

# The Air We Breathe

*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. (Romans 12:2 ESV)*

*You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet. (Matthew 5:13 ESV)*

## **The Worship God Deserves**

**July 16<sup>th</sup>, 2023**

**Romans 12:1-2**

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### **Introduction:**

Good morning! Please turn with me in your Bibles to Romans 12.

Over the course of this summer, we're going to take a brief break from our series in Acts. While our typical approach is to preach systematically through books of the Bible, from time to time it is helpful and even *needful* to slow down and consider what the Word of God says about a particularly relevant issue.

Our series is titled "The Air We Breathe" because, in this series, we are going to highlight some of the patterns of thinking that have become so prevalent in our culture that we barely even notice them anymore. They have truly become the air we breathe. By way of clarification, I'm not talking about the big-rock obvious morality issues of our day. This isn't a series about abortion, sexuality or gender. No, in this series I want to draw your attention to the sinful thought patterns that lie behind those issues – the subtle sin that we *don't* immediately recognize as dangerous. I want to identify the *carbon monoxide* sin – that is, the sin that silently slips into a church and causes death and ruin while congregations rest unaware.

Tribalism. Consumerism. Individualism. Introspection obsession. Authority aversion. Instant gratification. Entertainment addiction.

I want to talk about the sinful thought patterns that we shamelessly bring with us into our worship services. The thinking that enables us to spend our time in corporate worship sulking about our song preferences when we should be praising our King. The thinking that enables us to gather in Christian circles and to scrutinize and compare our congregations the way that we might scrutinize and compare our favourite restaurants. The thinking that enables us to spend five minutes in the Word of God and five hours in front of YouTube without even feeling a pang of guilt.

It's commonplace. It's not even something that we bother to hide! It's the air we breathe. And it's worthy of our prayerful attention over the next few weeks.

We're going to begin and find the biblical warrant for this series in Romans 12:1-2. I hope that you have the text open in front of you. Hear now God's holy, inspired, inerrant, living and active word to us today.

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. <sup>2</sup> 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.  
(Romans 12:1-2 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

In our passage this morning, the Apostle Paul reminds us that *right living* is actually the heart of *right worship*. We see that at the end of verse 1:

present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, **which is your spiritual worship**. (Romans 12:1b ESV)

And in verse 2, we see that *right living* or *right worship* is inseparable from *right thinking*.

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. (Romans 12:1-2 ESV)

So right thinking, then, is ultimately a *worship* issue. And when I use that word *worship*, I'm not simply referring to the songs we sing on Sunday morning. While it is not inaccurate to describe

our Sunday morning singing as “worship” or our Sunday morning gatherings as “worship services” – both of those expressions are true and accurate – it IS important for us to understand that the worship doesn’t stop after the benediction! Worship doesn’t stop when Josh puts his guitar back into its case. No, the worship that Paul is highlighting in this passage encompasses *all of life*. In his letter to the Corinthians Paul wrote:

So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, **do all to the glory of God.** (1 Corinthians 10:31 ESV)

Do ALL to the glory of God. Your habits. Your routines. Your eating. Your sleeping. Your speaking. And – as we see here – your *thinking*. All of it is meant to be – *designed* to be – finds its greatest fullness and vibrance and *delight* – when it is done to the glory of God! That is why you exist! That is what God deserves! So, let’s look to this passage and spend some time reflecting on the worship that God deserves.

## The Worship God Deserves

The first thing we learn in this passage is that:

### 1. The worship God deserves is fuelled by grace

Look again at verse 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. (Romans 12:1 ESV)

I want you to notice here that Paul is appealing to his brothers – and, by extension, his sisters. We sometimes use that familial language casually, but Paul used it very specifically. “Brother” was a term that Paul only used when addressing his fellow believers. This is a *sacred* expression of love and unity, and it all began when Jesus said:

“Here are my mother and my brothers! <sup>35</sup> For **whoever does the will of God**, he is my brother and sister and mother.” (Mark 3:34-35 ESV)

Therefore, Romans 12:1-2 is addressed to *the family of God*. This is a call to believers. Your unbelieving neighbour isn't going to live like this, and you shouldn't expect them to. The worship that's being called for here is the worship that overflows from the gratitude of a man or a woman who has been transformed by the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

And that observation leads us to the MOST important word in this passage – and in fact, the most important word in all of Christian ethics! Our call to worship comes after the word “therefore.”

I appeal to you **therefore**, brothers (Romans 12:1a ESV)

You've heard it said 100 times but hear it once more this morning that the word “therefore” points back to an argument that has been made. Paul expects us to recognize that this call to worship is the *fitting* and *logical* and *right response* to whatever he has just described. Therefore, if we are going to hear this command rightly, then we need to consider the argument that preceded it.

But how far back should we look? Is this Paul's conclusion to his argument in chapter 11? Or perhaps, chapters 10-11? Or maybe even, chapters 9-11? I agree entirely with Bible scholar Leon Morris who argues:

We should probably not tie it in too closely to the immediately preceding words (though there is a good sequence of thought), but take it as referring to the whole massive argument that has preceded it.<sup>1</sup>

That is to say, Romans 12:1-2 is the culminating response to ALL that Paul has explained in chapters 1-11. In the time that we have this morning, I can't read all of chapters 1-11 – though I would commend that to you as your homework for this afternoon – but we won't hear this call to worship rightly without at least briefly reviewing what has come before.

In the Book of Romans, the Apostle Paul masterfully explains the good news of the gospel. But as Matt reminded us last Sunday, the good news doesn't make sense until we understand the bad news. That's where Paul begins his letter. In chapter 1, he warns:

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<sup>1</sup> Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, [Pillar New Testament Commentary](#). Accordance electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 432.

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. <sup>19</sup> For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. <sup>20</sup> For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. (Romans 1:18-20 ESV)

There is a God. And we *know* that there is a God but, in our rebellion, we try to suppress that truth. We lie to ourselves. We pretend that we are nothing more than a cosmic accident, or we pretend that this mystery is unknowable, or we find some semi-credible metanarrative to alleviate our consciences so that we can go on living as the gods of our own little worlds.

But the beauty, and the glory, and the power, and the intricacy of creation provide us with more than enough evidence to know that our atheism is dishonest.

There is a God. We see His fingerprints everywhere. This is His house. He makes the rules, and each and every one of us senses that we have broken those rules. Even before ever having heard the Word of God, our conscience testifies against us. Which is why Paul writes in chapter 3:

For there is no distinction:<sup>23</sup> **for all have sinned** and fall short of the glory of God, (Romans 3:22b-23 ESV)

All of us sit under that verdict. We have denied Him, rebelled against Him, and sought to go our own way. And that means that we have an enormous, eternal problem. Paul explains in chapter 6:

For the wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23a ESV)

There is a God. He is holy. We are His creation. We have sinned. And the penalty for sin is death.

There is no other problem in the universe that deserves your attention more than this one. This is BAD news. What hope is there for people like you and me? Can God simply turn a blind eye to my sin? Can He sweep it under a rug and pretend that it never happened? If He's the kind of God who will simply wink at the sin of the world, then is He worthy of my worship at all?

I need a solution to my sin, but I know in my heart of hearts that Whoever God is He needs to be just! He needs to be honest! He needs to be holy! Because, if He isn't, then heaven will be hell.

So, how can a holy God pardon sinners like you and me? The answer to this mystery is explained in chapter 3:

for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,<sup>24</sup> and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, <sup>25</sup> whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. <sup>26</sup> It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. (Romans 3:23-26 ESV)

In the most profound and unexplainable expression of love that this world has ever seen, Jesus bore in his flesh the sin of his people – people who rejected and rebelled against him. He made a way for sinful people like us to live forever with our sinless, Holy, awesome God!

But how? He became the propitiation for our sins – that is, he became the payment that settled our debt. In Him, God has shown Himself to be just AND the Justifier! When we confess our sin and place our trust in Jesus, he absorbs all our sin and takes it with him to that cross and he sends all of his righteousness and clothes us with it for eternity! If you are a Christian, then everything that ought to separate you from God and declare you as guilty has been hung on the cross of Christ. Therefore, Paul writes:

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. <sup>2</sup> For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. (Romans 8:1-2 ESV)

Christians – brothers and sisters – there is now no condemnation for you! You are forgiven! You are accepted! You are loved! You are an heir to the throne of grace! You are a child of God! You are going to rule with Christ! You are going to see creation in all of its intended beauty in the new heavens and the new earth when every last trace of sin – including the sin that you contributed – is finally and forever washed away! And it is in the light of this glorious news that Paul writes in our passage for this morning:

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. (Romans 12:1 ESV)

You'll never worship rightly until you see this. The worship that God deserves is fuelled by grace.

John Calvin writes:

This exhortation teaches us, that until men really apprehend how much they owe to the mercy of God, they will never with a right feeling worship him<sup>2</sup>

If you don't see it, then you'll never live it. But when you see amazing grace – when it *captures* your heart and fills you with faith – you will be ready to lay your life down on that altar. And that leads us to the second lesson we learn in this passage:

## 2. The worship God deserves holds nothing back

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. (Romans 12:1 ESV)

The language that Paul uses in this passage would have been jarring for his original audience. The word “sacrifice” is used metaphorically in our culture, but it was all too real for these first listeners. Leon Morris notes:

They had stood by their altar and watched as an animal was identified as their own, as it was slain in the ritual manner, its blood manipulated, and the whole or part of the victim burned on the altar and ascended in the flames to the deity they worshipped.<sup>3</sup>

They understood the extent of what Paul was calling for: a complete and total surrender of life. Which is, of course, a reiteration of what Jesus had already said:

If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.<sup>25</sup> For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. (Matthew 16:24b-25 ESV)

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<sup>2</sup> John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries (Complete)*, trans. John King, Accordance electronic ed. (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1847), paragraph 80155.

<sup>3</sup> Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans, Pillar New Testament Commentary*. Accordance electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 433.

Can I tell you something? There is nothing greater than life with Jesus! In fact, “life” without him is actually no life at all. It’s *counterfeit*. It can’t ultimately satisfy you. Life without Jesus is a trap from the devil, and he is intent to distract you all the way to hell. But Jesus said:

I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.  
(John 14:6 ESV)

You NEED to follow Jesus! But, as I say that, you need to know this morning that following Jesus is not a hobby. When you see reality – the reality of God, the reality of your sin, the reality of grace, and the reality of glory – then it will flip your life upside down.

You can’t keep living with your boyfriend.

You can’t keep yelling at your wife.

You can’t keep playing with pornography.

You can’t keep partying with your buddies.

Your life is no longer about amassing the most money possible. Your life is no longer about worshiping your children. Your life is no longer about chasing after comfort or pleasure.

To follow Jesus is to put your life on the altar and to say, “I am completely, 100% YOURS, Jesus! My life, my ambitions, my money, my family – it is ALL yours.” THAT is the Christian life! And it is GLORIOUS! But it is costly. It is FILLED with JOY! But it doesn’t come without loss. It is a call to lay down everything you know so that you can receive everything you need. Jesus said:

For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. <sup>26</sup>For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?  
(Matthew 16:25-26 ESV)

I don’t think I can go any further without issuing a warning. Listen: There is no category in the Bible for a Christian who chooses to hang onto his habitual sin for a lifetime. There is no such thing as a Christian who surrenders *some of* or even *most of* her life, but who refuses to surrender



all of it. He will have all of you, or He will have none of you. If you are neither hot nor cold, He will spit you out. As Paul wrote to the Corinthians:

You are not your own,<sup>20</sup> **for you were bought with a price.** So glorify God in your body.  
(1 Corinthians 6:19b-20 ESV)

You were bought with a price – the precious blood of the Son of God! Bought out of your own sinful rebellion. Bought out of death. Bought out of HELL!

He saw you. He loved you. He lived for you. He DIED for you! He rose again for you. He sent His Spirit to live in you. He is right now interceding in heaven for you! He's preparing a place for you! Why then would we live for anything else!? Why would we settle for anything less!?

Brothers and sisters, Paul appeals to us this morning: Give him everything! Or give him nothing at all. There is no in between. The worship God deserves holds nothing back.

Third, and finally, we learn in this passage that:

### **3. The worship God deserves is fought for in the mind**

And here, I hope you will see the connection between our passage this morning and the series we will be considering over the weeks ahead. You see, the challenge with being a living sacrifice is the *living* part. As the old familiar joke goes, the problem with a living sacrifice is that it always climbs off the altar! There's some truth to that joke, isn't there? If the call was simply to die for Jesus it would be a frightening and morbid command but at least it would be straightforward. That's a clear goal with a finish line.

But *living* as a sacrifice? That's hard. That's complicated. Every day we are faced with unique opportunities and challenges. Every moment we are confronted with decisions that need to be made. What does it look like to be a living sacrifice as a paramedic? As a lawyer? As a pastor? As a mom? It's one thing to say in theory that my life is a living sacrifice for God, but how do I live that out in the day to day?

That's an important question. And Paul points us to the answer in this passage. It turns out, there IS a way to discern God's good, acceptable, and perfect will for your life. Look again at verse 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. (Romans 12:2 ESV)

Paul is teaching us here that the battle for wisdom in life – the battle for the worship that God deserves – begins in the mind. One commentator notes:

The reference to the mind is important. Paul does not envisage a mindless emotionalism, but a deeply intelligent approach to life, as characteristic of the Christian who has been renewed by the Holy Spirit.<sup>4</sup>

In short: If you want to live rightly then you need to *think* rightly.

“Okay,” you say. “That’s all well and good, but how did I go about changing my thinking?”

That’s another good question, and it brings us to one of the remarkable lessons in this passage.

According to Paul, you *can't* simply change your thinking. That’s simply not something that you can do on your own. What happens instead is that some external force transforms us – for better or for worse. Something must act upon us to change the way that we think. Look again at verse 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. (Romans 12:2 ESV)

Your mind is being transformed day by day whether you like it or not. The question is, are you being conformed to the world or transformed by the Word? What Paul seems to be saying here then is that *where you position yourself* will determine who or what does the transforming.

By way of illustration, imagine that there are two faucets, each dispensing a stream of water. One of those streams is filled with sewage and filth. The other is a cleansing stream that restores and refreshes. The battle for your mind, then, really comes down to where you choose to position yourself. We see this same dichotomy in chapter 8 where Paul warns:

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<sup>4</sup> Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, [Pillar New Testament Commentary](#). Accordance electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 435.

For those who live according to the flesh **set their minds on the things of the flesh**, but those who live according to the Spirit **set their minds on the things of the Spirit**. <sup>6</sup>For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.  
(Romans 8:5-6 ESV)

So, what are you setting your mind on? Where are you positioning yourself?

Of course, there are segments of our day that are seemingly outside of our control. For example, you can't control what your co-workers talk about for the eight hours you're at work and you can't control what the teacher lectures on for the eight hours you're in class. It may be that you are forced to sit under the influence of the world for large swaths of your week.

But what about the other hours of your day? Assuming that you sleep for eight hours and work for eight hours, what do you do with the eight hours at your disposal? Instagram, Netflix, Twitter, Disney+, CBC, FOX News – how many hours of the day do you CHOOSE to position your brain in the flow of sewage?

Alternatively, there is a cleansing stream. You can position yourself in a place where the lies of the world are routinely washed away, and the truth of the gospel routinely washes over you.

Brothers and sisters, open the word of God! Read it every day. Listen to the word of God preached. Pray and invite God to speak into your life. Spend time worshiping God as you enjoy His creation. Spend time with His people talking about Him.

Here's a challenge for you: Learn to *cherish* the moments when you read your Bible and it offends your sensibilities! Your sensibilities are in error! The Word of God isn't! Those uncomfortable moments are the moments when His truth is dislodging the lies that you have been swimming in! That unsettling is why we sit in the cleansing stream! Invite God to speak into the areas where you have long attempted to mute Him. Let His truth wash over every part of your thinking.

THAT is worship.

Submitting to your Creator because you know that His way is best. Offering up your life to Him to follow where He leads. Learning how to discern His will in every of your life. Glorifying and enjoying Him now and in the life to come. THAT is the worship God deserves! That is what you were made for! That is where you will find joy and life and love!

And *this* (the Bible) is the place where – with the help of the Holy Spirit – you will be transformed, and you will be enabled to discern:

what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. (Romans 12:2b ESV)

Stop fighting God. Stop editing Him. Stop arguing with Him. Learn from Him! Be renewed by Him! And in that, we will learn how to offer to Him the worship that He deserves.

To that end, let's pray.