

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

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MERCY DEEP ENOUGH TO RENEW 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."

If the Christian walk is perceived as a task or assignment it will always be forced in terms of carrying it out. And if the engine driving the walk with Jesus isn't pleasurable and delightful, only the most strong in will-power will carry it out continually. The easiest way to reach the human will and capture it eternally isn't with **duty**, but with **delight**.

This is why we should pay particular attention to the way Paul finishes the two verses in our theme text for this series. The good news is Paul ends his famous appeal in Romans twelve one and two with his description of living in the will of God as being "**...good, acceptable and perfect.**" The bad news is, for many, this is not an accurate description of the process of living the Christian life.

If you don't believe me just ask yourself why in the world would we have to expend so much effort and energy encouraging and pleading and begging people to keep going and growing with God? Why do people have to be nudged into something that is not only **good**, but **absolutely perfect**?

That's the issue we want to address in this teaching. If people are to **live** the Christian life properly they must **perceive** it properly. In other words, you don't just "**get saved**" and bolt out of the starting gate. That initial energy may or may not carry you very far down the track. That's why we took a whole week studying the "**Therefore**" at the beginning of our text. The renewed mind comes from **somewhere** not **nowhere**. There are foundations and reasons that make everything else work properly.

Today we are going to get a little more specific as to the shape and substance of those foundations. Paul is going to tell us something from our text that will **keep our walk with Jesus delightful, not just dutiful**. Paul says there is a key - it doesn't work automatically - but it's a key none the less, that will **renew** the believer's mind. That is, it will **keep making things new** in your walk with Jesus. It will **keep it fresh**. This foundation will **rejuvenate joy** and **awaken fresh hope**.

So we want to know what this foundation is and how it is applied:

1) **THE MOST IMPORTANT THING YOU CAN DO TO COOPERATE WITH THE SPIRIT IN THE RENEWING OF YOUR MIND IS TO TURN YOUR MIND CONSCIOUSLY TO THE MERCIES OF GOD**

Romans 12:1 - "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.

The "**therefore**" links Paul's appeal to the content of the previous eleven chapters of Romans. We took two weeks considering this. But there's a lot in those chapters. They are just full of solid, doctrinal meat. And the "**therefore**" reminds us none of it is irrelevant or superfluous. The renewed mind comes from **somewhere** not **nowhere**.

But then Paul focuses in even more tightly on what he has in mind. "The things I'm calling you to now live out can't just be done because I'm telling you to do them. They need fuel to get off the ground. And the fuel is the mercy of God. But I don't mean just **experiencing** the mercy of God. And I don't mean just **believing** in the mercy of God. I'm talking about your **mind** and how you **soak it in the mercy of God!**"

The truth of the abounding mercy of God in Christ Jesus is to your mind what uranium is to a nuclear reactor. When you **ponder** it prayerfully you will **cherish** it. And when you cherish it it will become fuel in the renewal of your mind. Soaking your mind in the mercy of God will **draw your will with thankful, humble delight** rather than **drive it in mechanical duty**.

This is exactly why Paul directs his readers' attention **backward** to Romans 1 through 11 before he directs them forward to Romans 12 through 16. These first eleven chapters of Romans are a tale of the mercies of God. Even the chapters that don't, at first glance, **appear** to be about mercy at all really do resound with mercy when you

consider them fully and deeply.

Romans 1 and 2 seem to hold out nothing but a sad tale of our sin and rebellion against God. Everything is black and hopeless. And they're *meant* to be like that because only the truth about our actual situation, our utter bankruptcy and hopelessness, sets the stage properly for the mercies of God.

It's for people the likes of *us* - people who couldn't possibly *earn* their status or favor before God - for whom the righteousness of God has been made freely available through Christ - **Romans 5:6-10** - **"For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. [7] For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die— [8] but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. [9] Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. [10] For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life."**

Do you see the wonderful, hope-filled news in those words? Never let anyone tell you that you weren't so bad apart from Christ. Those who try to build your esteem with false flattery do you no favor. You're being cheated. Let the Bible speak its own message. The worse we are without Christ the better. Because I was so lost and sinful and unworthy of Christ's grace then, when He came and died for me on the cross, I know that I need never worry *now* about qualifying for His grace either.

That's Paul's whole point. It's the doctrine of my utter sinfulness and unworthiness before God that is the ground for my assurance of His ongoing presence and mercy now - **Romans 5:10** - **"For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life."**

Now, remember where we are in our teaching. This is just one example of the mercies of God unfolded in Romans 1 through 11. This is the truth Paul sends us back to if we would renew our minds and transform our lives. But how? How does this work? Why does Paul call us to look intently at this kind of doctrinal truth and honestly make his appeal to godly living on the basis of it?

Romans 12:1 - **"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."**

Perhaps Jesus, more than anyone else, expanded on the very thing Paul is telling us in these two verses from Romans 12. Listen very carefully to a simple incident from the life of Jesus. Try to pretend you've never heard this account before:

Luke 7:37-47 - **"And behold, a woman of the city, who was a sinner, when she learned that he was reclining at table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of ointment, [38] and standing behind him at his feet, weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head and kissed his feet and anointed them with the ointment. [39] Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner." [40] And Jesus answering said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." And he answered, "Say it, Teacher." [41] "A certain moneylender had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. [42] When they could not pay, he cancelled the debt of both. Now which of them will love him more?" [43] Simon answered, "The one, I suppose, for whom he cancelled the larger debt." And he said to him, "You have judged rightly." [44] Then turning toward the woman he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. [45] You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet. [46] You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. [47] Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little."**

Take note. Jesus uses a decidedly *non-religious* person in His story to teach something important to a highly trained and seriously devout Pharisee. Surprisingly, the Pharisee in Luke's account isn't as moved to serve Jesus as this "sinful woman." And this cuts to the core of the *reason* Paul turns to the mercies of God as the motive for renewed minds and transformed lives.

The Pharisee, who is prompted by every religious system and rule and regulation you could imagine, was never drawn to devotion to Jesus by the call of *duty*. This sinful woman, who knew *none* of the rules and regulations and

religious duties of the Pharisee, was openly **drawn** to worship and serve Jesus. **Why?** What was working in her life that wasn't working in the Pharisee's?

Jesus tells us. She understood she had been forgiven much. She was drawn, warmed, and delighted to adore Jesus because her mind and heart were steeped in the rich mercies of God. And, just like Paul said, the mercies of God will motivate you far beyond religious duty.

Back to us. I know we all **believe** in the mercies of God. I know we could all recite the basic theology of grace and forgiveness. I know we all **understand** and **agree** with the Biblical premise that we're sinners saved by grace. But I'm not talking about any of those things. Those things, in themselves, carry no renewing power.

I'm asking you how many times a day - while you're at work or driving your car or cleaning your house - how many times do you pause, get purposely still and quiet, and back up your brain, and just **consider** the mercies of God to you in Christ Jesus. How regularly do you **recall** the mercies of God? Paul says that's where the power for godliness comes from. Jesus says so too.

2) THE MERCIES OF GOD ARE THE ANTIDOTE TO THE THINGS THAT MOST FREQUENTLY WEAR CHRISTIANS OUT AND PULL CHRISTIANS DOWN SPIRITUALLY

If reveling in the mercies of God **renews** us, then neglecting God's mercies **ages** us - wears us out before our time. We are called to renew our minds daily in God's mercies and we are called to glorify and extend God's mercies - **Romans 15:8-9** - "**For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God's truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, [9] and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy....**"

This is the whole object of the gospel. We are to **renew** our lives daily in God's mercy and we are to help others **marvel** at God's mercy. We are called to **reveal** God's mercy to others in both our words and our actions. This is how Christianity spreads and grows. Jesus came to make God's mercy look great. Jesus saved you and filled your life with God's mercies to make them **manifest** through you to others.

But it doesn't always happen. I've been around the church long enough to realize that many Christians **profess** the mercies of God more than they **extend** the mercies of God. And this kind of **hybrid** spirituality burns people out long before their time.

I've seen it over and over. People get miffed because someone is ministering on the platform and they don't think that person has treated them fairly. Another person gets upset because he sees someone else raising their hands in worship and they don't think that person was honest with them. Someone quits working with children because someone else spoke too harshly to their kids. Another person leaves the church because one of their friends didn't get along with one of the department leaders.

All of those true stories have one thing in common. The **mercies of God** were not taken into consideration. We all get so much like the older brother in the parable of the prodigal son. If the only idea Jesus were driving home in this parable was the wonderful, mind-bending grace the father gave the son Jesus could have told the story with only two characters - the wayward son and the merciful father. But there's obviously something else intended here. Jesus injects a third character, the older and obviously miffed brother.

The context of the parable tells us why. It's a story directed to the Pharisees because they were offended Jesus was associating with flat-out sinners. They couldn't stand to see Jesus' favor - His mercy - extended to these undeserving reprobates. **That's** why Jesus' story has an older brother in it. We're meant to see ourselves. We're meant to see how, little by little, inch by inch, we poison our souls and starve our hearts when we don't **share** in the Father's mercy. How quickly we forget that our **calling**, the **reason we are saved at all** is to make the mercies of God look absolutely, irrationally, unbelievably stupendous. Mercy isn't earned and it isn't deserved. If people **quality** for it, it isn't mercy.

Remember, make mercy the **operating system** for all the other programs of your life. Only **thinking about** and **manifesting** the mercies of God will keep you **renewed in the Spirit of your mind** - "**I urge you by the mercies of God that you present yourselves.....**" Whenever you aren't **recalling** the mercies of God to your own life, and whenever you are manifesting something **other** than mercy to others, you are out of the will of Father God. And you just can't be fruitful there.