

Sermons through

Romans

A Living Sacrifice

Romans 12:1, 2

Part Three

Renewing Our Minds

With Study Questions

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I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, *which is your reasonable service.* ² And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God (Romans 12:1, 2).

Introduction

Have you ever been frustrated with someone's lack of ability to 'get it'? Whether it's the counsel we might seek to give another regarding a life choice or a theological/doctrinal issue, it seems so very clear to you, but it is just not penetrating some barrier in the thinking of the person to whom you are speaking.

There has been quite a queue of students in my life to whom I have explained something over and over. Within a week or two the explanation loses its attachment and they ask again. It may be my lack of ability to instruct clearly. Sometimes I will ask others if they see the soundness in the explanation and they often do – not always.

For example, I am convinced that my understanding of eschatology (end times) is the simplest view imaginable. Yet when I explain it to my fellow Christians (many of whom have been continually exposed to another view) it's as if I've begun speaking a foreign language.

I'm not saying this as if to suggest I have all the right answers. As I commonly explain, one of the first thoughts I have when this occurs is how others, no doubt, feel the same way about me. I recall having a disagreement with some fellow presbyters on the theory of knowledge where an entire table of them (because of my lack of ability to get it) almost detached their collective optic nerves from the eye-rolling.

This is one of the reasons why I enjoy reading theologians out of my own time frame. I remember finding it very difficult to follow a John Calvin or a Martin Luther a Jonathan Edwards or (even further back) an

Augustine. They seemed to approach the text of Scripture from such a different angle; it forces me out of my little time and culture box. There is great value in taking advantage of the teachers that God has raised up in the church, not merely in our own generation, but throughout history and throughout the world.

My point here is that there is a great deal of work to do here when it comes to the renewing of our minds. It's been said:

Here you have the purpose for which we must put on a new mind, – that bidding adieu to our own counsels and desires, and those of all men, we may be attentive to the only will of God, the knowledge of which is true wisdom. But if the renovation of our mind is necessary, in order that we may prove what is the will of God, it is hence evident how opposed it is to God.¹

It's not uncommon for the world to criticize the Christian faith due to its many denominations and disagreements. This criticism reveals a fundamental misunderstanding of the Christian faith – especially as it speaks to the fall of man. We should not be surprised, nor disturbed, by these distinctions and arguments. There was a great explosion when the race fell in sin. And God slowly, patiently is restoring the wreckage of humanity.

He does this individually (in each person), collectively (in the body of Christ – the church) and historically (throughout the course of history) but not immediately. It's a quest. It takes time. And it requires a willingness to study (2 Timothy 2:15), humility (James 4:6; 1 Peter 5:5), patience and perseverance (Hebrews 4:11).

Review

In this short series entitled *A Living Sacrifice* we spoke of *The Need for Renewal* and how our lives should be a sort of *Walking Church Service*. We spoke of how our pursuit of the transformation by the renewing of our minds should be done in light of the love of God, not in an effort to gain

¹ Calvin, J. (1998). *Romans* (electronic ed., Ro 12:2). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

that love. Paul is writing of our reasonable response or reasonable service based upon the character and faithfulness of God.

I Beseech You

It would appear that Paul recognized the inherent persuasiveness of the message (irresistibly to the elect but foolish to the lost—John 6:44; 1 Corinthians 1:18). He begins chapter twelve—not with the (perhaps more powerful and certainly appropriate) “**command**” *entello*. He uses the more gentle “**I beseech you**” *parakaleo* (call to one’s side, urge). Truly God’s “**kindness is meant to lead (us) to repentance**” (Romans 2:4).

By The Mercies

Chapters twelve through sixteen are to be obeyed in light of chapters one through eleven—hence the “**therefore**”. The Apostle is addressing the “**brethren**” for it is the brethren—the believer—who enjoys the “**mercies of God.**” If we are not objects of His mercy by grace through faith in Christ, the remainder of Romans is nothing more than good advice for a damned people.

But if we are objects of His mercy, not only should we seek to imitate that mercy in our interactions with others, we can also enjoy the beauty of the truth and justice of God’s law. If we are not objects of God’s mercy, God’s law is a minister of death. But if we are objects of God’s mercy, the law is beautiful and gracious.

The law of your mouth is better to me than thousands of gold and silver pieces (Psalm 119:72).

Therefore I love your commandments above gold, above fine gold (Psalm 119:127).

It is true that the law can appear loud and demanding—it is instruction in excellence (1 Thessalonians 4:1). As a coach I view it as my responsibility to get the most out of my players. That might include me raising my voice during the course of a contest—like a starter’s pistol a well placed shout can improve performance. At the same time it can be

discouraging or distracting. One thing I've taken to do is remind my players that if I yell it doesn't mean I'm mad at you. It doesn't even mean I think you should make the play. All it means is that I want you to try. It is designed to help. They are, after all, my players and I want them to do well. The law may be very demanding, but for those in Christ it is never a burden.

**For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments.
And his commandments are not burdensome (1 John 5:3).**

A Living Sacrifice – Reasonable Service

We are called to present our **“bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service (Romans 12:1).** Paul uses language prevalent in the religious cultus or community in this call to obedient living.

The nature of a **“sacrifice”** *thysian* is to give up of oneself. The sacrifice does not stand on the altar and ask “What’s in it for me?” By the phrase **“Holy, acceptable to God”** we conclude that it is the sacrifice of Christ that makes us holy and acceptable to God (Hebrews 10:18-22). And it is only because we are holy and acceptable in Christ that our works are holy and acceptable as well.

The first verse ends with Paul’s affirmation that all of this is our **“reasonable service.”** The word Paul uses in Romans 12:1 is *latreian* is advances the idea of a church service—in 9:4 it is translated **“worship”** in ESV and **“service”** in NKJV. Not to take away from or replace our Sabbath worship—but the Christian is to view their entire life as a worship service where we are on the altar—a living sacrifice.

The word λατρείαν is another cultic term. What is remarkable is that Paul has applied the language of the cult to everyday existence. ²

This overturns what we read at the opening—where men, by their nature, would not worship God but **“the creature” (Romans 1:25).**

² Schreiner, T. R. (1998). *Romans* (Vol. 6, p. 646). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

Those who worship God give their entire lives over to him so that he is honored and praised in everything they do.³

Not Conformed But Transformed

I have perhaps overstated the great force with which our minds have been conformed *syschematizesthe* (to fashion alike – conform to a pattern) to this world, but the older I get the more I become aware of how the enemy has utilized the world and my own flesh to attach the stain of sin to every part of me. Many parents feel this way when they see their children recklessly dancing by the boundaries of the pit – whether literature, music, movies, friendships – even churches.

At some point we need to instruct them on how to function in these inevitable environments while keeping **“oneself unstained from the world” (James 1:27)**. We live in an age which likes to emphasize our Christian faith as a relationship with Jesus. But there was a time when I realized that, though that certainly is true, Christ calls us to entirely altered life and world view. And we are to pray on a daily basis that by His Spirit He would show us the remnants of the old man which must ever be put to death (Romans 8:13).

And it is not merely a matter of putting to death the old man but putting on the new man (Ephesians 4:22-24). The mere avoidance of doing wrong without Christ is, according to Jesus, a very dangerous condition. A swept, orderly but empty house is very inviting to the evil one (Matthew 12:43-45).

I would like to finish this short series by addressing what steps we take toward the **“renewing of (y)our minds”** that we may **“prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.”**

Renewal Of The Mind

It's been said that:

³ Schreiner, T. R. (1998). *Romans* (Vol. 6, p. 646). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

Transformation by the renewal of the mind, then, involves the penetration of the coming age into the present evil age ⁴

We might consider that when we pray, in the Lord's Prayer, "**Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven**" (Matthew 6:10), **this begins in our own minds**" this begins in our own minds. In a very practical sense, how does one go about obeying the injunction—this imperative of transformation? What role do we all play in the renewing of our minds?

Be Separate From Them

There is a two-part answer to this. *First*, is to put our finger in the damn of the sewage seeking entrance into our souls.

Do not be deceived: "Bad company ruins good morals."

³⁴Wake up from your drunken stupor, as is right, and do not go on sinning. For some have no knowledge of God. I say this to your shame (1 Corinthians 15:33, 34).

It is as true now as it was then, that you can't play in the trash and avoid getting stinky. Simple, yet profoundly true is the little acronym GIGO—garbage in, garbage out. We need boundaries and we need our loved ones to help us when we're blind to the fact that we have crossed them or have not set them tightly enough. One of the greatest contributions to my and our family's sanctification is my wife's unbending and determined conviction that the raciest show allowed on any screen in our house is Little Bear.

There is a great temptation to become Pharisaical here and, as a church, set extra-biblical boundaries. I walked into a church once that had scores of television sets on the altar. That seems helpful at first but the consequences of that methodology become disastrous. Be that as it may, we are called to be a consecrated people.

Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what

⁴ Schreiner, T. R. (1998). *Romans* (Vol. 6, p. 647). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

fellowship has light with darkness? ¹⁵ What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever? ¹⁶ What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, “I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ¹⁷ Therefore go out from their midst, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch no unclean thing; then I will welcome you, ¹⁸ and I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to me, says the Lord Almighty” (2 Corinthians 6:14-18).

Secondly, we are to avail ourselves of what God has provided for our own sanctification. In His High Priestly Prayer Jesus show the transition from avoiding evil to pursuing holiness. He prays:

I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one (John 17:15).

The answer to our problem is not to become isolationists – which would merely make us well-insulated sinners. Jesus then presents that primary means of grace by which Christians are sanctified:

Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth (John 17:17).

Could it be that the most potent contributor to the current feeble condition of western evangelicalism is the Christian’s lack of willingness to know the word? Could it be that the downsizing of doctrine in the name of love has resulted in the departure of both? Notice the two-part counsel (what to avoid and what to pursue) in Psalm 1:

Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; ² but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night. ³ He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its

leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers (Psalm 1:1-3).

Of course there is more to the means of grace than reading our Bibles. Knowledge of catechisms, creeds, confessions and good books are vital. We must ever keep in mind the primary means of grace by which God sanctifies us, which is through prayer, the preaching of the Word, and the sacraments; all of which require faithful participation in the Lord's Day.

It was quite sad recently when I heard that a certain presidential candidate has a strong evangelical following which, upon deeper analysis, do not attend church. Someone may choose to argue correlation versus causation, but it has been my observation that regardless of the trials and difficulties and failures that may befall a Christian, those who faithfully attend a faithful church will faithfully see their way through the storms.

It is here that God's will proves itself to be beautiful and a delight to the faithful. But above that it reminds the **"believers that the transformation wrought in them by the renewal of the mind is pleasing to the Lord."**⁵ The word **"prove"** *dokimazein* means to try to learn the genuineness of something by examination and testing – to test.⁶

Generally speaking, testing God is not a good idea (Numbers 14:22; Psalm 95:9). But there are times when God calls us to test Him. In regard to faithful tithing we read:

Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. And thereby put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you a blessing until there is no more need (Malachi 3:10, 11).

If this is true of something as secondary as tithing, how much more in the **"weightier matters of the law"** (Matthew 23:23)?

⁵ Schreiner, T. R. (1998). *Romans* (Vol. 6, p. 648). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

⁶ Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains* (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., Vol. 1, p. 331). New York: United Bible Societies.

Questions for Study

1. What do you think are some things that block our ability to grasp basic biblical concepts (pages 2, 3)?
2. Why do you suppose there are so many denominations and disagreements among Christians? Is that good or bad (page 3)?
3. In what respect in the word of God irresistibly persuasive or not persuasive at all (page 4)?
4. Why is important to read the law of God in light of His mercies (pages 4, 5)?
5. Discuss what it means to be a “living sacrifice”. How can our lives be like a church service (pages 5, 6)?
6. In what ways has the world formed our thinking? Why is it dangerous to merely seek to avoid wrong things (page 6)?
7. Where do we see the renewal of the mind in the Lord’s Prayer? Explain (pages 6, 7).
8. What are two important principles when it comes to our minds be renewed (pages 7-9)?
9. Is it a good or bad idea to test God? Explain (page 9).