

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

Sunday, September 29th, 2019 - 6:00 p.m. - Teaching #2160

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WHAT A RENEWED MIND DOES

Romans 12:3-5 - “For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. [4] For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, [5] so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.”

It would be easy to conclude that we’ve stalled in these past seven weeks in our journey through the book of Romans. We’ve been glued to the first two verses of Romans 12. It was almost like we were watching a movie that was put on *pause* for seven weeks. We’ve been intentionally trying to digest these two verses in slow time. We’ve been studying the *kind* of change the Holy Spirit brings. We’ve been considering its *internal* nature. We’ve been considering the *motive* of the renewed mind - the *mercies of God*. We’ve been examining the *process* of inward renewal. And we’ve been studying the *content* of the renewed mind - knowing by *testing* the *will of God*.

But eventually, as important as all of this is, we must move on. The renewed mind is *for* something. Spiritual life isn’t all *contemplation* and *comprehension*. There is *service* as well as *devotion, action* as well as *prayer, ministry* as well as *purity*. Being inwardly renewed and clean is good, but it’s not enough. You are clean *for something*.

In other words, we must remember verses one and two as we launch into the rest of this great chapter. We’ve been looking at those two verses for about seven weeks. And Paul isn’t developing a *new* topic in verse three. Rather, he is elaborating and explaining this theme of the renewed mind and the life - the *body* - being presented to the Lord as worship. And that leads us right into the first point of today’s teaching:

1) **WHEN YOU LOOK FOR THE PERSON WITH A RENEWED MIND YOU WILL FIND HIM IN THE CHURCH**

Romans 12:3-5 - “For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. [4] For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.”

These are striking words. It would be easy to read verses one and two and think Paul is merely writing about the transformation of the *individual*, the Christian as he stands before God *alone*. I want to be holier. I want to be more discerning of the will of God. I want to contemplate His marvelous mercies. I want my life to be a life of worship. But it’s all *me*. It’s all about *my* spiritual goals and *my* desire for godliness.

But when Paul talks about this person with his or her quest for a renewed mind and a transformed life, he can’t talk about the person *alone*. The renewed mind is described in terms of its relationship to *others*. Paul can’t even begin to discuss the renewed mind as it stands *by itself* - “For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, [5] so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another”(12:4-5).

This verse is a real slap on the face for so much of North American evangelicalism. We are so accustomed to thinking of our Christian walk as a matter between the individual and Jesus Christ. And we can come to consider our *spiritual growth* - that is, the *renewal of our minds* - as a matter between each one of us *individually* and the Holy Spirit.

This is the mistake Paul is addressing in today’s text. Paul has just spent two verses dealing with the *importance* of having renewed minds and transformed lives. Nothing is more important than this. Very well then, *how* does God do this? What is the process? Well, we must contemplate and learn deeply the *mercies of God*. And we must *turn from the misinformation of the world*. We must *present our bodies* as instruments of worship.

Is that all? Is there anything else? Paul now tells us *where* this transforming work takes place. God doesn’t renew the minds of Christians *independently*. He doesn’t work with *you* and then work with *me*. He only works with *us*. When He works with *you* He does so in relationship to *me*. And when He works in *me* He does so in relationship to *you*. Or, to take another run at it. He works *through you* to work on *me*. And He works *through me* to work on *you*. This is what Paul is going to unfold in these verses, though I’m only introducing it here.

But **why?** Why does God choose this strange, rather roundabout way of **linking us up** as He works in our lives? That leads us into the second point:

2) **IT IS IMPOSSIBLE FOR OUR MINDS TO BE RENEWED AND OUR LIVES TRANSFORMED IN ISOLATION FROM THE CHURCH**

Romans 12:3-5 - “For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. [4] For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, [5] so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.”

So far we’ve been referring mainly to **verses four and five**. Now I want to look more carefully at **verse 3** - “For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.”

Please stay with me for a minute because this gets to the heart of the issue. If you work **backwards** from this verse it will take you back to **verses 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 mark of an **unrenewed mind** is self-centeredness. We are all naturally inclined to **self-promotion** and **self-exaltation**. We “**think of ourselves more highly than we ought to think.**” And, in spite of what many therapeutic brands of spirituality would have you believe, this is the essence of what God wants to **undo** in my life. His number one goal is to turn me away from the pampering and exalting of self and self-fulfillment. That’s His **whole** mission in my life. And He has a **gigantic** task ahead of Him.

There are **parts** of that work that can be done in seclusion. There are some **tools** that God will use later on by the Holy Spirit. I can read my Bible alone. I can and should spend time in private, secret prayer. I can and should study and meditate in quietness and seclusion. All of this is so obviously true it needs no proof-texting from me. But here’s where we **do** need to think things through freshly. I said these private disciplines are the **tools God will use later on by the Holy Spirit**. But what are those tools **for?** What does God want to **do** with those tools? **When** and **where** do they get applied to some specific task?

We simply **must** ask these questions. I have loads of **tools** in my basement. I’m so proud of them. Reni shakes her head when we go through Lowes or Home Depot because I love buying little gadgets. I don’t know how to **use** them. I don’t even know what some of them **are**.

This can happen with the **tools** of the spiritual life. Take reading the Bible, just as one example. Reading the Bible isn’t **living** the Christian life. Reading the Bible is **preparation** for living the Christian life. It is amazing to me how many Christians think of their duty regarding God’s Word as being fulfilled merely by **reading** it. “I read my Bible for an hour a day, Pastor Don.” That’s good. But Jesus isn’t going to ask you if you **read** your Bible every day. He’s going to look for what you **did** with that Bible knowledge.

This is clearly presented in the very **terms** God’s Word uses to describe itself. Most famously, it’s called the “**sword of the Spirit**” - **Ephesians 6:17** - “**....and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God....**” What’s a sword for? Hanging on your belt? Is that what soldiers did with swords? The plain truth is **swords are for killing**. That’s the only reason soldiers carried swords. And what the Word of God kills is **pride, self-exaltation, and self-reliance**.

Now remember where we are. We’re talking about how the renewed mind and the transformed life can’t happen in solitude. We’re working through the idea that transformation takes place **in the church**. We’re still working with the concept in **Romans 12:3** - “For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.” This is what the natural mind does. This is how an **unrenewed mind** thinks. It registers the self **too highly**. It places the self in an unrealistic position.

And all of this is why genuine spiritual transformation can’t take place in solitude. I can read my Bible alone and I can pray alone and I can meditate alone. And yes, the Holy Spirit will speak into my life. But I will probably think the job of transformation is complete before it is. I will **feel** holy only because, as I kneel by my bed, there is nothing about my circumstances to make me feel **unholy**. I will rest in the fact that I’ve **read** my Bible and **said** my prayers.

But God has a solution to this mystic delusion. He will place me in the context of a group of people in the church. In fact, this is where He will use all that time in prayer and the Word. He will **reveal unrenewed, untransformed stuff** in my soul. He will show me where I don't **conform** to the Word I've hidden deep in my heart. He will place me in a church context where I can't possibly get my way so I will be forced to confront my own selfishness. He will put me into fellowship with people who won't have much tact when they get frustrated with my stubbornness and prejudices. In short, He will, by His Spirit, reveal to me where I have **thought of myself more highly than I should have**.

This problem isn't corrected by Bible reading, and, if you think about it, you will quickly see why. The power of the Bible to change my life is proportional to my repentant response as I read it. But as I read my Bible **alone** I am reading it with my own eyes and my own blind spots, not the least of which is I **over-estimate** myself. And if, as Paul says, I am inclined to **think of myself more highly than I should**, I will miss most of the things the Holy Spirit wants to change. He will speak. But I won't think He's speaking **to me**. His voice won't seem urgent.

"Well, pastor Don, can't the Holy Spirit **show** me my blind spots?" And the answer, of course, is yes, He can. The only question left is **how** has He decided to show me this? And the only Biblical answer to that question is He's chosen to reveal all that still needs to be done in my life **in the context of the local church**. I simply won't see the unfinished areas of my heart unless they're revealed through the imperfections and irritations of others.

Reading the Bible alone will reveal **doctrine**. But it takes the Bible, the Holy Spirit, **and** the body of Christ to reveal pride. That's because it's only in the church that I'm required to practice **patience and forgiveness** in the face of repeated hurt. I can **read** about loving others in the Bible. But it's only in the church that I can wash a brother's feet.

More on this important idea next week.