

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

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THE MERCIES OF GOD AND THE RENEWAL OF THE MIND

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."

Last week I began by outlining two foundational principles that hold up the rest of what Paul is going to say in these famous opening verses of Romans chapter 12. First, spiritual life (and by that I mean the life generated by the *Holy Spirit* - not just the *inner you* described by Oprah and a host of others) - *that* spiritual life is *organic*, not *external*. That is, you can't just *copy* the life of Jesus by yourself. It isn't like the decorations on your Christmas tree. It has to grow from new life inside - like the tomatoes on the vines in my garden.

And second, spiritual life - the life generated by the Holy Spirit - begins with a *comprehensive* inward change. It doesn't begin as a solution to one particular problem. Spiritual life is like the flu. When you have it in your being there is no part of you left untouched. God reaches all the particular needs and problems of your life *indirectly*, not *directly*. He doesn't come to solve a problem. He comes to claim you as His own and *increasingly dominate* the rest of your being.

That's where we began our opening teaching in this series. Now I want to anchor a few more ideas to the text we'll be examining in detail for the next eight weeks:

1) THE RENEWED MIND COMES FROM SOMEWHERE. IT DOESN'T JUST HAPPEN

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 appeal to you therefore...*" There's a whole world of hope and instruction in that fifth word - "*Therefore*," or, "*Because of this*," or, "*In view of this*." In other words, Paul is emphasizing that what he is *about* to say is based on the things he has *just* said. He is about to give four and a half chapters of specific, practical, livable direction to their lives, but he doesn't just give it. He tells them and us something we are prone to either forget or neglect. He tells them and us that there is no way these instructions are do-able without a renewed mind.

Remember, spiritual life is *organic* not *external*. These Roman Christians can't *copy* the Christian life from Paul or Jesus or anybody else. They can only live it out from the inside. Well, *where will they get these renewed minds?* If they can't manufacture them by themselves will Jesus just come and plopp new minds into their heads? How will this all start to grow and flow in their beings? How will it become *comprehensive and organic* rather than just *partial and external?*

This is where that word "*therefore*" comes into play. The practical instruction Paul will give in *chapters 12 through 16* is based on the doctrinal instruction in chapters *1 through 11*. Only, you wouldn't think so. You wouldn't think all those deep, ponderous doctrinal truths had anything to do with peace and joy and marriage and delight and wisdom.

We tend to think the practical stuff in 12 through 16 is for the *life* while the doctrinal stuff in 1 through 11 is for the *head*. But Paul, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, says that's all wrong. In fact, he says the instructions in 12 through 16 are *impossible* without the teaching of 1 through 11. All of this is bound up in that single word, "*therefore*."

In Romans 12:1-2 Paul is calling out to the church. The life he is calling them to live in Romans 12-16 won't just happen. It doesn't come out of nowhere. It has foundations. It has grounds. It has reasons. We must come back to these if we're going to teach the next generation of Christians to live for Jesus. Coffee houses and snappy praise choruses aren't going to cut it. You have to be more than just "wild at heart." You have to have a mind and heart deeply tethered - disciplined - anchored in a full understanding of the truth of God.

If people don't *think* right about God they won't *live* for God. They can be *morally good* people but they can never

be **godly** people. Paul says the renewed mind and the life of worship arise out of something very specific. There must come a full, rich, warm grasp of the goodness of God in Christ Jesus - ***"I appeal to you, therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God to present your bodies....."***

There is no experience that takes the place of filling the mind with the truth of God. You can't sing or shout or fast your way into this kind of understanding. Without this foundation we will always be vulnerable and weak in our faith, regardless of how long we've been Christians. Spiritual maturity isn't measured merely by **time**.

I see more Christians than ever ***"tossed to and fro,"*** to use Paul's words, by every new doctrine blowing through the church. Or they're carried along in a thousand different directions by their own emotions and passing ups and downs. It's so easy to profess **belief** in Biblical truth without really **studying** and **ingesting** and **loving** and being **fueled** by Biblical truth.

Satan is working his hardest in these days to fill people's minds with false ideas about God. There is a history to his approach: **Genesis 3:1-5** - ***"Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, 'Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?'" [2] And the woman said to the serpent, 'We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, [3] but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.' " [4] But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely die. [5] For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."***

Remember, the damage of the Fall didn't just **happen** when Eve and Adam **ate** the fruit. That was only the **outward expression** of the damage that was **already** done in their thinking. Satan changed the way they **thought** of God. He changed what was going on in their thoughts and the disobedience was the outward **result** of that process.

Paul is telling us that the same process works in a positive direction - **a fall-reversing** direction as well. We are to fill our lives with the beautiful truth of Jesus and (as we'll study in future weeks) His mercy toward us. We are to saturate our lives with truth that buffs up the glory of God in our own heads that our actions will **organically** germinate and flow out of this as **worship** rather than **work**.

This is why, as we'll study in future weeks, Paul calls the outward actions of the renewed mind our ***"spiritual worship"*** rather than merely our ***"assignment."*** He means our **lives** must follow our **hearts**. We're called to live where the mind has been so warned and enlivened with the beauty and power of Biblical truth that our **hearts** are in our deeds. They aren't a **chore** because we've been trained to see the shallowness and emptiness in the life-styles played out all around us.

2) **THERE IS A PRACTICAL MANIFESTATION TO AN INWARDLY RENEWED MIND**

People who have lives filled up with the abundance of Romans 1 through 11 are **ready** to live out Romans 12 through 16. They are ready because they are bursting to please God. These people never even ask "Why can't I see this movie?", "Why can't I go to that party?", "Why can't I date that non-Christian person?", or, "Why do I have to go to church?"

We must train people to think deeply and Biblically about these issues. They aren't just **moral** issues in the strictest sense. We will always appear small and archaic in the world's eyes if we're merely perceived as fighting the latest trend. We are not merely advocating a more conservative social agenda. We seek to magnify and flesh out the beauty of the truth of Christ and His indwelling, all-consuming life.

This is so important. We will never be convincing in our arguments against worldly tastes and ambitions until we teach people to ask the right questions. The issue isn't just ***"What's wrong with this movie, or this music, or these magazines?"*** Or, ***"What's wrong with the goal of being rich or powerful?"***

All of those questions are simply too small. They don't really have good, satisfying answers because they're the wrong questions. You can never get truly convincing answers to them because they never touch big eternal issues. That's not the way we are training disciples with renewed minds to think.

The questions that need to spring to mind immediately in everything I do are, ***"How can I show the beauty of Jesus in this? How can I act to show all my friends that I treasure Jesus more than my own pleasure in this world? How can I prove to the world that Christ calls me to lay down my life for Him in this world? What will stand out about my calling to be a servant and pilgrim in this world as I take up my cross? How can I show people that my citizenship is in heaven and not of this earth?"***

Those are the right questions. Those are the important questions. But here's the thing - you can never **make** people ask those questions. Only as people learn to treasure genuine spiritual truth will they begin to think this way and ask those questions. It takes a mind renewed by the Spirit and soaked in the Word to begin to ask those questions in a way that's **unpremeditated** and **winsome**.

People with renewed minds never just ask "**What's wrong with this?**" Because they've experienced a **comprehensive shift in affections and priorities** they look through a completely different set of lenses at everything they say or do. And that kind of mind doesn't come out of nowhere. It comes from digesting and adoring the truth of God more than anything else in life.

And by the way, just so you know we're on the right track here, Jesus said the very same thing: **John 8:31-32** - "**So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, 'If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, [32] and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.'**"

Your will only sets you free **indirectly**. You can't merely **choose** to live a free life in Christ Jesus. Your will can't accomplish that directly. But you will **can** be used by the Holy Spirit **indirectly** - perhaps more **gradually** would be a good way to say it. Your will **can** choose to grow in truth. You can come to **know** spiritual truth. And you will then, with the affection-changing power of the Holy Spirit, come to **love** spiritual truth. And line by line, strand by strand, you will come to find your heart increasingly **freed**.

3) WHAT DOES ALL THIS MEAN TO THE AVERAGE CHURCH-GOER TODAY?

I know this isn't popular to say, but I would submit to you that the average church goer is trying to do the impossible today, and his church isn't even **telling** him so. The average church goer wants to have a happy marriage. He desperately wants his children to do well in school, marry a Christian partner, stay out of trouble with sex and drugs, and generally love Jesus.

In fact, the average adult church-goer today wants more in terms of spiritual blessings for his children than he wants for himself, forgetting that children never treasure a lifestyle based on **instruction**. They treasure it on the basis of **example**.

Honestly requires us to face some bad news before the freeing work of truth can bring its freeing power. If Paul is **right**, many church-goers are today are **wrong**. They want more and more of the good life. They want their prayers answered, their kids godly, their homes sound and moral.

At the same time they want to ground their own lives in costly spiritual disciplines less and less. They are going to church 50% less than one generation ago. They spend more of their time and wealth on their own consumption. They read their Bibles less. They spend less time in prayer and get more of their religion through television and the internet.

Add to this the disturbing trend in religious books that tell believers they don't need to work very hard at anything Christian, that the traditional church is laying a big guilt trip on people, and that as long as they spend quality time with their family on Sunday, that's the same thing as worship in God's eyes, and that all they need to be is "wild at heart," and you can see why these dear, misguided saints can't figure out why, somehow, with all the best intentions, and armed with the latest religious best-seller under their arm, everything is somehow coming up unraveled and empty.

Please, church, please remember this key point from today's teaching. God calls us to live a life of devotion, separation and loving, passionate, obedience to Him. All of my behavior, emotions, and plans and thoughts are to be **renewed** by the Holy Spirit. But this renewal isn't accidental and it isn't arbitrary. It can't be pumped up with good music and lighting. It can't be regulated by rules and laws. It can't just be inherited from parents like red hair or freckled skin.

It is **built** on something. It doesn't come from nowhere. It comes from the passionate, continuous digesting and cherishing of divine, revealed truth. You shall **know** the truth, and the truth shall **set** you free.

Because of what I know to be true of Christ I speak this way and not that. Because of what I know to be true of Christ I think this way and not that. Because of what I know to be true of Christ I cultivate this kind of activity and put that kind to death. Because I exist to glorify Christ I watch and listen to this and not to that. Because my whole life is

joined to Jesus at every point I date this kind of person and not that kind. Because I am a pilgrim here on this earth, and only for a short while, and because I am awaiting Christ and His return, I do my business this way and not that way, even if it's less profitable in the short-term.

Hear this call from the Spirit today. Hear it more deeply than you have heard it before - “....**assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, [22] to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, [23] and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds....**” (Ephesians 4:21-23). Note, “***renewed in the spirit of your mind.***” Not just in the *content* of your thoughts, but the whole *flavor* of your desires and ambitions. We all need more and more help of the Holy Spirit in this.