

Romans: Verse-by-Verse

Romans 12:2 B

As we begin this segment of Romans 12, let's read verses 1-3 again, so we can keep this passage in its true context. Paul writes,

"Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will."

As we finished last time, we noted that this transfiguration that Paul urges us to undergo, must have a process. Indeed, it does. For our lives to be transfigured ... as 2 Corinthians 3:18 puts it:

"And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit."

While Paul does not specifically state the entire process of transformation in our Romans text, he does in his other letters, such as the passage we just read from 2 Corinthians.

Let me give you the short answer, and then I want to go back and lay this out for you. The only way we can experience a "Mount of Transfiguration" change in our lives is through two things: 1. The Word of God. 2. The Work of the Holy Spirit.

That's it. That's the correct spiritual formula. If we try to do one without the other, we fall into error. We either become legalists, devoid of the Spirit's grace, or we become Charismatics, without the grounding of the Word of God. Trust me, in 45 years of ministry I have seen both.

So, let's not hurry on to verse 4. Let's see why this process is so necessary and see how it must take place.

I think the first thing we need to consider is why this process needs to take place, and why Paul centers it in our minds, and not some other arena of our lives.

The real key to understanding the reason for this transformation is found in verse 3. Paul writes, "Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will."

That's the goal of a transformed mind. It couldn't be any clearer. The goal is not just to make us wise, although that is a good thing. The goal is not just to give us perspective, although we certainly need that as well. The goal is to equip us to determine and approve what is God's Will – his good, pleasing, and perfect will.

One of my favorite exegetes, John Piper, tells us why this is so important for believers. He writes,

We are perfectly useless as Christ-exalting Christians if all we do is conform to the world around us. And the key to not wasting our lives with this kind of success and prosperity, Paul says, is being transformed. "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed."

That's a strong statement, but so true. We are perfectly useless as Christ's emissaries to our world if all we do is conform to our world. If we accept and live out the world's values and dictates, we have nothing to say to it. In fact, we negate God's values and His Word.

So why are we so likely to do that very thing? The answer lies in our minds. The answer lies in the attitudes and values of life that are manifested by what we think; what we have embraced as "truth" in our lives.

I've already mentioned John Piper. For this section, I am going to lean heavily on his exegesis of Romans 12. He has, I believe, one of the best explanations of Paul's emphasis on transforming our minds.

In our 21st century world, many believe that education is the key to humanity's progress. The so called, "Progressive Educators" have convinced much of academia that education is all humans need to throw off the darkness of their nature and emerge into a new race of global citizens.

In essence, the philosophy is that what the human mind needs is more information. If we just had more information, we would make logical, informed choices that would eventually transform who we are – and help us change our world.

As John Piper puts it, " ... Education becomes the great instrument of redemption — personal and social."

In other words, if we just educated people, the evil in our world would eventually disappear. People would quit using their minds to develop elaborate scams, promote terrorism, plot evil, and carry out acts of violence against others.

That's not how the Bible presents the problem. In fact, the Bible has a much deeper explanation for the evil in our world. The Bible teaches that each person's mind has what Ephesians 4:23 calls, "the spirit of your minds." Let me read you the parallel to Romans 12:2 found there in Ephesians 4:20-23:

"You, however, did not come to know Christ that way. 21 Surely you heard of him and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus. 22 You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; 23 to be made new in the attitude of your minds; 24 and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness."

The background to those verses is Paul's insistence that the Gentiles operate in what he calls the "futility" of their minds. Listen to what he says in Ephesians 4:18:

"They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts."

Doesn't that sound just like Romans 1:21-22?

"For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools..."

So Paul tells his Ephesian audience, ""Be renewed in the spirit of your minds." So what is the "spirit of your mind"?

It can be described as a "mindset". It can be described as an overall "attitude" of our minds. Paul's description speaks of something that active; something that is directing our thoughts and attitudes.

As Piper puts it:

It doesn't just have a view, it has a viewpoint. It doesn't just have the power to perceive and detect; it also has a posture, a demeanor, a bearing, an attitude, a bent.

So what's the primary problem with this "spirit of the mind"? The answer is, our minds are not just extremely complex computers, capable of making millions of connections in short bursts of time. The problem is, our minds are fallen. They have been corrupted.

That was the plague that affected our first parents, and every subsequent generation that followed them. Again, as Paul put it in Romans 1, "Their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened."

Now I think you can connect the dots in Romans 12:1-3.

If there is a part of us that wants to walk with God, that wants to obey the instruction to “present our bodies as living sacrifices”, it’s the fact that we are still struggling with an unregenerated mind. That’s the struggle every Christian faces.

In our hearts, we may well want to carry out the will of God. After all, that’s what this discussion in Romans 12 is about: How to follow after the good, pleasing, and perfect will of God.

What’s hindering us? What keeps us from doing these things? Paul says it is the fact that we must have our minds, the spirit of our minds transformed. Otherwise, our hearts may want to do one thing, but our minds another.

It is the “spirit of our minds” that is the problem. To put it simply, our minds are not what John Piper calls, “God-worshipping minds”. I wonder if you are getting that? Our minds, because of the effects of sin, are not “God worshipping minds”. No, they are darkened; they are futile; they are self-seeking.

So, the real problem with our minds is not education. It is not true that if we just better educated humans, they will be better human s. It’s not a problem of information; it is a problem of unregenerated minds that are much more likely to adopt the darkness of this world than the light of God’s revelation.

So, what do we do? We are back to verse 3. Paul says:

“Do not conform to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.”

According to Paul, the answer is the “renewing of our minds”. Now, I like that word “renewing”. To renew means to bring something back

to its original condition. Did Paul choose that word because he realized that our original mind was completely capable of discerning the good, pleasing, and perfect will of God. I believe it.

Before humans rebelled against the one and only negative law God established, their minds were not darkened. Their thinking was not futile. They had not given themselves over to worship images of birds, and reptiles, and humans. The "spirit of their minds" was not antagonistic towards God. Just the opposite was true.

Over 6,000 years of human history has shown what a mistake it was to break God's clearly defined will and pursue self-development. History is replete with acts of violence, treachery, war, debasement, and more.

That's what Paul is referencing when he says, "Stop behaving like the pagans around you. Instead, be transfigured in your minds so you can carry out God's good, pleasing, and perfect will."

I ask again, "So what is the remedy?" How do we break the cycle of darkened thinking, of futile minds lending themselves to the very things that deny and oppose God?

Some have tried to implement a strict control of their minds. They have tried to adopt austere lifestyles attempting to control their lives. They have not only adopted these measures, they have insisted that their followers do the same.

Paul has a better answer. He calls it the "renewal of the mind". How does that happen? It requires a combination of the Word of God and the Spirit of God. That's the only true way forward.

The reason I say the Holy Spirit is required is because this word "renewal" Paul uses in Romans 12:2 can only be found in one other place in the Bible. In Titus 3:5, Paul writes, "[God] saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his

own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit.”

The Greek word Paul uses for renewal is “anakainōsis”. The Greeks used this word to mean a complete renovation, as in renovating a home.

So, there we have it. Paul uses this special Greek word, “renewal” in reference to transforming our minds, and the work of the Holy Spirit in making that transformation possible.

It’s a double work. We must be immersed in the word of God, but the Holy Spirit must renew us as well. I don’t think it’s a stretch to say that the Spirit renews our minds. In fact, we cannot even legitimately call Jesus Lord without the Holy Spirit.

That’s what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12:3: “Therefore I want you to know that no one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, “Jesus be cursed,” and no one can say, “Jesus is Lord,” except by the Holy Spirit.
– 1 Corinthians 12:3

We are to renew our minds through the Word of God, but the Holy Spirit must be part of that process. Didn’t Jesus promise that would be the case in John 16:13? He said,

“But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come.”

I like how one devotional put this point:

So the Spirit continually renews and refreshes us. How? The Word of God read, heard, obeyed, memorized, and meditated upon is the tool that the Holy Spirit uses to renew us and conform us to the image of Christ. As we are renewed we are indeed transformed and as we are transformed our lives prove that God's will is perfect, acceptable, and holy.

Again, 2 Corinthians 3:18 points to this process. Paul writes, "And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit."

What does the Spirit do? He enables us to "behold the glory of the Lord." As we do this, we change from one level of Christ's glory in our lives to another. That, friends, is an indispensable part of spiritual growth – and it involves the Word of God and the Spirit of God.

I didn't say all of this was effortless! Certainly, if we are going to go from one level of God's Glory to another, the Holy Spirit is going to have to do a renovation work.

If you've ever renovated a home, you know sometimes you need a screwdriver, sometimes you need a saw, and sometimes you must have a sledgehammer!

Is it any different renovating a human mind? The Holy Spirit has a lot of work to do, doesn't he. Listen to how Paul describes it 2 Corinthians 4:10:

2 Corinthians 10:4-5 says:

"For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds; casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience to Messiah."

While Paul illustrates this activity by talking about physical strongholds that were broken down in battle, the renewing of the mind is an internal battle. The Holy Spirit must work from the inside out, not the outside in.

He must help us see the transforming truths of God's Word, no matter what the medium of that information is ... reading the Bible, meditating, listening to teaching, etc.

His goal is that this transformation will allow us to discern and put into practice what he calls the will of God.

So, now we know the two parts of renewing our mind. We must be exposed to the Word of God and we must have the Holy Spirit to make that renewal effective. If we follow this process ... slowly, but surely, we will be able to discern and desire the will of God.

Next time, we look at verse 4.