

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #129:

THE BIBLICAL WAY TO...

By John Temples

I guess I first need to explain the incomplete title. This article started out as “The Biblical Way To Banish Bad Habits,” based on Philippians 4:9. That verse says, “The things which you learned and received and heard and saw in me, these do; and the God of peace will be with you.”

But I got to thinking, I should include the verse before it. That’s verse 8, another familiar verse: “Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report--if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things.” Well, that was so rich I felt I simply had to include verse 7--”And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.”

But well, why stop there? Verse 6: “Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God.”

What we have in these verses is a picture of the ideal, complete Christian life that all of us desire:

- Don’t despair about anything--pray about everything--be thankful for all things--be so confident in your relationship with God that you are not afraid to talk to Him about anything you desire (verse 6).
- Let the peace of God permeate your life and guard your hearts and minds (verse 7).
- Practice perfect thought control (verse 8). As the song says, “Each thought and each motive beneath His control.”
- Possess the power to banish bad habits at will (verse 9).

So yes, I want to talk about banishing bad habits, but I decided to broaden the discussion. And another reason I wanted to include these earlier verses is that

there is a fascinating reversal of terms that you may not have ever noticed. (We'll get to that.)

So let's talk about getting rid of bad habits. We all have habits we wish we didn't. They range from merely irritating or unhealthy habits to truly destructive, spirit-crushing ones such as profanity, gluttony, smoking, bad temper, procrastination, lying, etc. How do we conquer these?

IT ALL BEGINS WITH CONTROLLING OUR THINKING

Verse 8 says, "think" on good things, not evil things. Last time I checked, all our bodily functions were controlled by the brain. Our minds are in charge. So, if my feet are in the habit of going to wrong places, or my eyes look at things they shouldn't, or my tongue starts moving before my brain is in gear, or if my body craves chemicals--*the solution begins in my mind.*

Other passages bear this out. Proverbs 23:7 reads, "For as [a man] thinks in his heart, so is he." That means, *what you think, you become.* That is powerful. You have an amazing faculty that fulfills Proverbs 23:7--the subconscious mind. Here are two powerful qualities of your subconscious mind:

- It takes everything you think or say literally.
- It believes everything you tell it.

So, if you think consciously about resisting some temptation, your subconscious mind assumes that is what you want to do and acts accordingly.

And that is Paul's point in Philippians 4:8: "Whatever is pure and lovely...think on these things." Here is the ideal--to constantly be, think, and act right; to be in complete control of your thoughts, emotions, and actions.

But how do we achieve that? How do we put the "I" in "ideal"? That at last brings us to verse 9, which I offer to you as "Paul's Prescription For Banishing Bad Habits": "The things which you learned and received and heard and saw in me, these do; and the God of peace will be with you."

THE PROCESS BEGINS WITH LEARNING

“The things which you *learned*...” This is purely an intellectual exercise. We learn from the Bible, from sermons, and from other information sources what is right and good. If you are addicted to soda pop or sugar, you read up on the bad effects of soda pop and sugar. In the realm of morality, the Bible is our supreme source for guidance. Paul said he would not have known that covetousness is a sin unless he had learned it from the law (Romans 7:7). The Psalmist said, “Through your precepts I get understanding; therefore I hate every false way” (Psalms 119:104). This is the “accumulating data” phase of the process of banishing bad habits.

THE SECOND PART OF THE PROCESS IS RECEIVING THE TEACHING

“The things which you learned *and received*...” This is different from learning. “Receiving” means accepting and acknowledging the information learned as being right and valuable and good. *Learning* is an intellectual process; *receiving* is an act of the will (“I ought”).

THIRD, WE HAVE OUR UNDERSTANDING REINFORCED BY EXPLANATION AND ENCOURAGEMENT

“The things you learned and received *and heard*...” It helps immensely, doesn’t it, to hear others talk about fighting and winning the same battles you are working on?

THE FOURTH STEP IS VISUALIZATION

Paul says, “The things which you learned and received and heard and *saw in me*...” Visualization is especially powerful. We see good habits in others, and that makes us want to imitate them. We see the damage bad habits do to others, and that motivates us to avoid them. When Paul talked about seeing his examples, he called up a thousand memories in the Philippians of the exemplary life he lived among them. What’s that old saying--“I’d rather see a sermon than hear one any day”? Christianity actually *lived and practiced* is a very powerful sermon.

Do you know one reason the church is losing so many of its young people? It is that they hear a lot of sermons, but they don’t see Christianity being brought home

with them. They don't see their parents or other church members applying Biblical principles to real life. They see their parents or other Christians fighting, lying ("Tell the people at the door I'm not home"), and despairing about problems just like people of the world do. Our children--indeed, all of us--desperately need to SEE the gospel consistently applied to real life.

Do you see how potent these principles are for changing habits?

- Learning (information)
- Receiving (internalization)
- Hearing (affirmation)
- Seeing (visualization)

These principles work on the whole person: intellect, will, and emotions. They enter our psyche through multiple senses and impact us on multiple levels. This is why this Biblical plan is so powerful and successful. For example, we might want to quit smoking. We can hear anti-smoking logic and medical facts all day, and even acknowledge them to be true; but until we "receive" them--internalize them and acknowledge them as right for us--and until we receive support from others, we probably won't quit smoking. But...

THERE IS ONE MORE PRINCIPLE IN PHILIPPIANS 4:9: ACTUALIZATION

"The things which you learned and received and heard and saw in me, *these do*." That's actualization: having accumulated and loaded the ammunition, you actually pull the trigger.

There is a fine distinction in the Greek in verse 9. The verbs *learned*, *received*, *heard*, and *saw* are in the aorist tense, which signifies single, completed, one-shot actions in the past. But the verb *do* is present tense--meaning, start doing and keep on doing. "Doing" is ongoing and never finished!

But wait, there's more: "And the God of peace will be with you." Notice how God waits until this point to enter the picture. He wants us to take the initiative. He does not come at the very beginning of the process, to do it all for us; nor does He come after we've done all the heavy lifting, giving us no help at all. Rather, He

comes at just the right time, and providentially takes our hand to help us over the last hurdles.

Remember I told you there is a fascinating inversion of terms in this passage? Verse 7 says, “and *the peace of God* will guard your hearts and minds.” Verse 9 says, “and *the God of peace* will be with you.” What is the difference? *The peace of God* is a principle; *the God of peace* is a Person. The peace of God is a comforting sense of God’s presence, the God of peace is the One who actually gives us that peace. People are much more powerful than abstract concepts. The Giver is greater than the thing given.

So, if we are really serious about banishing some bad habit, or altering our lives for the better in some area, we should follow Paul’s inspired plan:

- First comes *learning* (information)--the intellectual part. Study, gather data, ponder reasons why we should change this or that habit.
- Second is *receiving* (internalization)--arriving at the stage of “I ought” and “I will.”
- Third and fourth are *hearing and seeing* (affirmation and visualization)--being strengthened by the encouragement and example of others.
- Then, it is a matter of *doing* (actualization)--the simple case of the mind telling the body to get cracking!

When we arrive at that point, God becomes an active partner and giver of strength.

Folks, this will WORK--it is better than all the self-help books available from Amazon. Apply it in your life today. --John Temples