

## Rethinking Your Focus

### A Study of Philippians 4:8-9

Characteristic of Completeness: Goodness/Integrity

Big Idea: Put your mind on a diet and get some exercise.

Related Scriptures: Psalm 119:11; Proverbs 23:6-7a; Isaiah 55:7; Romans 12:2; 1 Corinthians 15:33; 2 Corinthians 10:5; 1 Timothy 4:7-8

Introduction:

- A. Guys talk to each other differently than girls do. I was at *LA Fitness* a few months back. I hadn't been in a long while. When one of the regulars I know saw me, he said, "Wow, Bob, you've put on some weight." Pointing to my belly, he added, "*That* didn't used to be there."

I said, "Yeah, I know." Then we played racquetball.

I just can't see women doing that. I can't see Ann saying to Judy: "Wow, Judy, you've put on some weight. *That* didn't used to be there."

In any case, that motivated me to embark on a rigorous fitness program. You probably don't notice because I am fully clothed. But here are the before-and-after results ► on the screen.



... Okay, so I'm lying. It's not me. But I'd like it to be me. I'd like a healthier body.

- B. If you want a healthier body, there are basically two ways to get it: diet and exercise. If you want to become more physically fit, it's all about two things: diet and exercise. If you want to lose weight, there are many methods—all of them variations on two themes: diet and exercise.

We're coming up on the New Year and with it come resolutions. Many will resolve to get healthier by putting themselves on some kind of diet. Many will resolve to get healthier by getting more exercise. As for me, I'm going to have to go to the doctor for my 50-year check up. I know what he's going to say: "Put yourself on a diet and get some exercise."

Diet and exercise take discipline—discipline to manage what goes in my mouth—discipline to work out my body. I say no to the path of least resistance and I override my desire for immediate gratification and comfort for the sake of a better quality of life in the future. The Bible says that such bodily discipline is profitable. It's a good thing.

But bodily discipline isn't among the most important things in life. In fact, being physically fit doesn't help much after you die. And we're all terminal. Bodily discipline is vastly less important than a greater discipline—a discipline of *the mind* for the purpose of godliness. In ► 1 Timothy 4:7-8, the Apostle Paul writes this to his young protégé, Timothy:

<sup>NAU</sup> 1 Timothy 4:7 . . . discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness; 8 for bodily discipline is only of little profit, but godliness is profitable for all things, since it holds promise for the present life and *also* for the *life* to come.

Here, Paul speaks figuratively of a mental discipline or training for godliness.<sup>1</sup> It is this discipline of the mind that is vastly more important than the discipline of the body. The benefits of bodily discipline are temporary; the benefits of mental discipline are eternal.

- C. You've ► heard the expression, "You are what you eat." That applies to brain food, too. You are what you think. Our mind is shaped by the things it absorbs. It's not my idea; it's biblical. Proverbs ► 23:6-7 says,

<sup>NAU</sup> Proverbs 23:6 Do not eat the bread of a selfish man, Or desire his delicacies; 7 For as he thinks within himself, so he is. . . .

Elsewhere in the Bible, we are told that true personal transformation begins with a diet of the mind. Romans ► 12:2 says,

<sup>NAU</sup> Romans 12:2 And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind . . .

- D. So, ► what if my resolution is to have a healthier mind in 2007? What if I want to become more mentally fit? What if I want to discipline my mind for the purpose of godliness because that is the most important discipline? How do I do it?

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<sup>1</sup> Timothy Friberg, Barbara Friberg, and Neva Miller, *Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament*, s.v. "γυμνάζω," (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2000).

Same two words: diet and exercise. Same idea: I say no to the path of least resistance and I override my desire for immediate gratification and comfort for the sake of a better quality of life in the future. In fact, I want to show you that the Apostle Paul gives us as believers the following prescription: Put your mind on a diet and get some exercise. That's ► the big idea of my message today: Put your mind on a diet and get some exercise. This will lead to a healthier mind and a better quality of life in the future.

Right now, this big idea is not particularly helpful because it just raises questions. Questions like, what kind of diet? And what kind of exercise? Well, we're going to spend the rest of our time this morning answering these questions. First, ► we're going to consider how to put your mind on a diet. Then, ► we'll consider how to get some exercise.

- E. We've been studying our way through the Apostle Paul's letter to the Philippians. We come today to Philippians 4:8-9. This is the text from which I got the big idea. Paul ► says,

<sup>NAU</sup> Philippians 4:8 Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things. ► 9 The things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.

- I. From this text, let's ► first consider how to put your mind on a diet.

- A. Before getting to the diet itself, we need to cover a very basic dietary question: How does your mind get fed? We know how our bodies get fed; we put stuff in our mouths. But how do our minds get fed? Paul gives us some insight in ► Verse 9, where he says,

<sup>NAU</sup> Philippians 4:9 The things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me . . .

Here, Paul is giving us various ways that our minds get fed.

1. We ► learn things. That is, we gain knowledge by instruction.<sup>2</sup> We learn from the training of others.
2. We ► receive things. That is, we come to accept or agree with the teaching of others.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> W. Bauer, F.W. Danker, W.F. Arndt, and F.W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3d ed., s.v. "μαθησάμενος," (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), hereinafter abbreviated BDAG.

<sup>3</sup> BDAG, s.v. "παραλαμβάνω."

3. We ► hear things with our ears. That is, we listen to what is said.<sup>4</sup>
  4. And ► we see things with our eyes. That is, we recognize a pattern or follow an example.<sup>5</sup>
- B. With that in mind, the basic idea of the diet is to learn, receive, hear, and see things that are nutritious.
1. In ► Verse 8, Paul gives us a list of nutrients our minds need. Our minds need to feed on these things.
    - a. Our minds need to feed on ► “whatever is true;” that is, whatever is in accordance with fact, as opposed to what is false.<sup>6</sup>
    - b. Our minds need to feed on ► “whatever is honorable;” that is, whatever is worthy, venerable, holy, above reproach.<sup>7</sup>
    - c. Our minds need to feed on ► “whatever is right;” that is, whatever is fair, equitable, just.<sup>8</sup>
    - d. Our minds need to feed on ► “whatever is pure;” that is, whatever is holy,<sup>9</sup> free of fault,<sup>10</sup> having integrity.<sup>11</sup>
    - e. Our minds need to feed on ► “whatever is lovely;” that is, whatever is pleasing or agreeable.<sup>12</sup> This is not just about moral truth, but also aesthetic truth, extending to the beauty of creation.<sup>13</sup>
    - f. Our minds need to feed on ► “whatever is of good repute;” that is, whatever is praiseworthy or commendable.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> BDAG, s.v. “ἀκούω.”

<sup>5</sup> BDAG, s.v. “ὄραω.”

<sup>6</sup> BDAG, s.v. “ἀληθής.”

<sup>7</sup> BDAG, s.v. “σεμνός.”

<sup>8</sup> BDAG, s.v. “δίκαιος.”

<sup>9</sup> BDAG, s.v. “ἅγιός.”

<sup>10</sup> Joseph Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, s.v. “ἅγιός” (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1977).

<sup>11</sup> Markus Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians, Black’s New Testament Commentary*, ed. Henry Chadwick, (London: A & C Black, 1998), 252.

<sup>12</sup> BDAG, s.v. “προσφιλής.”

<sup>13</sup> Bockmuehl, 253.

<sup>14</sup> BDAG, s.v. “εὐφημος.”

- g. Our minds need to feed on ► “any excellence;” that is, anything of extraordinary character or exceptional virtue.<sup>15</sup> It’s about moral excellence.<sup>16</sup>
- h. Our minds need to feed on ► “anything worthy of praise;” that is, anything deserving commendation.<sup>17</sup>

These are the nutrients, and our minds need to feed on or to ► “dwell on” these things. That is, we are to consider them, weigh them, meditate upon them, with a view to absorbing or obtaining them.<sup>18</sup> The command to dwell is in the present tense, suggesting that this is an ongoing process, not a one-time event.

Such mental nutrition is about goodness and integrity of character, and so, ► goodness and integrity constitute our Characteristic of Completeness for the week.

2. But we are left with an important question: In what foods are these nutrients found? What are the sources of these nutrients? There are at least ► three primary food groups for the mind. We could think of them as parts of a brain-food pyramid.

- a. At the foundation of the pyramid is ► God’s Word. Our minds are nourished as they feed on what God has to say to us in the Scriptures. In ► Verse 9 of our text, it’s safe to assume that the things the Philippians “learned” and “received” from Paul are scriptural. Surely in ► Verse 8 Paul had the Scriptures in mind as the primary source of that which is true, honorable, right, pure, lovely, reputable, excellent, and praiseworthy. After all, it’s Paul who says to his young protégé in ► 2 Timothy 3:16-17,

<sup>NAU</sup> 2 Timothy 3:16 All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; 17 so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.

In ► Jeremiah 15:16, the prophet says to God,

<sup>NAU</sup> Jeremiah 15:16 Your words were found and I ate them,  
And Your words became for me a joy and the delight of my

<sup>15</sup> BDAG, s.v. “ἀρετή.”

<sup>16</sup> Bockmuehl, 253.

<sup>17</sup> Thayer, s.v. “ἐπαινος.”

<sup>18</sup> Thayer, s.v. “λογίζομαι.”

heart; For I have been called by Your name, O LORD God of hosts.

And listen to some of the ways the Word of God nourishes us in ►  
Psalm 19:7-11:

<sup>NAU</sup> Psalm 19:7 The law of the LORD is perfect, restoring the soul; The testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple. ► 8 The precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; The commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes. ► 9 The fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever; The judgments of the LORD are true; they are righteous altogether. ► 10 They are more desirable than gold, yes, than much fine gold; Sweeter also than honey and the drippings of the honeycomb. ► 11 Moreover, by them Your servant is warned; In keeping them there is great reward.

- b. A ► second brain food group is God's people. By this I mean godly people who provide examples and encouragement to live right—people who are striving to be Christ-like. In our relationships with them, our minds can feed on their motivations, their values, their beliefs, their conduct.

Paul alludes to this in ► Verse 9, where he urges the Philippians to put into practice the things they had “learned” and “received” and “heard” and “seen” in him.

Earlier, in ► Philippians 3:17, he says,

<sup>NAU</sup> Philippians 3:17 Brethren, join in following my example .  
..

In ► Proverbs 13:20, we are told,

<sup>NAU</sup> Proverbs 13:20 He who walks with wise men will be wise .  
..

Jesus says in ► Luke 6:40,

<sup>NAU</sup> Luke 6:40 “A pupil is not above his teacher; but everyone, after he has been fully trained, will be like his teacher.”

c. A ► third brain-food group is God’s creation. Our minds are nourished as they feed in the beauty and creativity of God reflected in things like nature, art, music, literature, and science.

(1) That the ideas of our text encompass such things is suggested by the use of the terms, ► “whatever,” “any,” and “anything” in Verse 8. If Paul wanted to confine his list of nutrients to include only that which is ostensibly Christian, he probably wouldn’t have used such inclusive language.

(2) Also, the ► terms Paul uses for the nutrients are largely borrowed from the popular non-Christian moral philosophy of his day.<sup>19</sup> The suggestion is that there are some good things in the world that don’t necessarily carry a Christian label.<sup>20</sup>

(3) Psalm ► 19:1 says,

<sup>NAU</sup> Psalm 19:1 The heavens are telling of the glory of God; And their expanse is declaring the work of His hands.

The heavens are not Christian per se, but their expanse points to God.

In ► Romans 1:20, Paul argues that we get a glimpse of God through the things He has made. Paul says,

<sup>NAU</sup> Romans 1:20 For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made . . .

Most of the things God has made don’t carry a Christian label. And so, I can admire the creative design of God in a mathematical proof, or the laws of thermodynamics, or a wistful painting, or a soaring musical piece, or a poignant poem, or a gilded sky. I can even admire and benefit from the intellectual brilliance of an atheist or a Muslim or a Hindu without embracing his theology.

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<sup>19</sup> Peter T. O’Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians: A Commentary on the Greek Text, The New International Greek Testament Commentary*, eds. I. Howard Marshall and W. Ward Gasque, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1991), 503.

<sup>20</sup> Frank Thielman, *Philippians, The NIV Application Commentary*, ed. Terry Muck, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995). 220-221, 224-225, 231.

(4) In ► commenting on our text, one Bible scholar says,

“Mature Christians should feel no compulsion to read only literature written by other Christians, to view only movies and plays that fellow believers have produced, or to listen only to Christian music. Paul urges believers to discover and learn from the true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, and praiseworthy wherever it occurs.”<sup>21</sup>

“Christians have often in the course of history had to endure social ostracism and outright persecution. But the proper response to these tragedies is not a retreat from the unbelieving world or a strictly reactionary response to it. It is instead a proactive attempt to embrace truth wherever it is found within the world and to integrate it with the truth found in Scripture.”<sup>22</sup>

- d. This leads us to an important point. As we move up the brain-food pyramid, we must be increasingly discerning. We must evaluate brain food alternatives at the higher levels through the filter of the foundational food group: the Word of God.

For example, we cannot automatically conclude that just because we’re hanging out with people who profess to be Christians that we’re being nourished at the second level. Remember earlier in his letter to the Philippians, Paul has already warned us about religious Christians and carnal Christians who have no particular interest in following Christ. Christians who don’t follow Christ are not nourishing people to be around.<sup>23</sup>

Similarly, we need to be discerning at the third level. Just because we can connect something to God’s creation doesn’t mean it’s always good for us. We must weigh alternatives in light of what the Bible says. For example, I can imagine someone arguing that, if God made the human body, and if God designed sex, then porn must be okay. The premise is true, but the conclusion is not, because it’s unbiblical. According to the Bible, sex is to be enjoyed in the confines of the marriage bed, undefiled by anything outside of it.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 225.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 231.

<sup>23</sup> See also 1 Corinthians 5:9-11.

<sup>24</sup> e.g. Hebrews 13:4.

In sum, there are three brain food groups from which can derive the nutrients our minds need: God's Word, God's people, and God's creation.

As we move up the brain-food pyramid, we must be increasingly discerning. We must evaluate brain-food alternatives at the higher levels through the filter of the foundational food group: the Word of God.

- C. The ► flip-side of pursuing the ingredients that are nutritious is avoiding the ingredients that are harmful.
1. Harmful ingredients would logically be the opposite of the nutritious ingredients. We can take Paul's list in ► Verse 8 and avoid the opposites. Avoid whatever is ► false, whatever is dishonorable, whatever is not right, whatever is impure, whatever is unlovely, whatever is disreputable, anything corrupt, anything unworthy of praise.
  2. These harmful ingredients are found in junk food. Junk food is usually fast, effortless, accessible, tempting, and it goes down easy. But it's full of artificial, harmful ingredients.
    - a. Junk food is often sold through the media: television, movies, books, music, video games, the internet. These media aren't intrinsically bad, but the messages they carry can be.

Take music, for example. Some musical expressions may be more beautiful and admirable than others based on the skill of the composer or the musician.

Musical genres are morally neutral; they are neither right nor wrong. Some like classical; others prefer country. But lyrics are different. The lyrics can be nutritious or harmful, depending on the message conveyed.

If you want to evaluate the music you listen to, jump on the internet, pull up the lyrics, read through them, and ask yourself the following question: Do the lyrics convey a message that is true, honorable, right, pure, lovely, reputable, excellent, or praiseworthy? If not, why listen?

The most common reply I've heard is something like, "I just like the music; I don't pay attention to the words." Yeah, right. That's like saying, "I just like the taste of Twinkies; I don't pay attention to the

ingredients.” Whether or not you think you pay attention to the ingredients doesn’t change the fact that a steady diet of Twinkies is not good for you. A Twinkie here and there may be no big deal; a steady diet of them will take its toll.

The MySpace account of one teenager declares, “The Bad Touch” to be a favorite song. I checked out the lyrics on the internet. The chorus—repeated eight times in the song—goes like this: “You and me baby ain’t nothin’ but mammals so let’s do it like they do on the Discovery Channel.”<sup>25</sup>

And this is nourishing how?

- b. Junk food can also come in the form of bad company—hanging out with the wrong crowd. Proverbs ► 13:20 says plainly,

<sup>NAU</sup> Proverbs 13:20 . . . the companion of fools will suffer harm.

In ► 1 Corinthians 15:33, Paul says,

<sup>NAU</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:33 Do not be deceived: “Bad company corrupts good morals.”

I’ve heard people say, “Just because I hang out with some people doesn’t mean they’re going to have a bad influence on me. I know how to handle myself. I can remove myself when the party gets out of hand. I can rise above the peer pressure.” Maybe you can, once or twice. But it’s naïve to think that you can continually play with fire and not get burned eventually.

King Solomon is described in the Bible as the wisest man on earth.<sup>26</sup> If anybody could rise above the corrupting influence of bad company, it would be him. But he couldn’t. Solomon was a ladies’ man. He surrounded himself with beautiful women who did not follow God. He thought he could have the milk without buying the cow; but he got creamed. Ultimately, these women turned his heart away from God.<sup>27</sup> If the wisest man on earth couldn’t handle bad company, what makes you think you can?

- D. This ► week I challenge you to evaluate your mental diet. Keep tabs on the various ways your mind is getting fed. What are you learning, receiving, hearing, and watching?

<sup>25</sup> Lyrics to “The Bad Touch” by Bloodhound Gang.

<sup>26</sup> 1 Kings 4:30-31.

<sup>27</sup> 1 Kings 11:1-9.

Is your mental diet balanced? Are you feeding mostly on God's Word, God's people, and God's creation? Or are you into junk food?

I am not building a case for living in a monastery or adopting some holier-than-thou separatism. After all, Jesus reached out to the tax-gatherers and prostitutes. I'm not asking you to reject the culture, but to be more discriminating within it.

I agree with one scholar who comments on our text, saying,

*The most common response to such a culture is not discrimination, but rejection. This text suggests a better way, that one approach the marketplace, the arts, the media, the university, looking for what is "true" and "uplifting" and "admirable"; but that one do so with a discriminating eye and heart . . .*<sup>28</sup>

Ask God to show you. Ask God for a discriminating eye and heart. Ask God if you need to put your mind on a diet.

II. Putting your mind on a diet is only the first part of becoming healthier. If that's all we do, we'll have trimmed some fat, but still be flabby. In addition to putting our minds on a diet, Paul ► encourages us to get some exercise, to put our diet to work.

A. I get this from ► Verse 9, where Paul says,

<sup>NAU</sup> Philippians 4:9 The things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, practice these things . . .

The operative word is, ► "practice." It means to carry out or to accomplish or to do something.<sup>29</sup> It's about applying what you know. The three most important words in mental exercise are application, application, application.

In Verse 9, I think Paul is saying something like this: "What was on my mind when I was with you? What did I talk about? What did I read? What was the burden of my conversation? What did I value? What did I do to improve my mind? Put these things into practice. Apply them."<sup>30</sup>

Let's ► look back at the food pyramid and consider how to apply the three food groups. First take God's Word. That's what we're studying this morning. It is of some value for us to learn from our text that our wellbeing is tied to our mental diet. But we don't realize the full benefit of this knowledge unless we apply it by putting our minds on a diet.

<sup>28</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians, The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1995), 421.

<sup>29</sup> BDAG, s.v. "πράσσω."

<sup>30</sup> D.A. Carson, *Basics for Believers: An Exposition of Philippians*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1996), 117.

Now, take God's people. It is of some value to hang out with and observe the habits of godly people. But we don't realize the full benefit of this knowledge unless we apply it by following their example.

We can even apply the most abstract food group: God's creation. It is of some value to observe the beauty of nature or art or music. But we don't realize the full benefit of this knowledge unless we apply it by responding in worship and thankfulness to the ultimate Author of all creativity.

How's your application these days?

- B. Application is the most difficult part, and so God helps us. He comes alongside to guide and empower us. That's what Paul means when he says in the last part of ► Verse 9:

<sup>NAU</sup> Philippians 4:9 . . . practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.

Apply and God will be with you like a personal trainer, only better. He doesn't just coach; He empowers. He's the God of peace. It is no coincidence that the word ► "peace" can be used to describe health and wellbeing.<sup>31</sup> When you take the initiative to put your mind on a diet and get some exercise, the God of health and wholeness will make you stronger.

Put your mind on a diet and get some exercise.

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<sup>31</sup> Friberg, s.v. "εἰρήνη."