

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

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KEEPING A RENEWED MIND IN THE MIDDLE OF THE LONG RACE

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."

The Christian life is less about doing the right *thing* than it is about forming the right *habits*. This makes the Christian life both *easier* and more *difficult* than people think. It's easier because the Holy Spirit comes alongside to change, not only specific *actions*, but to give us *new desires* to pursue those actions, eventually with very little premeditation and struggle.

But the Christian life is also harder than many think because, while one solitary good decision is important, it is much easier to make one good choice than to build whole new patterns of living and thinking. In other words, and here's the catch 22, *it takes diligence to form the habits that make spiritual renewal joyful and possible*. One short step, however righteous, is easier than learning to *walk in the Spirit*. But it's never as deeply joy-producing and soul-satisfying.

The call to *unconform our lives to the world* and the call to *be transformed* to the will of God are both calls that are in the continuous present tense. They *keep calling* as long as we follow Jesus on this earth. A large part of all that the Holy Spirit tries to do in my heart is to keep me *hearing* something this world tries desperately to drown out.

I want this teaching to be a simple, clarion call. I want to share the things we all must do to keep being *made new*. These are the things we must do to stay sharp with the mind of Jesus. These are the things that keep spiritual fervor warm in our souls, even in the middle of the long, hard race.

1) NEVER MISS ONE DAY SPENDING TIME ALONE WITH JESUS IN PRAYER

In **Luke 11:1** one of Jesus' disciples comes to Jesus and says the words that have made their mark in history - "**Lord, teach us to pray...**" This is the only time His disciples ask Jesus to teach them how to do any one thing. They asked Jesus many questions. But they never asked Jesus how to preach or teach. They never asked Jesus how to walk on water or turn water into wine.

But they saw Jesus pray over and over again. They saw Him praying when they weren't. It's almost as though they *knew* this was the key to everything else about Him. I think, if we could crawl into their minds when they asked Jesus this question - if we could sweep around in the dusty corners of their minds - here's what we would find. They saw something in Jesus they knew they couldn't *copy*. You can't copy a prayer life. It won't work mechanically. They saw a life spilling up from deep inside their Lord that was *authentic spiritual life* - it was *organic*. There was simply no way to manufacture it.

And while they weren't brilliant about everything, they could figure this much out. His life was tied to His praying. And if He could pass *that* secret on to them, well, they would have everything else they needed.

So I want to come back and ask this hopelessly old-fashioned question. I haven't asked it from this pulpit in a long time. **How much time do you spend each day in prayer?** It took me way too long to come to terms with the truth that prayer can't be learned from any book. There are no seminars that can teach you to pray. You just *pray*. You can't *learn* to do it without *doing* it.

That's why, at least most of the time, when Jesus taught His disciples about prayer, He talked to them about what Father God was like. He talked to them about the kinds of *dangers* there were to the prayer life - unforgiveness, greed, sleepiness, etc. In other words, He taught about the things that *inspire* the prayer life, like the promises of the listening heart of the Father, and He talked about the things that would *shut down* the prayer life. But He very rarely - with the one exception of what we have come to call the "**Lord's prayer,**" gave talks on the exact *technique* of prayer.

I need to constantly deal with my heart about this. I can't learn spiritual life the way I can learn history. I can never distort the Christian life into merely *admiring* Jesus or even *liking* Jesus. He doesn't even ask me to sing love songs to Him. Would you receive the song and praise of someone who never wanted to talk to you? The only way love for Jesus is authenticated in our lives is by prayer.

This is how Jesus loves us. Jesus loves you right now. And do you know what He **does**? - how He **demonstrates** that love? He **prays** for you. Does your love for Him birth prayer? Or is it all fluffy, emotional infatuation?

2) **LEARN THE ONGOING ART OF FORCING SPIRITUAL TRUTH INTO LIVELY MEMORY EACH AND EVERY DAY**

When you were born again you didn't **learn** a new way of thinking about life. Some people think they did from the way they've come to interpret some familiar Bible verses, like this one - **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 are a marvelous description of the scope of transformation Jesus brings. The change Jesus brings in conversion is a **comprehensive** change. Remember, it's like getting the flu. It's like a **divine infection** that leaves no part of your being untouched. **Everything** is new.

The Spirit of God reaches into your past and cleanses you from all sin. He reaches into your affections to change the things that rev and excite your emotions. He spreads His influence into all the relationships of your life. He shapes the relationships of your marriage, your parenting, with your boss at work. You are even called to love and forgive your enemies.

This is a wonderful description of a **new start**. Every area of life begins all over again. But while the change is **comprehensive** it isn't **finished**. That's why the experience of conversion is called being **"born again."** It's the new **start** of everything - absolutely **everything**. But it's only the **start**, not the **completion**.

Stay with me here, because this is more important than many people think. Jesus had stern words of warning for people who confused the **beginning** of a venture with the **completion** of it: **Luke 14:27-32** - **"Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple. [28] For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? [29] Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, [30] saying, 'This man began to build and was not able to finish.' [31] Or what king, going out to encounter another king in war, will not sit down first and deliberate whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? [32] And if not, while the other is yet a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace."**

Notice, when Jesus talks about these people who forgot to stay with the tasks they began He was dealing, very specifically, with the subject of **"taking up our cross"** and **"being His disciple"**(27). In other words, a big part of being a disciple of Jesus is **not** confusing the **beginning** of the task with the **completion** of it.

And the remedy He describes is framed in the words in **verse 31**, **"....he sits down first and deliberates...."** The **mind** is brought to the table. He **processes** the events yet to unfold later that day. A battle is coming. But it won't be won in the moment it's fought. It will be won **early**. It will be won by engaging the mind **before** the heat and distractions of the battle are at hand.

I'm slowly learning to ask myself certain questions near the beginning of each day. If I'm all alone in my office at the church I'll sometimes say the words out loud. I'll make my lips phrase the words - **"Why did God give my another day of life and strength?"** You should ask yourself that. I mean really ask the words out loud, not just thinking them in your thoughts. And make yourself give a clear answer. Because you will face the rest of the day very differently depending on the answer you give.

If the answer you give is **"God just wants me to be deliriously happy and give me Jabez-sized blessings,"** you will find personal problems frustrating - interrupting the blessings you're expecting. But if you answer **"God gave me this day to demonstrate to everyone I meet that Christ is my treasure rather than the things of this world,"** you will come to see all the daily irritants of life as opportunities to show the unsurpassing glory of Christ because they are trifles when compared with eternity.

That's just one very simple example. The questions are many and precious. **"Why would God allow enemies to foul up my plans? Why did God not allow me to accomplish my goals? Did He have something else more in mind? What would Jesus have done first today? Why am I always too tired to read my Bible but full of energy to play hockey or golf? In view of eternity, how should I arrange my time today? What would my friends say is the greatest love of my life if they followed me all day today? What could God be teaching me through this situation He has me in today? If I allow these feelings that I'm feeling in my heart right now**

room to grow and remain, where will they take me in one or two years?"

Meditating literally means **"mumbling or speaking to oneself."** It is regurgitating Scriptural truth in a way that stuffs it into your mind like dressing into a turkey. Bible reading is virtually useless without this. The **power** of truth is not **self-sustaining** in our minds. It constantly needs to be **recalled**. The power of truth must be pulled off the bench into service in our lives. The New Testament is full of reminders of this if you look for them:

2 Peter 1:10-13 - "Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to make your calling and election sure, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall. [11] For in this way there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. [12] Therefore I intend always to remind you of these qualities, though you know them and are established in the truth that you have. [13] I think it right, as long as I am in this body, to stir you up by way of reminder...."

It's not just what you **know**, it's what you **remember** that counts. Peter is an old man as he writes these words. No doubt, he could offer countless tips and insights into godliness. But he doesn't have a lot of time so he zeros in on what he thinks is most important. These Christians to whom he writes are having a hard time. We know they were experiencing persecution. The bloom has gone off the rose. Pay careful attention to what Peter tells them to do. He talks about their calling and their conversion.

Then he says something both strange and striking. He tells them to **"practice"** these things (10) - **"If you practice these qualities you will never fall."** What can this mean - **practicing doctrinal truth?** It's not like a tennis serve. How can a person **practice** truth? He tells us - **"Therefore I intend always to remind you of these qualities, though you know them and are established in the truth that you have. [13] I think it right, as long as I am in this body, to stir you up by way of reminder...."**

It's all about remembering. You **practice** truth by bringing it back to your mind. You make yourself **recall** truths by **asking your mind the right questions**. You bring truth to **bear** when it's needed. Peter says Christians who don't do this end up **"so near sighted they are blind"**(2 Peter 1:9). That means they **lose their way**. So, to keep your mind from growing weak and stale spiritually, question yourself honestly every day. Otherwise spiritual glaucoma sets in.

3) **MAKE YOUR SPIRITUAL CAPACITY BIGGER BY STRETCHING YOUR MIND TO STRUGGLE WITH DEEPER AND DEEPER TRUTH**

Not everyone is at the same level. Nor will they ever be. But everyone can stretch and grow. In fact, everyone **must**. The Psalmist points us down a surprising path for spiritual pleasure and delight: **Psalm 111:2** - **"Great are the works of the Lord, studied by all who delight in them."**

Something precious was stated very quickly. Did you see it? The Psalmist marries **delight** with **study**. The ways of God are too great simply to be glossed over or pondered lightly. Christian novels won't fuel deep delight in God. They will bring immediate pleasure and relaxation (and that's fine in small doses) but never deep delight in God. Delight comes from study, and study requires work. Therefore **delight** in the truths of God comes from **working** with the truths of God.

I came across a marvelous quote from C.S. Lewis making the very same point - **"For my own part, I tend to find the doctrinal books often more helpful in devotion than the devotional books, and I rather suspect that the same experience may await others. I believe that many who find that 'nothing happens' when they sit down, or kneel down, to a book of devotion, would find that the heart sings unbidden while they are working their way through a tough bit of theology with a pipe in their teeth and a pencil in their hand."**

That's a truly great quote - only you'll live longer without the pipe. Our modern evangelicalism has fallen for the myth that joy comes from light, easy truth rather than deep, costly truth. The music must be light and happy or we lose interest. The stories must be quick and snappy or we don't have time. Services must be breezy and humorous or we grow bored. Books must be easily accessible or we don't read them (have you noticed how the publishing companies have caught on to this and put all their best selling Christian titles into **little books** about the size of a greeting card?).

How different is the tone of God's Word! **Proverbs 2:1-6** - **"My son, if you receive my words and treasure up my commandments with you, [2] making your ear attentive to wisdom and inclining your heart to understanding; [3] yes, if you call out for insight and raise your voice for understanding, [4] if you seek it like silver and search for it as for hidden treasures, [5] then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God. [6] For the Lord gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and**

understanding....”

While we'd never say it out loud, we have a problem accepting the truthfulness of those words. And there's a reason for that. It's because the joy of deep study in God's Word **feels** different than the joy of hugging your wife or listening to a joke or singing a great song in a church service. The joy of struggling with God's Word, of meditating deeply on it and even memorizing it, is a joy that comes more **slowly** but with a deeper **payload**. Raking is easier than digging. But with raking you only get **leaves**. When you dig you may find **gold**.

Just **do** these three things. It's time. Don't **plan** to do them. Just **do** them. Don't wait until you feel more motivated. It won't happen, and it's only the Devil telling you to wait. **Pray honestly and intensely every day**. Prayer activates the Holy Spirit in your mind. **Dialog with your heart every day**. Ask yourself the right questions to keep your mind from drifting from truth you have already heard and learned. **And study** - as though your soul depended on it. Study the deep, meaty truths of God. Even when these things don't **feel** like joy in themselves, remember they are the **path** to joy. And there are no other ways to stay renewed in your mind.