

THE LETTER THAT CHANGED THE WORLD - The Biblical Theology of Romans - Part thirty-two

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Pastor Don Horban - Cedarview Community Church, Newmarket, ON

WHY 'PRACTICAL TEACHING' MAY NOT BRING THE SOLUTION TO SPECIFIC PROBLEMS

Romans 12:1-2 - "I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. [2] Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect."

I've been waiting for months to get to these great verses. I can't tell you how important they are to my understanding of genuine spiritual life. Christianity isn't real at all if there is no transformation of the life by the Spirit of God. This marvelous text rings with the melody of a new life. It is known and loved because Paul makes it seem so obvious and so natural that God transforms people. He doesn't just change their *religious beliefs*. He doesn't just add some *regulations* for them to live by. He makes them *new*. We're going to spend several weeks unfolding ideas from these two verses. We'll linger here on our way through Romans. These are grand, sweeping words and they are worthy of our time and study and application.

True enough, people don't feel the same excitement moving from fall into winter as they do moving from winter into spring, but this is the start of a new season for all of us, and for our church as well. God's Word and God's Spirit are always fresh in the transforming life and power they bring. These verses are for you and me.

Paul writes words of incredible promise and hope. He describes a wonderful, ongoing process. He's talking about something that is *begun* at some specific time but not *achieved* at any one point. We are to be constantly engaged in the *re*-newing of the spirit of our mind.

So how does this work? Perhaps more specifically, why does this *not* seem to work for many people? Why are there Christians - professors of *new creation* - who are walking around in *old lives*? My aim in this series is to encourage us all to be engaged in renewed minds and transformed life-styles. I want us all to believe this is possible for us because it is near to God's heart and bound up in His plan and power. Be renewed in the spirit of your mind. It really is the key to everything.

The two points I will make at the beginning of this teaching are a background to everything else I want to say in our study of these two verses. Right at the end of this teaching we'll come directly to some of the specific thoughts from the text. I'm doing this because nothing else Paul says in these two verses will make sense or accomplish the Spirit's purpose until these two background, foundational points are firmly embedded in our understanding:

1) CHRISTIAN CONVERSION BEGINS IN OUR MINDS WITH AN ORGANIC REBIRTH RATHER THAN AN EXTERNAL ADJUSTMENT

Organic and *external*. Since neither of those words has its roots in our text I need to explain what I mean. Think about Christmas. The trees come out of storage and we'll *decorate* them. The ornaments look nice as far as decorations go, but they are hung on the branches *externally*. They dress the tree up. Some good ones even look like they're part of the tree. But they aren't. They actually have nothing to do with the tree itself. They're just *on* the tree. Even for those purists who decorate real, living, potted trees, the decorations aren't a part of the tree's life. They're just decorations.

But if you went out to my tomato garden, or my perennial garden, you would have seen how God makes things beautiful and fruitful. He doesn't hang fruit and flowers on the branches from the *outside*. He births and grows them, gradually, from the *inside*. Unlike the decorations on my Christmas tree, these flowers and fruits aren't just attached or added on. They are there because they are *what the tree really is*. They don't just hang on the tree. They *are* the tree. They are what the tree is *organically*. My Christmas lights are *external*. My tomatoes are *organic*.

Nothing in Romans 12:1 and 2 will make any life changing difference to you until you learn to see the life of the Spirit as we've been describing it. It's unalterably *organic*. You can't *copy* the life of Jesus from someone else. There is no mechanical way of incorporating some religious rules and regulations so you can *be* just like Jesus. *Morality* starts on the *outside* of the life. *Christianity* starts on the *inside* of the life. You can make yourself better *behaved* but that has nothing whatsoever to do with spiritual life. You can never make yourself Godly.

This is so important and so misunderstood that I need to spend more time with it. There is a right approach and a wrong approach to living the Christian life. The wrong approach - the unfruitful approach - starts with particular

actions. The person says to himself, "I'll just stop doing this or that bad thing and I will be a Christian. I tell lies and I must not do that. I swear and I must not do that. I cheat and I must not do that. Jesus taught against those things." In other words, they start with the **particular outward action** rather than the **inwardly renewed mind**.

This is never the starting point for New Testament Christianity. There are people who don't swear and would never cheat but they are not Christians. The outward actions are the **fruit** of Christianity, not the **root**. **Not doing something bad will never cause one to be a Christian**. As I said in the statement of this first point, the Christian experience begins with an **organic** change of heart rather than an **external** change of actions.

True, Christianity **reaches** the actions. The outward life must be transformed - "**How shall we who died to sin still live in it?**" (Romans 6:2). But the outward fruit God grows on our lives is grown from the **inside**. It's the result of an **inner** transformation. It is not the same thing at all as morality. It is new life. I want to come back to this again at the end of this teaching.

2) **WE MUST UNDERSTAND WHY 'PRACTICAL TEACHING' MAY NOT BRING THE SOLUTION TO PARTICULAR PROBLEMS**

This may well be the grand deception in the contemporary church. It is lie number one. In the first point we saw that the Christian life is **organic** rather than **external**. Each one must, as the apostle Paul commanded, examine his or her heart to see if this change has taken place. Now we are ready to look at another related truth. The Christian life is **comprehensive** rather than **particular**.

Let me explain. By that I mean it doesn't come as the answer to **one particular problem to solve it**. This is a very popular approach in the contemporary church and it will never work. The gospel itself is presented as a solution to some **particular** problem. A person is lonely and Jesus is the friend indeed. A person is living aimlessly, without purpose, and Jesus is the One Who will give life meaning and direction. A person is struggling with sickness and lack and Jesus is presented as the One Who will bring healing and prosperity. But in each case a **particular problem** is singled out and that problem is the motive for the response to Jesus.

The church is shot through with this kind of teaching and the real problem with it is it doesn't work. And it doesn't work because Jesus never came to upgrade some segment or portion of your life. He came to claim ownership of **all** of it. That's what I mean when I say that Jesus didn't come to provide **particular** changes to your life but a **comprehensive** change to it. Just like a comprehensive insurance policy covers **everything**, Jesus comes to take ownership of **everything** about you:

1 Corinthians 6:18-20 - "Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body. [19] Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, [20] for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body."

These are truly striking words. Consider them. **Why** flee sexual immorality? This is the important question for the Christian to answer. Paul's answer is stunning to the careful reader. Do I flee it because I might get AIDS? Do I flee it because I might get someone pregnant? Do I flee it because my parents would be broken-hearted, or I might lose my good standing in the community?

No. **None** of those things are the motives for the Christian. Those motives are frequently the motives for people who profess no faith whatsoever in Christ. All of those reasons are just the **small** reasons. They're reasons rooted in tiny parts of my life - **particulars**, if I can say it that way. None of them is the **big picture** for the Christian. Perhaps I can say it like this - **none of those reasons has God in it**, and the Christian **lives** his or her whole life solely for the glory of God - "**So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God**" (1 Corinthians 10:31).

That's the **comprehensive** change that has captured the Christian's heart. That's where the new life of Christ shows up so vividly and differently from the mere desire to be a better person. The Christian's driving motive is he's been bought with a price. Paul says he is no longer his own. It has little or nothing to do with keeping rules and regulations. It starts with the **whole** of life, not the **parts** of the life:

2 Corinthians 5:17 - "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come."

These words must never be taken to mean Paul is claiming total perfection for every Christian. That's not it at all.

But here's what Paul **does** mean. The Christian is a new creation. He is a new creation **in whole** and he's a new creation **right now** in this sense - **every part of his mind and soul has been reached by Christ**. He may not be perfect yet, but there is only **one motive** in every part of his being, in everything he does. As Paul would say, whether he eats or drinks, he does it all **to** (notice that **directional** word), it's all **thought through - aimed at - the glory of God**.

Search your heart with this truth. Has Christ made this massive, **comprehensive** difference in your life. Is this new life pushing its way out into everything else about you? Is your whole life **bent** in the direction of Christ and His Kingdom? Or are you just trying to solve a few stubborn, particular problems, hoping that Jesus will help you out and prop you up as you may need Him from time to time?

I hope I can make this truth clear to you. Let me say it this way. There is a sense in which Jesus wants to reach every external, particular problem of your life **indirectly** rather than **directly**. This is always the way practical problems are dealt with in the Scriptures.

Think again about Paul's instruction about sexual immorality. He doesn't give a talk about sexuality transmitted diseases, or pregnancy, or personal embarrassment. No. He talks about conversion, the cross, the nature of the atonement, and the indwelling Christ. He focuses on the kind of stuff many churches are abandoning as irrelevant and stuffy. These are **doctrinal** truths. Who would have imagined that sexuality was somehow tied to the study of redemption?

When the church throws out the study of Biblical doctrine for the pursuit of more **"relevant"** topics, she is cutting off the only hope to permanently helping people. When the church pushes all its energy into healing the **"felt needs"** of the congregation she misses the important point that most of this world's deepest needs aren't **felt** at all.

I talk to people week after week who come looking for a solution for some particular problem. "Pastor, help me with my marriage," or, "Help me with my finances," or, "Help me with my stress." The situations are endless.

And usually they see no connection between those things and their lack of understanding or grounding or interest in what they have come to perceive as the drudgery of Christian doctrine. In fact, they've been **conditioned** by much of the body of Christ to look somewhere else - to something more **practical** - for the solution to their problems. And they're now set on a long, twisted path with a million different voices screaming a million different 'practical solutions' to their problem. They will wear themselves out with that empty journey.

To **continue** right in the renewal of your mind you must **begin** right. Build your life around these two foundational principles. Make sure you've truly begun with the new life of the Spirit of Jesus in your soul. First, remember spiritual life is **organic**, not **mechanical**. And second, make sure you understand the principle of **comprehensive** newness and motivation in **all** areas of your life, not just solutions to **particular** problems. Jesus will make you new only in **total**. He will never come just to clean up the parts of your life you want to present to him.