

If a Thought Does Not Spark Joy, Replace It
(Apologies to Marie Kondo)
Philippians 4:1-9

⁴ Therefore, my brothers and sisters, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, dear friends!

² I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. ³ Yes, and I ask you, my true companion, help these women since they have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life.

⁴ Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! ⁵ Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. ⁶ Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

⁸ Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. ⁹ Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.

As I was looking at this passage and working out what Paul is saying to his audience then, and us now, it occurred to me that there is a common theme running through the three scenarios Paul discusses here. As I pondered, a first impression struck me as I recalled a true saying, 'as a person thinks, so they are' (Proverbs 23:7). What ever we think, do or say in a situation has been rehearsed in our minds many times before we act it out.

I'm also reminded of Marie Kondo, the Japanese de-clutter and organising guru. If an item does not spark joy discard it, or at least store it where it is not in the way. She has since then had a baby and, to her credit, her philosophy has been amended. When we think about it, there is a lot of clutter which needs dealing with in our lives. What is your clutter? The kids have left home, but left their clutter in the shed, we have our ancestors clutter in the shed. Men have lots of junk in the shed 'which might come in handy one day' (maybe). Then there's the Tupperware cupboard, the weeds in the garden, those books we have or haven't read, the craft projects we'll do some day, and then there's those people whom once we knew.

Comedian Kitty Flanagan talks about de-cluttering her elderly father's shed. He loved darning socks and had cartons and cartons of blue and green socks put aside for darning. He doesn't darn anymore, but insisted he had to keep them. So they sorted them and reduced the number of cartons. Inside the house were even more cartons of blue and green socks needing darning, so they sorted them and discarded some more. In a drawer he had even more blue and green socks, all new, none holey still in their packaging begging to be worn. *Insert eye roll.*

At the other end of the clutter spectrum, when my father went to live in an aged care facility, my mother did a radical de-clutter and removed and disposed of all traces of him from their unit. *Insert eye roll.*

Wherever we are on the de-clutter spectrum, it is hard to let go of stuff. But it is harder, and more important that we de-clutter our minds. In effect, Paul would say to us that we need to take Marie Kondo's concept and apply it to our own inner dialogue which echoes, ad nauseum, inside the vaults of our skulls. If it doesn't spark joy, discard it.

Personal Tensions Verses 2-3

Paul has become aware that two women in the Church at Philippi are at logger heads. Euodia and Syntyche have fallen out over something and the unity and life of the church is compromised. Much ink has been wasted trying to work out who the women were, what their role is in the church, and what they were arguing about. Who was Syzygus? But Paul avoids the gossip and gets to the point: the falling out needs to be resolved and trusted people in the congregation are called upon to help resolve the matter for the good of all.

In looking at what wiser, better informed commentators had to say about this I found a useful insight from Alec Motyer "Public problems need private solutions." If there is discord between ourselves and others, we need to be honest with ourselves and identify, then address our own culpability in a conflict. Were we being too sensitive? Were we not in a good humour on that day? Have we misinterpreted motives and drawn unfair conclusions? Have we harboured resentment, or sought reconciliation? To that end have we consulted with another trusted person to help resolve the discord? Or are we content to let the conflict poison our minds?

As part of my own recovery, I have had to let go of fetid resentments, unfounded grudges and unfair accusations to finally come to a sense of peace with the people I once knew long ago. Each of us needs to come to terms with past disputes, we need to seek our heavenly father's grace to be gracious to the people we have disagreed with, let go of bitterness, and change the way we think about those people and the situations which have aggrieved us. In doing that we are sharing in the work of Christ to bring peace to troubled people.

Peaceful Praying 4-9

Paul's next concern is with our prayer life. He wants us firstly to rejoice, but why say that? We need to ask is our praying a celebration of what God has worked in our lives and the people and world around us? Or is our praying a rehashing of grumbles and

expectations that God fixes the things which inconvenience us? Is our praying like grateful children, or spoiled brats? Are we reminding ourselves of what is wrong, instead of identifying what is right? What are we telling ourselves in prayer?

We need to remember to give thanks and to express our petitions in a positive manner. If we pray to be less bad tempered, are we not confirming that we are incurably bad tempered? However, by praying for the grace to be more even tempered we are both giving thanks for the improvement God has worked in our lives and also confirming that by God's grace, we are improving, or growing, in that part of our lives. Another benefit of couching our petitions in a more positive, affirming way is that we begin to realise that a moral failure no longer is a catastrophic fall which ruins our whole day, but a stumble from which we quickly recover and our day is reclaimed.

Anxiety is another area of concern, it has the power to disempower us, and to enslave us to fear. However, Paul reminds us that the Lord is near, that means near in terms of place and position. He is literally close to each of us. In recent times I have discovered that truth in meditation at home, or walking with him in his garden, as so many other Bible characters have done as they walked and talked with God along the way. God is near, because he cares, therefore freely identify your anxieties, name them for what they are and give them to the Lord to deal with. Part of Jesus' suffering on the cross was to bear away all that troubles us. Dare to give away your anxieties and be freed of their burden.

As we give up the mind clutter of our catalogue of failure and our burden of anxiety, we shall rejoice in the liberty of being at peace and truly free.

Practice Mindfulness 8-9

At the end of this passage, we find ourselves back where we started, what do you think about when you're alone? In the 1960's Peter Sarstedt wrote a haunting song "Where do you go to my

lovely" The song is about a fictional girl named Marie-Claire who grows up on the poverty-stricken backstreets of Naples, becomes a member of the jet set, and goes on to live in Paris. The lyrics describe her from the perspective of a childhood friend; it is left unclear whether they have remained close.

What head clutter do you need to address? If what we think rehearses our actions and reactions, what do we rehearse in our heads? If what we think drives our lives then ask yourself 'What am I priming myself to do'? What needs to change? Paul's final challenge is to cultivate godly thinking. The clue is not in the list of attributes, but the summary at the end "if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things". We will do well to declutter our thinking, we need to reassess what we tell ourselves about God, our family, our neighbours, other road users, unsupervised children, ourselves.

The trick is to be mindful of our thinking, to replace the Joyless with the joyful. Trap a joyless thought and turn it to a joyful one. Instead of telling yourself what you don't like about yourself, turn it around to affirm what you have become by God's good work in you. Instead of criticising a neighbour, remind yourself that they too are God's workmanship and a valued person in the community.

In short, be aware of your inner dialogue, as Marie Kondo reminds us, if it does not spark joy, throw it away. Or as Paul suggests, if a thought does not spark joy, swap it out for a better one.