**"Whatever is True, Whatever is Just, Whatever is Beautiful"**
**Philippians 4:8-9**
**July 12, 2026**
**Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service**
*Pastor Nicoletti*

## The Reading of the Word

We continue this morning in our series in the book of Philippians, and we come today to Philippians 4:8-9.

Now, especially because this is a well-known passage to some of us, and therefore a little bit easy to tune out –please do listen carefully. Because this is God's Word for us this morning.

Paul writes:

[8] Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. [9] What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

"All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever." [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let's pray …

## Prayer of Illumination

Lord, we ask you to work now through this, your word to your servants,
the very word in which you have helped us to place our hope.
Though the world may deride us,
we do not turn from this, your revelation to us.
Teach us from it now, we ask, in Jesus's name. Amen.
[Based on Psalm 119:49-51]

## Introduction

So, a familiar text to many of us.

But as I studied it, I was surprised to find in these verses a different sort of message than I had expected.

What I think we see in these verses is that: While we are tempted to deny the good things the unbelieving world produces, or to accept them uncritically, Paul calls us here to acknowledge and

sift them, trusting that God is with us, and seeking to make proper use of every good thing in service to Christ, following the example of wise and mature believers.

Let me say that again: While we are tempted to deny the good things the unbelieving world produces, or to accept them uncritically, Paul calls us here to acknowledge and sift them, trusting that God is with us, and seeking to make proper use of every good thing in service to Christ, following the example of wise and mature believers.

Let's take that now one piece at a time.

## We Are Tempted to Deny the Good Things the Unbelieving World Produces, But We Are Called to Acknowledge Them

First, what I think we see here is that while we are tempted to deny the good things that the unbelieving world produces, Paul calls us instead to acknowledge them.

Now … that is a little bit different from how I think this verse is often used by Christians.

Often, when Christians cite this verse it's given as a reason not to engage with ideas from the unbelieving world – whether in the world of the arts, or storytelling, or philosophy, or ethics. Why set your mind on the products of the unbelieving world, when you should be setting them on things produced by Christians? That's often the sentiment when this verse is evoked.

But it turns out, Paul is doing something very different from that here.

Now, don't get me wrong – Paul is calling us to sift out things that are unprofitable. But he's not writing off the insights of the unbelieving world. He's actually calling on the Philippian Christians to consider the good things produced by the unbelieving world.

Because a key word in verse 8 is "whatever." Paul uses it 6 times, so he's not exactly being subtle. And "whatever" is an expansive word – meaning "as many things as" are. [Muller, 143] And so, it's not just true statements made by Christians that we should consider … but "whatever is true" – "as many things as" are true. It's not just honorable things done by Christians that we should consider … but "whatever is honorable." Not just justice as practiced or formulated by other Christians that we should take into account … but we need to consider "whatever is just." Not just Christian things that are beautiful and pure that we should value, but "whatever is pure" and "whatever is lovely." "If there is any excellence" Paul says, "if there is anything worthy of praise," consider – or "think about these things."

Paul begins not by denying the good things the unbelieving world may produce, but calling us to acknowledge them.

And that becomes even more clear when we look at the Greek vocabulary that Paul has chosen here.

Because in Greek, verse 8 looks kind of like a line from a work of pagan moral philosophy. [Hansen, 295]

One commentator writes: "This sentence would fit more readily in Epictetus's *Discourses* or Seneca's *Moral Essays* than it would into any of the [other] Pauline letters." Some of the words Paul uses here are used nowhere else in the New Testament, others are used rarely, or quite differently than they're used here. But most of the terms Paul uses were common in the world of pagan moral philosophy – especially Stoicism. [Fee, 415; Hansen, 296; O'Brien, 502; Hawthorne, 187]

The word Paul uses for "excellence" is even "the primary Greek word for 'virtue'" among unbelieving Greek moral thinkers. [Fee, 419; Hawthorne, 186; Hansen, 299; Martin, 178]

All of which is to say that Paul seems to be calling on the Christians in Philippi to recognize the good things – the things that are true, and beautiful, and just – that come from the unbelieving culture around them. Because he's using their terminology. [Fee, 414; Barth, 124; Hansen, 296; Howthorne, 187; Martin, 178; contra Silva, 197]

And once they've identified those things, Paul wants them to take them into consideration, in their own thoughts and lives. As Gordon Fee points out, the verb that's translated here as "think about" ordinarily means "recon" or "take into consideration." In other words, it seems that Paul "is telling them not so much to 'think high thoughts' as to 'take into account' the good" things they find in the unbelieving world around them. [Fee, 415-416; see also Hawthorne, 187]

They are to learn from them, to incorporate them into their thinking, and act upon them in their own lives.

While we are tempted to deny the good things that the unbelieving world produces, Paul calls us instead to acknowledge them, and act upon them

That's the first thing we see here.

## We Are Tempted to Uncritically Accept the Things the Unbelieving World Produces, But We Are Called to Sift Them

But denial of the good things produced by the unbelieving world is not the only temptation for us to be on guard against.

Another temptation for some of us is the temptation to uncritically accept the things the unbelieving world produces. But instead, Paul calls us here to sift them.

And that should be obvious from the start. Paul doesn't call on the Christians in Philippi to consider and adopt whatever comes from the unbelieving world, but whatever is true or just or beautiful – he is giving them criteria by which to sift the things that come from the world. And he gets more emphatic about those criteria as the verse goes on. [Fee, 406; 406 n.13; Hansen, 299]

And then he gets even more specific on how they are to do this in verse nine. There Paul writes: "What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things."

In other words, the Philippians have seen how Paul did this – how he evaluated and sifted the things of the pagan world. And he calls on the Philippian Christians to follow his example – to approach these issues like he did. [Fee, 420]

And while we cannot observe the Apostles firsthand, we do have their example, and the examples of others, left for us in the Scriptures. And it's by the Scriptures, that we can sift what the unbelieving world around us produces, and determine which things from it are good and to be embraced, and which must be set aside or rejected.

And this is often a work that requires a scalpel more than a machete. As thinkers like Thomas Aquinas and Herman Bavinck have pointed out, in the unbelieving world truth and falsehood are often mixed together – so that there are no falsehoods that don't also contain some bits of truth in them. [Aquinas, quoted in Bavinck, 319; Bavinck, 318]

And though we must discard the falsehoods of the unbelieving world, we must not discard the truths that are mixed in along with them.

And so, where we are often tempted either to deny the ideas and actions and insights of the unbelieving world, or to accept them uncritically, Paul calls us instead to sift them, and then to acknowledge and consider those things that are good – that are true, and just, and beautiful.

## Trusting that God Is with Us

Now, for some Christians, this idea can cause a lot of anxiety.

Some are anxious that this approach encourages us to turn away from God and towards the world. Others are anxious that this task of sifting seems too daunting. Still others are anxious because they fear that this approach implies that something is lacking in our Lord, as we admit that we can learn from those who don't even know him.

And Paul's response to our fears is to assure us in verse nine that the God of peace is with us. [Bruce, 146-147; Fee, 420; Muller, 144]

In the midst of challenges, turmoil, or uncertainty, it is not our circumstances that give us peace, but the fact that our God, who is the God of peace, is with us. [Fee, 420-421; Hansen, 303]

And it is God's presence and his ongoing work in the world that can calm each of our fears as we consider Paul's calling on us.

Some fear that in listening to the world, we are turning from the Lord. But that's when we need to remember that while God's speech is found in special form in the Bible, God's presence and speech are not limited to the Bible. In fact, the Apostle Paul and the Psalmist tell us that creation – the world around us, including its history, even the human heart – all of creation, they say, pours out speech from God. [Romans 1:19-20; Psalm 19:1-3]

Herman Bavinck puts it like this – he writes: "From creation, from nature and history, from the human heart and conscience, there comes divine speech to every human. No one escapes the power of general revelation." [Bavinck, 321]

God speaks in special ways through the Scriptures. But he also speaks through creation – even through the insights of other people.

And as Christians we must hold on to both sources of God's speech to us: both creation and Scripture. We must not deny that God has spoken through creation, and so we must be willing to hear what he has said, even if it reaches us through the insights of non-believers. At the same time, we must not deny the important role of Scripture, by which God speaks in human language, so that we can then sift what we think we see in creation. We need both. And holding on to both does not threaten the uniqueness of the Christian God, but it asserts his supremacy, because both Scripture and all of creation come from him, and he speaks his truth through both.

In both Scripture and in creation, the God of peace is with us. We need not be anxious.

Others are anxious because the task of sifting seems so daunting.

Humility before such a task is a good thing. We will, after all, sometimes get it wrong.

But even so, we need not despair, because, as Paul says in verse nine, the God of peace is with us. Through his Spirit, through his Word, through his Church, God is with us. And he will guide us and help us. If we look to him, he will not abandon us. We will still get it wrong sometimes. But we need not fall into anxiety and fear. Because the God of peace is with us, even in our missteps.

Finally, some are anxious about this approach because they fear that acknowledging that we may need, at times, to be instructed or even corrected by non-Christians on matters concerning what is true or just or right – they're anxious that this implies that something is lacking in our faith or in our God.

But learning such things from non-Christians doesn't admit any lack in our God or in his gospel. It simply admits a lack in us. And that shouldn't be hard for us, because as Christians, at the heart of the gospel, is the conviction that we are lacking – that we fall short.

In fact, theologian Brian Brock argues that in Christ, the Christian is free to stop defending themselves in such matters. We are free instead to admit we have been wrong – and that our people have sometimes been wrong. Because of the forgiveness we have in Christ, he says, "we do not need to save our reputation, our nation, our church, or our family's good name." [Brock, 29]

Admitting we were wrong, admitting that those who don't even know the Lord can still teach us and correct us regarding what is good and just and true – that is not to admit any deficiency in our God … it's just to admit what the Bible already tells us about ourselves. We fall short. But Christ has forgiven us. And so we can admit it.

Though the process Paul calls us to here may tempt us to anxiety, Paul reminds us here that we need not fear … because the God of peace is with us, to speak truth to us, to guide us, and to forgive us.

**Making Proper Use of Every Good Thing in Service to Christ**

So Paul calls us to sift. He calls us to acknowledge what is good. He calls us to trust that the God of peace is with us. But the implications of this passage don't stop there.

Because as we see in verse nine, we're then supposed to act on these good things we find in the unbelieving world – we're supposed to take them, and to make proper use of them in service to Christ.

And this is a pattern we see repeatedly in the Bible: some good thing comes from a worldly and unbelieving source … and God's people are called on to lay hold of it, and repurpose it towards its proper use of serving the God of the Bible.

In Genesis 4, it's unbelievers who are hostile to God and violent against their neighbors, who invent herding animals, musical instruments, and metal work.

But then, as the Scriptures go on, God's people, the Israelites, are called to be shepherds. They're called to use musical instruments in the worship of God. And they're called on to fashion metals for God's tabernacle and then his temple.

God called on his people to acknowledge that these arts, developed by evil men who had rejected God and harmed other people – even so, these arts that they had developed were good, and beautiful, and should be taken and repurposed in the service of Yahweh, the God of the Bible. [Leithart, "Instruments Make the Man"]

Similarly, in the Book of Exodus the Lord tells his people to ask the Egyptians for their silver and gold jewelry before they leave Egypt [11:2-3], they do. "Thus," we read, "they plundered the Egyptians." [12:35-36]

This was the gold of pagans. It was the gold of God's enemies. It was from wealth built on the backs of slaves. Its use in Egypt may have been evil. But the gold itself was good. And God wanted it refashioned and used in service to him. And so, he called on his people to use the gold of the pagan Egyptians to construct the elements of his tabernacle – the sanctuary of God. [Exodus 25:1-9; 35:4-9, 20-29]

In First Samuel we read of David repurposing the sword of Goliath and using it to defend and protect God's people. [1 Samuel 21:8-9] Think about that. At one point, a Philistine blacksmith and worshiper of Dagon had crafted a sword for Goliath. As he did, he thought he was making a weapon that would be used against the people of Israel. But God laid hold of it through his people, and used it instead to defend his people, Israel.

And this pattern extends beyond physical objects, into the world of ideas, and ethics, and wisdom.

King Solomon tells us that the fear of the Lord, the God of the Bible, is the beginning of wisdom. But he also takes up at least a chapter and a half of the book of Proverbs – his book on learning wisdom – with sayings from of non-Israelites: from people outside the covenant community of God. Chapter thirty of Proverbs says that it contains the words of Agur, who was likely an Ishmaelite, not an Israelite. [Kidner, *Proverbs*, 24-25, 171-172] And the first portion of chapter thirty-one comes from the mother of King Lemuel, also a non-Israelite. [Kidner, *Proverbs*, 24-25,

176] Scholars have argued that her words may be an example of Egyptian [Kidner, *Wisdom*, 35] or even Canaanite wisdom literature [Clifford, 270].

Solomon was, in his lifetime, the Bible tells us, the wisest man on the earth. [1 Kings 4:29-34] And even he learned from the wisdom of the non-Israelite cultures around him. [Kidner, *Wisdom*, 15] And the Holy Spirit confirmed that we can as well, when he incorporated the words of those cultures into the Scriptures themselves.

This is the pattern Paul is calling us to here. And historically, the Church has sought to follow that calling.

From Origin, to Gregory, to Augustin, the Church fathers urged Christians to learn from the thought and philosophy and ethics of the unbelieving Greek world, and then to repurpose those insights for the service of Christ. [Origen, "Letter to Gregory," ANF 4.393-394; Gregory, "Oration XLV: Second Oration on Easter" Chapters 20 and 21 (NPNF2 7.430-431)]

Augustine urged Christians not only to learn from the ethical and philosophical insights of non-Christian thinkers, but to recognize that any good things which non-believers bring to light are truly from God, and so belong to God, and find their true home in service to God. And so, Christians are being faithful servants of the Lord when they learn, and acknowledge, and make right use of those good things, no matter what human source they first learn them from.[1] [Augustine, *Teaching Christianity (De Doctrina Christiana),* II.40,60-61 (p. 170-171)]

And that is what Paul calls the Philippians to as well – to take these things that are good, and just, and beautiful, and to make use of them as he did: in service towards Christ, in love towards their neighbors, in the advance of the Kingdom of God, and for their growth in Christian discipleship and maturity.

## Living This Out in Practice

But what does this really look like?

How does this really play out?

[1] "If those, however, who are called philosophers happen to have said anything that is true, and agreeable to our faith […] not only should we not be afraid of them, but we should even claim back for our own use what they have said, as from its unjust possessors. It is like the Egyptians, who not only had idols and heavy burdens, which the people of Israel abominated and fled from, but also vessels and ornaments of gold and silver, and fine raiment, which the people […] appropriated for their own, and indeed better, use as they went forth from Egypt; and this not on their own initiative, but on God's instructions, with the Egyptians unwittingly lending them things they were not themselves making good use of.

"In the same way, while the heathen certainly have counterfeit and superstitious fictions in all their teachings […], which everyone of us must abominate and shun […] their teachings also contain liberal disciplines which are more suited to the service of the truth, as well as a number of most useful ethical principles, and some true things are to be found among them about worshiping only the one God. All this is like their gold and silver, and not something they instituted themselves, but something which they mined, so to say, from the ore of divine providence, veins of which are everywhere to be found." [Augustine, *Teaching Christianity (De Doctrina Christiana),* II.40,60-61 (p. 170-171)]

For one thing, it means that we, as Christians, need to be ready and willing to sift and then to learn from the non-Christian world around us. We need to be willing to learn not just technical skills from them, but also insights into what is true, and just, and beautiful – the very kind of things that Solomon was willing to learn from Agur, and King Lemuel's mother.

Let's consider some examples in our own setting.

First, we can learn from science and scholarship that comes from non-Christian sources. Now, of course, science always involves human interpretation, and human interpretation is never neutral. In that sense, we're called on to sift what is presented to us. But even so, we can do that sifting knowing that we can learn real truth from the work of non-believing scholars and scientists. Science, done rightly, is observation and study of how the world works. It helps us to see more clearly the world that God made, which speaks in so many ways about who he is. And the creation speaks of God regardless of who is doing the scientific investigation. And understanding the world God has made, can help us better care for it, as God's called us to, whether we're considering an unborn child, or fragile ecosystem.

But such insights from the unbelieving world are not limited to the STEM fields. Non-Christians can also help Christians see things more clearly even when it comes even to things like ethics.

In the Old Testament, God wanted Jonah to repent. And one way he called him to repentance was by instructing him through individuals outside of God's people – first from pagan mariners, and then from ignorant Ninevites. In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul confronted the Christians in Corinth by saying that they were accepting sins that even the pagans would not tolerate. [1 Corinthians 5:1] In other words, the Christians in Corinth could learn something about ethics by looking to the pagans around them.

Sometimes the unbelieving world sees an ethical problem or a moral failure in our world before we do. And our slowness to see it is to our shame. But continuing to deny it out of stubbornness or pride doesn't solve the problem. It doesn't defend the gospel. It only sets us against what is true and what is just. And so, when non-Christians present an ethical argument – when they present a moral insight – we need to seriously consider whether it is true and just. We need to sift it. Maybe they're wrong. But maybe there is something true in what they're saying. Maybe, like the Corinthians or like Jonah, God is humbling us and calling us to learn a moral truth from those who don't even know him, because as we consider their exhortation, we see that the same moral obligation, the same moral command, is right there in God's Word … and we had missed it – we had ignored it.

And the calling to acknowledge, and consider, and act on what is just extends into the political realm as well. And here, I think we often have a problem acknowledging when a cause is just, if it happens to also be championed by our political opponents.

And so, Christians who don't like the Republican party might begin avoiding the Bible's teaching on things like abortion and the sanctity of human life, because they don't want to share a common cause with their political opponents. But Paul here calls us to act on whatever is just, regardless of whether our political opponents hold the same view.

And it goes the other way too. From when it first came out in 2001 through the 2016 edition, the ESV editors placed a heading over part of Exodus 22 that described that section as "Laws about

Social Justice." They called it that because that section contained laws about social justice. But then "social justice" became a concept elevated by the political left. And so in 2025 the ESV changed the section heading to something different.

Now, the problem is not really with the ESV editors. The problem is with many of us. The editors knew their audience. And many conservative Christians don't want to hear about social justice … because it's something their opponents support. But God cares about justice. And he cares about it on the level of society. Yet we are reluctant to name it for what it is, lest we sound like we might sometimes agree about something with secular folks on the left. But just as it's problematic for Christians who don't like Republicans to avoid or even deny the Bible's teaching on the humanity of the unborn, so it's also problematic for Christians who don't like Democrats to avoid or even deny the Bible's teaching on social justice.

We are to consider whatever is just in our own political engagement, regardless of who else champions it. We are to be willing to sift the ethical views of non-Christians, acknowledging what is true and just and right, and responding accordingly in the political realm, regardless of who it means we need to agree with.

We see it in science, we see it in ethics, we see it in politics. We also see it in the realm of psychology and how we understand ourselves as human beings.

There is much to be wary of in certain forms of secular psychology – much to sift through the lens of God's Word. But at the same time, seeking insights and tools from non-Christian psychology is almost inevitable. Human beings have been trying to understand themselves for thousands of years. Even those who do not know the Lord will, by God's grace, have had some insights that you have not yet come upon. Our calling is to mine those insights, to draw them out of various places, and then to employ them in service to Christ, towards discipleship, and maturity, and spiritual growth and healing in our own lives, and in the lives of others.

And the repurposing of good things from the unbelieving world extends beyond the realm of ideas and into the world of the arts as well – whether it's music, storytelling, visual art, or other forms. The word translated as "lovely" in verse 8 of the ESV can also mean beautiful. And Christians are called to consider and appreciate beauty wherever it is found. Because our God is the source of all beauty. [Fee, 418]

While we may be tempted to deny the good things the unbelieving world produces, or to accept them uncritically, Paul calls us here to sift them, and acknowledge what is good in them, trusting that God is with us, and seeking to make proper use of every good thing in service to Christ.

## Following the Example of Wise Believers

And the Lord hasn't left us to do that all alone.

As Paul reminds us in verse nine, the Lord has put wise believers – mature believers – in our lives, so we can learn from them as we consider their advice and follow their example.

We can encounter such believers in the Scriptures and in Church history. But God also gives them to us in person, in our own lives.

For some of you, a couple of those more mature Christians in your life may be your parents. Children – especially in their teenage years – can be quick to dismiss the perspective of their parents, especially when it comes to evaluating and sifting things that come from the unbelieving world. And while your parents will not always be right … chances are that they have more wisdom in this area than you do. And so, you're called not only to obey their requirements for you, but to observe them and to proactively try to learn from them, seeking to understand and then imitate their wisdom. That requires humility. But as we said, such humility that we have much to learn lies at the heart of the gospel.

For adults, this might require even more humility for us to do ourselves. Because we're used to pretending that we have things sorted out. At the least, we're used to projecting that to others. But this requires us to admit that we need to learn from others as well – to ask wise and more mature believers than us for their insights, or to observe their way of life, or even to ask them for their guidance in our lives. Just because we're adults doesn't mean we know how to do this. Remember, a lot of the people Paul was writing to here were adults. Don't assume that you've graduated beyond them. Whose help might you need as you approach this?

God has not left us to ourselves. He's given each of us Christians who are more mature in the faith, and more wise in living it out, than we are. Let's not neglect that.

## Conclusion

God has given us so many good gifts – in the Scriptures, in the Church, and in the world around us. Let's not deny or disregard any of God's gifts, however he brings them to us. But instead, let us repropose them, in service to Christ, seeking help from others, and trusting that God is with us.

In other words, "brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is [beautiful], whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, [consider] these things." And "what you have learned and received and heard and seen in" the witness of the Apostles, in the faithful among God's people, and the instruction of God's Word "—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you."

Amen.

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***<u>This sermon draws on material from:</u>***


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This sermon has incorporated some material from my September 15, 2019 sermon "The Sword of Goliath: Plunder, Temptation, Provision, and Equipping."

Note: In my preaching I often cite and draw from a range of sources, which includes material from Christians within my theological tradition, Christians outside my theological tradition (in keeping with our church's core value of "Reformed Catholicity"), and also (following the Apostle Paul's example in Acts 17) non-Christians who are well outside of Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxy. And so, when I cite an author or a source, that citation should not be understood or construed as me necessarily agreeing with, endorsing, or recommending to others anything else from that author or source, except for what I explicitly say I agree with, endorse, or recommend. When engaging with different materials and thinkers, all Christians must exercise wisdom and discernment to determine what is helpful, appropriate, and edifying for each person, taking into account their current needs, wisdom, and spiritual maturity.