

# 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)*

## **Self-Reliance**

**August 6<sup>th</sup>, 2023**

**Romans 12:3-8**

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### **Introduction:**

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

We are continuing our summer series in which we are identifying the subtle yet sinful thought patterns that permeate our culture and that inevitably threaten to creep into the church. Thus far we've addressed tribalism and the idolization of feelings. Our target this morning will seem far less sinister, but an argument could be made that – out of all the topics we will discuss in this series – this way of thinking has gained the most traction in the church.

Our target today is self-reliance.

We live in a culture that *celebrates* when a man or woman reaches the pinnacle of success and proclaims: “I did it – and I did it on my own!” Is there anything more impressive than a person who doesn't *need* anyone?

The flipside, of course, is that we are ashamed whenever we find that we DO need others. Asking for help is worse than going to the dentist. “I shouldn't *need* help! I should be able to do this on my own!” Have you ever felt that?

That feeling of shame is evidence that our culture's emphasis on self-reliance has crept into our thinking. The question that I want to ask this morning is: Are we really meant to pursue this ideal?

Is it really God's plan for your life that you should be able to do all things without ever requiring help? Doesn't that seem out of character for the God who looked at the first man and said:

It is not good that the man should be alone (Genesis 2:18b ESV)

That lesson is on the second page of your Bible! It's not good for you to be alone. You weren't made to be alone. You were not designed to be self-sufficient. In fact, we will see in our text today that each and every one of us are *strategically deficient*. A big part of becoming who God has made you to be is recognizing and embracing all of the things that you can't do on your own.

That's counterintuitive. That flies in the face of everything that we celebrate in the media. That's not the air we breathe. But it IS what we see in God's Word.

To that end, I want to invite you to look with me at Romans 12. We will be studying verses 3-8 this morning but I'm also going to read verses 1-2 which we studied three weeks ago because we need to understand how this argument fits together. Look with me to Romans 12. 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.

<sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, <sup>5</sup> so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. <sup>6</sup> Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; <sup>7</sup> if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; <sup>8</sup> the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness. (Romans 12:1-8 ESV)

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

Now, as I said, we preached through verses 1-2 three weeks ago and in those opening verses Paul reminded us that right *worship* is right *living*, and then he taught us that right *living* flows out of

right *thinking*. If we want to know what is good, acceptable, and perfect – if we want to know how to worship God as *living sacrifices* – then we need to be transformed by the *renewal of our minds*.

That was the lesson of verses 1-2. Our passage this morning – verses 3-8 – is the *first application* of that lesson. What does it look like to live with a renewed mind? That’s what Paul is beginning to dive into here. Commentator Douglas Moo notes:

The renewed mind, Paul suggests, will take the form of right “thinking” about ourselves (v. 3)... Thus he wants us to recognize that the transformation of character is seen especially in our relationships with one another.<sup>1</sup>

Isn’t it interesting that *this* is the first change that Paul highlights? When our minds are renewed, we are essentially brought back to the garden where we can agree with God’s assessment “it is not good that man should be alone.” When our minds are renewed, we are enabled to be *truly human* again, and we see here that to be *truly human* is to live in relationship.

Put another way: Before you can thrive in the community of faith, you need a correct assessment of yourself. And before you can assess yourself correctly, you need a renewed mind. So, let’s consider our passage and ask the question:

## How Does The Renewal Of My Mind Change My Perception Of Myself?

First:

### 1. It right-sizes me

We see this in verse 3 where Paul writes:

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. (Romans 12:3 ESV)

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas Moo, *The Letter To The Romans - Second Edition* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2018), 777-778.

Paul teaches us here that we will never function in community if we indulge lofty opinions of ourselves. He clearly wasn't reading from the self-empowerment aisle at the bookstore! Paul is essentially saying, "Brothers and sisters, if you want to be a living sacrifice for God then you need to come back to reality!"

That begs the question, "Well, what *is* reality?"

That's an important question, isn't it? One of the reasons why we need our minds to be renewed is because there are 1001 voices out there telling us who we ought to be! So, which voice matters? What *is* reality? We find the answer to that question at the end of the verse where Paul clarifies:

each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. (Romans 12:3b ESV)

It is only by the faith that God gives that we are able to accurately see ourselves. If you have a renewed mind, then you will view yourself through the lens of faith.

This is the faith that looks back to the beginning and acknowledges that God is the Creator and that we are creatures.

This is the faith that looks to the Law and acknowledges that God is holy and that we are sinners.

This is the faith that looks to the cross and believes that the only reason we can have forgiveness is because Jesus bore our sins and paid for them on that tree.

This is the faith that looks to the empty tomb and believes that it is only because we are in Christ that we too will one day walk out of our tombs.

This is the faith that looks to the coming kingdom and believes that there is a place reserved for us – not because of any inherent worthiness or merit in us – but because of the free grace of God that He has bestowed on all His people.

This is the faith that looks to the Word of God and believes that God's way is right and leads to life! This is the faith that chooses to trust God when what He says about me *in here* is contrary to what the world says about me *out there*. This is reality.

Paul is calling us to think about ourselves in accordance with this faith that we have received because he knows that that is the only way that we will be able to see ourselves rightly.

I'm not a self-made man. I'm not the centre of the universe. I don't have all the answers. I don't have all the gifts.

I am who God says I am. I'm an image bearer who has been given a glorious assignment that I can only do in His strength and in cooperation with His people. I need Him. I need His people. *I need.*

Faith enables me to see that. A renewed mind enables me to see that. It right-sizes me. But that right-sizing isn't complete until I recognize that I am designed to function as part of a diverse team. We see this in verse 4:

For as in one body we have many members, and **the members do not all have the same function** (Romans 12:4 ESV)

Paul is a good teacher, and he knows that illustrations are effective. Here, he uses the image of a human body to illustrate his point. He used this same illustration when he was teaching the Corinthians – I alluded to it earlier when we were welcoming the Addinks into membership. The point of the symbolism is that each of us is inherently different and therefore serves a different function. Feet are important and valuable, but you don't use your feet to pour a pot of coffee. In the same way, each of us is important and valuable but each of us are called to serve various functions.

And, in a culture that tells me that I can do anything I want to do and be anyone I want to be – in a culture that teaches me that I shouldn't *ever* need anybody else – this is a necessary lesson. Having a renewed mind and viewing myself through the eyes of faith allows me to see that I am *intentionally* and *wonderfully* limited! There are things that I simply cannot do! And that is by design! I'm not meant to do everything.

Please take that to heart this morning. Some of you came in carrying a burden that you were never meant to carry. Some of you came in believing the lie that, if you can't get through life on your own, then you're doing it wrong. That's a lie from the pit of hell. God says it's not good for you to be alone. God says you are one piece of the puzzle – one member of the body – and you are wonderfully gifted in certain areas! But you are intentionally deficient in others. See that this morning. A renewed mind right-sizes me. And then, having done that:

## **2. It reorients me**

We see this in verse 5:

so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.  
(Romans 12:5 ESV)

That last bit about being limited would be terribly bad news if it weren't for this beautiful news. I AM limited. I CAN'T do everything. BUT, God has designed the world and the church in such a way that I don't NEED to do everything!

I just need to do my part. I am designed to function in team. And that is a reorientation that I need.

Think about this analogy of the body that Paul is using. The way that God designed our bodies to work is absolutely incredible! Whether it's our hands, or our feet, or our ears, or our eyes, each member of the body is designed for a specific purpose and intuitively serves that purpose when the need arises. Even the parts of our body that we can't see function in vital, indispensable ways.

But, sticking with that analogy, imagine for a moment if the members of our body began to think the way that *we* think. Imagine if they became competitive and begrudged their roles? Imagine if, when your brain told you to reach for your coffee cup, your left hand, your right elbow, your ear and both feet lunged forward in a race for the handle! Everyone in the coffee shop would look at you like you were a lunatic. And you'd wind up with scalding hot coffee all over your body.

I know that's a ridiculous analogy, but isn't that what sometimes happens in the church? Isn't it true that we sometimes despise the roles and the gifts that God has given to us? Isn't it true that we sometimes fight one another for the roles and the gifts that we want – nay – that we *deserve*?

How many churches have imploded as various groups fought to exercise leadership? How many churches have fractured after self-proclaimed “teachers” led secret Bible studies out of their basement? How many churches have been stunted and stifled by domineering pastors who insisted on doing everything? These are all signs of unhealth. These are all indicators that the body of Christ is not functioning the way that it should.

And, to speak to a more sensitive subject, don't we see this in the current gender discussion that our culture is having? We have – as a culture and as the church – often failed the women in our lives by treating them as if their identity is necessarily bound up in their relationship to a man. So, she's not Amanda – she's *Levi's wife*. Or she's not Abi – she's *Levi's daughter*. That was wrong. That was unhelpful. That communicates something terribly unhelpful to women.

But our *reaction* is proving to be even MORE destructive! Because now, that same little girl is being fed the lie that – in order to become fully realized as a woman – she needs to become a man! She has to reject motherhood. She has to reject everything the Bible says about womanhood. There is a reason why the transgender movement is predominantly filled with young girls transitioning to be boys – they are hearing from every side that being a woman is *not enough*.

But when I see myself through the eyes of faith – when I think rightly about myself with a renewed mind – I don't believe the lie that I need to do everything. It doesn't threaten me that there are areas where I am not able to serve. I don't feel the need to insist upon my own way. The renewed mind allows me to trust that God is building His church and that – while He is going to use me toward that end – He doesn't need me. I'm a piece. I'm not the whole.

What I need, then, is to be reintegrated into the body of Christ – reoriented with the design that goes all the way back to Genesis 2.

Practically speaking, I felt this in such a powerful way when I came back from vacation and jumped into Camp Redeemer. I showed up on Monday and was handed a song that had already

been written, and a memory verse that had already been divided up, and I was directed to the “Forget Me Not Forest” which was already assembled and all I had to do was teach. I watched as people with the gift of administration handled the check-in, and as people with gifts of service setup the tents, and as people with gifts of mercy worked one-on-one with high needs children, and as people with the gift of teaching mentored and disciplined their groups, and that’s just scratching the surface! It was a glorious reminder that the body of Christ is so much BIGGER and so much BETTER than just me! God reminded me that – while I am certainly limited – I am connected into a body of Christ that is vibrant and healthy and STRONG! All I have to do is play my part. Praise God for that. That was a reorientation that I needed.

Third, and finally, when I see myself with this renewed mind:

### 3. It releases me

We see this in verses 6-8:

Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; <sup>7</sup> if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; <sup>8</sup> the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness. (Romans 12:6-8 ESV)

I’m going to work through this list and consider the gifts that Paul has listed, but first I want to be clear that Paul isn’t listing *every* spiritual gift here. He lists gifts in 1 Corinthians 12 and in Ephesians 4, and each of those lists are different which suggests that Paul isn’t attempting to write a *comprehensive list* of spiritual gifts here. He’s just getting us started in our thinking about the diversity of the gifts in the body of Christ.<sup>2</sup>

First, Paul highlights the gift of prophecy. This gift is often viewed with suspicion, but we will see in our study through the Book of Acts that the New Testament church had many people who were referred to as prophets. They received messages from God that they then shared with the church.

As one commentator notes:

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<sup>2</sup> See Douglas J. Moo et al. eds., *New Bible Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 1151.



NT prophecy involved proclaiming to the community information that God had revealed to the prophet for the church's edification. The truth revealed by the prophet did not come with the authority of the truth taught by the apostles, for prophetic speech was to be scrutinized by other prophets (1 Cor. 14:29-32).<sup>3</sup>

So, these messages were scrutinized and were studied against the authoritative doctrine that had been passed down by the apostles, but then they were gladly received by the church. I have often been encouraged by brothers and sisters who have reached out and said something to the effect of "I might be wrong, but I feel like God wanted me to share this with you." That's the gift of prophecy. In fact – we had Noelle in response to a word of prophecy that someone shared with me. We had been privately praying about whether it would be wise to have a third child. We weren't sure if we could afford it, and Amanda had an exciting and lucrative career that was developing. We were in a season of privately praying about next steps when a brother approached me one Sunday after church and said:

"This might be nothing, but I had a dream about you and Amanda last night. There was soapy water, and then hands came up out of the soapy water holding a baby. I woke up and my mind jumped to the verse "She will be saved through childbearing." I don't know if that means anything to you, but I felt like God was calling me to share that with you."

That was a great example of this gift on display. It was not presented as if it was authoritative. It was weighed against Scripture. And then, it was presented with humility and an invitation for discernment. When I shared that with Amanda, we both felt convinced that God had spoken, and I am so incredibly glad that Noelle is in our lives now. Prophecy used rightly is a beautiful gift for the church.

Next, Paul mentions service. This is most likely a reference to the service of benevolence in the church – the type that deacons attended to. It does not appear that Paul was attempting to create a tiered list with more important gifts at the top and less important gifts at the bottom – in fact, such an arrangement would be contrary to his point. But it IS interesting that he places service right below prophecy and *above* teaching. I suspect that he was *at least* trying to undermine the idea

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<sup>3</sup> Douglas Moo, *The Letter To The Romans - Second Edition* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2018), 783.

that the gift of service is somehow *less than* the other gifts. I am convinced that one of the devil's go-to lies in our culture is to whisper, "If your gift isn't used on a stage then God is withholding from you and people don't appreciate you." When your peeling potatoes to make a casserole for a shut-in, or changing a diaper in the nursery, or getting rained on in the parking lot, forget what the devil whispers and remember instead what Jesus said:

For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve others and to give his life as a ransom for many. (Mark 10:45 ESV)

Service is a GIFT for the church, and we are thankful for you.

Next, Paul lists teaching and then exhortation. These two gifts are similar, but not the same. Both those who teach and those who exhort communicate God's Word, but to different effects and for different purposes. The teacher's primary purpose is the transfer of knowledge. But the exhorter or the preacher's primary aim is life transformation. Matthew Henry notes here:

Many that are very accurate in teaching may yet be very cold and unskillful in exhorting; and on the contrary. The one requires a clearer head, the other a warmer heart.<sup>4</sup>

I have tried teaching in the classroom setting, and I don't do it well. I always want to slip in some application. I want to raise my voice and wave my arms. But that's out of place in the classroom. Teaching is a whole different animal. And I've sat through sermons that were brought by those with the gift of teaching and I've walked away thinking, "That was a great lecture, but a sleepy sermon." The church needs both of those gifts.

Next, Paul refers to "the one who contributes." Some people are given the gift of earning and sharing. Pause. I want you to hear that, because sometimes I worry that we in the church can sometimes make successful businesspeople or those with high salary jobs feel as if they have done something inherently *wrong*. On the contrary, the ability to earn is a *gift from God*, and it is the precursor to the spiritual gift of contribution. Paul writes that those who contribute are to do so "generously." If God has equipped you to serve in this way, don't give out of obligation and don't contribute begrudgingly. Your contribution is just as much a spiritual gift in the church as the

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<sup>4</sup> Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary On The Whole Bible* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008), 1782.

sermon and the benevolence program. In fact, there can be no benevolence program without those who contribute, and the sermon would be two letter grades worse if I had to work a full-time job on top of my pastoring!

Next, Paul refers to the one who leads. Leadership is a spiritual gift, and it's a gift the church needs. Paul is almost certainly referring here to the leadership within the church – that is – Paul is referring to eldership. If God has equipped you to lead, then you should use that gift for His service. And you should do it, Paul says, with zeal. When you're the leader – when no one is looking over your shoulder demanding an account of your time – it can be tempting to slip into laziness or carelessness. So, lead with zeal. Lead with the conviction that God is watching and that He will reward according to our labour. Lead in such a way that you have nothing to be ashamed of. And church, when we appoint elders and they step into that role, recognize that good leaders are a gift from God and be thankful.

Finally, Paul refers to those who do acts of mercy, and he calls them to do so with cheerfulness. To do acts of mercy is to do something for someone that they don't deserve. It is to share a meal with someone who can't repay you, or to invite someone into your home who won't be able to return the favor. It is to extend generosity to the poor, kindness to the neglected and love to the unlovable. It is the kind of ministry that happens behind the scenes when no one is looking. And it is just as much a spiritual gift as the gift of teaching. If God has given you this gift, use it with cheerfulness. What a blessing it is to receive a gift from someone and then to see in their eyes that they are absolutely delighted to give it to you! Our world needs more of that!

As I said, Paul is not listing *every* gift on this list, but he is trying to stimulate our brains to think about the various ways that we have each been gifted to serve the body of Christ. And this isn't simply an academic exercise. Paul has a *reason* for sharing this list. Look again at verse 6:

Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, **let us use them:** (Romans 12:6a ESV)

As my mind is renewed – as I am enabled to see myself for who I truly am – I will see that, while I am not called to do *everything*, I AM called to do *something*. That reorientation RELEASES me to step into who God has made me to be and to give my life wholeheartedly to it!

Getting back to the analogy of the body, I used the absurd example earlier of how our feet weren't designed to pour a cup of coffee. But the sad reality is, there are people in this world who don't have arms and who have been *forced* to learn how to pour coffee with their feet. And the same thing happens in the church. There are certain things that we *could* do – things that we *SHOULD* do – but that we currently *can't* do or do *clumsily* because we're missing members of the body.

Are you gifted to lead? We need more elders. We will be stunted in our growth and clumsy in our care until those leaders step up. Are you gifted to teach? We need more teachers. We need them for Thursday nights at Life Together and for Sunday mornings in the children's wing. We had 65 children the other week! What a mission field! Are you gifted in acts of mercy? The Lighthouse needs volunteers. Your neighbors need kindness. Use that gift. Are you gifted in hospitality? There are people in this room who have never been invited into someone's home. Let today be the day that that changes!

Self-reliance says, "I don't need anyone." Christianity says, "I need and have the family of God." Self-reliance says, "I do everything." Christianity says, "I do what God has gifted and called me to do." The more that self-reliant thinking creeps into this place, the more dysfunctional we will become.

We need each other. That is by design.

So, show up, but leave your ego at the door. Benefit from the gifts that other people have. Contribute with the gifts that you have. In a world full of people trying to get by in their own strength, let's strive to be a compelling example of life as God intends it.

Because it is not good for man to be alone. And this is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.