

# By the Transforming of Your Mind

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Romans 12, one of my favorite passages and one of the first verses I memorized as a young Christian. Romans 12, we usually say verses 1 and 2 together. I want to focus this morning on verse 2.

And while you're turning there, Romans 12, let me just give you some background on this. One of the prominent themes that runs throughout Scripture is the truth that authentic holiness is a heart issue. Holiness is not achieved by the renovation of our external appearance, but true holiness starts on the inside and even the external tokens of our spiritual identity are supposed to be reminders of that truth. In the words of the Apostle Paul from Romans 2:28-29, "no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God." He's making the point there that even the external rituals, you could add baptism to circumcision and say these rituals that are identifiers of our faith in Christ, not circumcision, that was an Old Testament thing, but nevertheless the point is the same, it symbolizes an inward reality, the purification of the heart. And the Pharisees got this wrong. They wanted to make the law as much about externals as possible and Jesus said to them in Matthew 23:26-28, he said, "You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness."

Now, I don't know about you but I can't read that and not be convicted because I know the thoughts that go on in my own heart and I know that as Jesus said, it's from within. All the things that defile us come from within us and so true morality, true holiness even, is not a question of outward behavior alone, but genuine holiness is a state of the heart and, therefore, the law of God was given to govern the heart first and foremost, and it's the internal person that God is most concerned with: the mind, the emotions and the will. And the Bible teaches this from cover-to-cover. This is not a new idea in the New Testament but even in the Old Testament sin is not merely a question of external actions but the real wickedness of sin stems from what takes place in the heart. The things that defile you the most are not the sinful things you do but the sinful thoughts you entertain.

In other words, it's not really what you do that colors your character, that's an expression of your character; what colors your character is what you think about.

In Mark 7:20-23 is where Jesus said, "What comes out of a person is what defiles him. For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person." Now notice, some of the sins he named there are clearly sins of action: theft, fornication, murder. But Jesus is saying the sin that motivate and drives such actions comes from within. So when he lists sins like sexual immorality and theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, he's not focusing primarily on the act of adultery or acts of thefts and murder, he's grouping all those things together as evil thoughts and what he's being critical of there are the thoughts that give birth to those acts. Those evil thoughts come from within and that's what defiles a person which means it does no good to paper over your character with a veneer of righteousness. That's what the Pharisees did.

And Jesus is also saying that every evil deed, every evil act, and there are acts that are evil. He's not saying those things aren't really evil, but he's saying those things all begin with evil thinking. Murder doesn't spring from a pure heart, it's the product of envy or hatred. Fornication and adultery are the fruit of lustful thoughts. And whenever someone transgresses the purity of the marriage relationship or dishonors his body with an act of fornication, you know that person entertained unrighteousness first on the inside in his thought life in a way that he thought was secret and maybe didn't think was as big a deal as it is. All sin is incubated in the mind, and by the same token, the person who willfully entertains evil thoughts, the person who savors, deliberately savors the lustful thought in his own mind, that person will eventually commit evil acts too. It's unavoidable. You can't keep evil thoughts bottled up forever. Jesus said they defile a person, they defile the whole person, and they inevitably bear the fruit of evil behavior because a corrupt tree cannot bring forth good fruit, that's Matthew 7:18.

So your thought life is the most accurate gauge of your sanctification. What you believe, what you love, what your mind turns to when you have free time to think, these things not only measure your spiritual progress but they either promote or hinder your sanctification and that is why you must gain mastery over your thoughts if you want victory over persistent sinful habits. How wholesome are the secret thoughts of your heart? That is the true measure of your character. Proverbs 23:7 says, "as he thinks within himself, so he is." The real you is not the person that you project to other people, it's not what other people see, it's not the person who comes to church every week with a smile and takes notes and tries to keep up a pious veneer, but the real you is the person only God can see. The real you, according to 1 Samuel 16:7, "the LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart." God judges you according to what you really are like in the secret chambers of your heart. 1 Chronicles 28:9, "the LORD searches all hearts and understands every plan and thought." Jeremiah 17:10, "I the LORD search the heart and test the mind."

So God sees all of our thoughts and he judges us accordingly. The Psalmist was writing about this in that familiar Psalm, 139, he said, "O LORD, you have searched me and known me! You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar." Now, that's an expression of worship but it's also a kind of fearful thought, isn't it? "You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O LORD, you know it altogether." And we will be accountable to God for our thoughts, not just our external works. Jesus said this in Luke 12:1-3, "Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy. Nothing is covered up that will not be made known," he says, "nothing is hidden that will not be revealed. Therefore whatever you have said in the dark shall be heard in the light, and what you have whispered in private rooms shall be proclaimed on the housetops." In other words, you can't keep your secret thoughts secret forever. God already knows your heart so well that by the time a word is formed on your tongue, he knows it. And the Apostle Paul says in Romans 2:16, "according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus." 1 Corinthians 4:5, the Lord "will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart." Whatever you have thought or done in secret is going to be exposed and judged one of these days.

So does that make you tremble a little bit? It certainly does me. "Be sure your sin will find you out," that's Numbers 32:23. You can't keep secrets from God and what takes place secretly in your mind is, in some ways, the most important thing about you. This is the barometer of your character. It's the gauge of your spiritual health. It's what reveals more clearly and more infallibly than anything else what you are really like. And if you meditate on that thought, I guarantee it will have you feeling like the Apostle Paul expressed in Romans 7, "O, wretched man that I am!"

It's a sobering thought. How is your thought life? How do you expect to fare at the judgment seat of Christ when your private thoughts are brought to light and you're called to give account for them? You won't be judged and sent to hell for them, but you can't keep them secret either. Sinful thoughts warp the mind, they provoke fleshly lusts, they harden the conscience, they defile the whole person. Now, you carry the evil thought around with you in your head, and those thoughts are with you wherever you go. Evil thoughts will marry themselves to whatever lust or temptation has the most power over your flesh. And those thoughts can surface in any idle moment. It doesn't matter whether you're alone or in a crowd; it doesn't matter whether you're in a prayer meeting or at a circus.

Once you get into the habit of this kind of sin, it can be a snare to you at any moment of the day or night and sinful thoughts, then, become a kind of horrible bondage, a habit, that's very difficult to escape from and this, I believe, is the underlying addiction in every sinful habit. I often counsel with people who've become entangled in the snare of sin because they harbored evil thoughts in their hearts, and if you do that, you will reap a bitter harvest. Galatians 6:7, "Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap."

My former pastor, Warren Wiersbe, used to say, "Sow a thought, reap an act. Sow an act, reap a habit. Sow a habit, reap a character. Sow a character, reap a destiny." And there is ultimately nothing more wicked than evil thoughts because that is where all sins are ultimately hatched, in the mind. And if you want to be holy, if you want to pursue sanctification, if you want to be conformed to the image of Christ, the place where the battle must take place and the place where the transformation must begin, is in the inner man and the mind, in particular.

And that's why the Apostle Paul spoke repeatedly about renewing our minds. Listen to Ephesians 4:22-24, he says to the Ephesians, "put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness." In other words, sanctification is first and foremost a process of mind renewal. "Be renewed in the spirit of your minds," Ephesians 4:23. How you think determines who you are. That's the truth of Proverbs 23:7 again, "as he thinks in his heart, so is he." Whatever you think is what determines your character and the Apostle Paul builds his entire doctrine of sanctification on the truth that your mind is what determines your character and, therefore, true sanctification must begin there in your thought life.

So if you've turned to Romans 12, let's look at this passage. I'll read verses 1 and 2 and we're going to focus particularly on the idea of mind renewal in verse 2. Here's the text, Romans 12:1-2,

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. 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.

Now, let's set the context for this. Paul has just completed 11 chapters of the most intense doctrinal instruction you will ever find anywhere in the New Testament. The first 11 chapters of Romans are a series of theological discourses. It's the closest thing Paul ever wrote to a systematic theology. He talks about sin and the problem of human depravity in chapters 1 through 3. He outlines the doctrine of justification by faith in chapters 3 through 5. He writes about the doctrinal aspects of sanctification and the believer's struggle with sin in chapters 6 and 7. And in chapter 8, he talks about the security of the believer. We looked at that passage not long ago. In chapter 9, he talks about election and the sovereignty of God. And in chapters 10 and 11, he talks about the role of Israel and the eschatological future.

So those first 11 chapters of Romans are like a miniature systematic theology. Paul is dealing throughout those 11 chapters with objective doctrinal themes, but then beginning here in chapter 12, he turns to the issue of practical application. From this point on, the epistle has a different tone and Paul here is concerned with putting to work in our individual daily lives the truths that he's outlined in those first 11 chapters and so here he

gets intensely practical. He's been theological, now he's going to be practical and the logical order there is significant. It's the way Paul always handled his epistles: doctrine first, then application. And the doctrine Paul covers so carefully, so thoroughly in those first 11 chapters of Romans, lays what is really the necessary foundation for the practical teaching that you find starting here in chapter 12.

And those two things go hand-in-hand: doctrinal and practical. You can't divorce them. And I hope you don't after many years of us teaching this in Grace Life, I hope you don't think that doctrine is inherently impractical or against practical application. Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, all doctrine, every doctrine you can name, has practical implications, and apart from sound doctrine, somebody who just teaches practical application all the time can be downright dangerous if he doesn't lay the doctrinal foundation. Practical exhortations that are not grounded in sound doctrine, usually reduces to a kind of pious moralism, works salvation.

But because Paul has already carefully and meticulously laid a crucial foundation, a careful foundation for Christian soteriology and the doctrine of justification by faith alone, there is no danger that any careful reader of the book of Romans would get the idea from Paul that the practical exhortations of Romans 12 through 15 are supposed to be means of salvation. They're not. Instead, these are the fruits of salvation; this is the outworking of God's justifying and sanctifying work in us but it involves practical exhortations. "Do this. Follow that. Be faithful in this."

He gives commands like that from here to the end of the book. He is saying, "Here is how redeemed people ought to live," and he ties it to the preceding doctrinal discussion with that adverb "therefore. I appeal to you therefore, brethren. In light of God's gracious, justifying and sanctifying work on your behalf, everything we've talked about for 11 chapters," he says, "in light of that, by the mercies of God, I appeal to you to present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Since you've been justified freely by the grace that is in Christ Jesus, since you've been united with him in his death and resurrection, it's only reasonable," he says, "it's only logical, it's only equitable that you should render your bodies as a living sacrifice to God because, after all," 1 Corinthians 6:19, "your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit within you whom you have from God, and you are not your own but you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body."

That's the starting point here in chapter 12, but Paul doesn't stop there. Not only does he call us to present our bodies to God, he commands us – and this is the hard part – to renew our minds for God, and this is the commandment I want to look at most closely this morning, verse 2, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, so that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect."

Now, there are two points here that I want to dwell on. Notice that there are two ways our minds are typically influenced: we can either be influenced from the outside by the world through worldly pressure that conforms us to a worldly standard; or we can be

transformed from the inside out through the renewing of our minds. Those are your only two choices. Whether you realize it or not, one of those two things is currently happening to you. You are either passively allowing the world to conform you to its own evil standard or you are actively renewing your mind and being transformed by that process into greater and greater Christ-likeness. There is no middle ground. There is no third way. There is no standing still. If you are not renewing your mind in Christ, you're being conformed to the world and you see that a lot in the church today.

So let's look at the two sides of this command and see what Paul is talking about. First, there are two points: 1. do not be conformed to this world. That's his first point. And he uses a Greek word, "syschematizo," to speak of "being conformed to this world." It's a word that speaks of fashioning or changing someone into the likeness of another, but it's a unique word that speaks of a change that is unstable and transitory; it speaks of a cosmetic external change. You'd use this word, for example, if you were speaking of molding a lump of clay. Or you might use the same word if you were speaking about plastering over defects to disguise them. It speaks of a change in the shape or the appearance of something. This is not about a change in the real essence or the nature of something. This is an outward external conformity in appearance only, syschematizo.

Now, someone might ask, "Is this a warning to genuine believers? Are authentic Christians even susceptible to worldly pressure? Is it possible for a genuine believer to be conformed to the world because, after all, James 4:4 says, 'Friendship with the world is enmity with God and whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.' Is it possible for a Christian to be conformed to the world?" And the answer is: yes, in a temporal and temporary sense. And this word conveys, again, that sense of a transitory change; a temporary change; an external plastering over.

And let's face it, we all know, if we're honest with ourselves, how easy it is to be susceptible to worldly pressures. I see it on people's Facebook pages every day, people who are susceptible to worldly pressures. And you, personally, no doubt feel that pressure to conform. The world exerts an incredible pressure on us to get in line and get in step with the world. You feel it and lots of Christians give in to that willfully, give in to that pressure to conform, but no Christian will be permanently conformed to the world, no true Christian because, after all, God has predestined us to be conformed to the image of his Son and that's something entirely different. That's Romans 8:29.

According to 2 Corinthians 3:18, "we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image." "He chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him," Ephesians 1:4. And 1 John 3:2 says, "we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is." Then verse 3 adds this, "everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself even as he is pure."

So it is one of the marks of a true Christian that he resists being conformed to the world. We don't always do it successfully and we don't always do it consistently but we know, if

you're a true believer one of the things you know in your heart is that you should not be conformed to this world. You know that and if you are a true Christian who loves Christ, you also have a longing in you to be conformed to his image, and yet both Scripture and experience teach us that even true believers can for a time become susceptible to worldly influences like Lot, you know? The remnants of sinful corruption remain in us, so temptation still entices us, and if we neglect the means of our preservation, we can to some degree and sometimes to a very large degree, be conformed to the world and, in fact, I would say this is the peculiar failing of the church in our generation.

The church today, the visible church, the evangelical movement, is filled with people, including many Christian leaders, who seem to think the church ought to be striving to be as much like the world as possible and so we see multitudes of people who profess to be Christians but they are being conformed to the likeness of the world. In fact, many who call themselves Christians today are indistinguishable from their unsaved neighbors.

I was looking at a guy today who claims his ministry is posing for bodybuilder contests, like he's a professional poser. I don't see how you can reconcile that with any kind of Christian values but he says that's his ministry, the ministry God has called him to. We tend to fall into those sorts of worldly ways of thinking. We immerse ourselves in the same types of entertainment that the world watches. We follow the same fads. We have all the same interests. And in many ways, we are simply not being diligent enough to keep ourselves from being conformed to the world and it is to our spiritual detriment that we do that. It reflects how cold our hearts are to the things God loves.

Remember, you cannot love this temporal world and all its fads and fashions and still be a friend of God. To be a friend to the world is to be an enemy of God. We forget that sometimes. And I'm not arguing for some kind of legalistic rules. If you know me at all, you know what a foe of legalism I am. I despise the sort of pietism that makes extra-biblical rules and teaches Christians to order their lives around lists of do's and don'ts that really have nothing whatsoever to do with biblical holiness. And yet in our zeal to guard our liberty, we must also remember that there is a grave danger at the opposite end of the spectrum. Legalism is not the only danger and it's not the danger most Christians today fall into. We are free from the yoke of bondage under the law, but we have to avoid the bondage of sin as well. We're not to use our liberty as a cloak for evil. We're not supposed to turn the grace of God into lasciviousness. We must resist this world's pressure to conform us to its image.

Now, there's only one other verse in all of Scripture where this word "sychematizo, be conformed," is used and it's 1 Peter 1:14 where the word is used to speak of conforming to our former lusts. So the one other text where this is used is 1 Peter 1:14. Let me read you that passage starting at verse 13. 1 Peter 1:13, Peter writes, "Therefore, preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, 'You shall be holy, for I am holy.'" Now notice, what Peter says here echoes what Paul says in our passage. Peter is

focused on mind renewal, "prepare your minds for action," he says, or as it's translated and I love this in the King James version, "gird up the loins of your mind."

"Don't be conformed to your former lusts." He's using a kind of military term to say, "Get ready for the battle here." It's just another way of saying, "Do not be conformed to the world. Don't let the passions of your former ignorance shape your thoughts but gird up the loins of your mind. Prepare for battle." This calls for a willful, deliberate self-control that is exercised particularly in the arena of the mind, what we think about. This is how you resist worldly pressure to conform. You can't do it merely by following lists of rules that govern your external behavior or manage your external appearance. Sometimes those rules are valid rules but if all you're doing is following the rules, you're not cultivating holiness. You have to get control of your mind and direct your mind towards holiness.

"Your carnal lusts," Peter says, "were formerly framed in ignorance, but now that you're a believer, we don't have any excuse for it. We know better so we're not to think in those old patterns. Gird up the loins of your mind." Peter is using language, again, that evokes the imagery of a battle. You know, every soldier going into battle, they had a tunic that went all the way to the ground. They had to gird it up, that is, they pulled it up and tucked it into the belt so that from the knees down they were free to run or fight without getting their legs entangled in their own clothing. So he's using language that is purposely militant. It calls for an active response. If you're passive or if you're lazy or if you subscribe to this stupid notion of sanctification that all you have to do is sort of lay back and let God do it, do what, I don't know, you can't obey these commands. You just can't do it. In other words, this is something we must do as Christians. Scripture doesn't use terminology like surrender or passivity or anything like that when it talks about sanctification.

He is urging us to take control of our minds and deliberately, purposely, consciously, steer them in a right and godly direction and that brings us to point 2 here in Romans 12:2. 2. Be transformed by the renewing of your mind. I don't do two point messages very often, do I? Pete always teases me about that. He says, "A typical Phil Johnson message is three points and two Spurgeon quotes." Well, here I've got two points and I don't think I have any Spurgeon quotes. But this is point 2: be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

Now remember, the word translated "conformed" here speaks of an outward change, *syschematizo*. It's a cosmetic change where something is molded or shaped by external pressure. Here Paul uses a different word for the idea of being transformed, it's the Greek word, "metamorphoo," which obviously is the root and origin of our English word "metamorphosis." It speaks of a change like you probably learned the word "metamorphosis" when you studied butterflies in grade school because it speaks of a change that takes place from the inside out. It's a total transformation of nature. It's a change that changes the very character and essence of our hearts. Be transformed. Be metamorphosed by the renewal of your mind.

Why the mind? People ask this sometimes: why does it always have to be cerebral? Why is it an intellectual thing? Because our charismatic brethren deny that it is. A lot of them say you have to turn off your mind. Paul doesn't say that here. He says renew your mind. Why is it an intellectual thing? I mean, this is so contrary to the spirit of our age where people think what you really need to transform you is an emotional experience or a mystical experience where you are slain in the Spirit or you lapse into uncontrollable laughter or whatever, but far more important than any emotional experience is mind renewal. Why the mind? Why the intellect? Because "from it flow the springs of life," Proverbs 4:23.

Several years ago I did two messages on that Proverb where we talked about this very thing, how from out of your heart, which means in biblical language, out of your mind, come the rivers of life so don't pollute your mind. That's the point of Proverbs 4:23. The mind is what rules us. All of our actions, all of our choices, all of our decisions, all of our legitimate emotions are fed and watered by what flows from the mind and what you think about, what you believe, the way you perceive reality. And to a large degree, you control what you think about. That's why this is an imperative. It's a command. "Be transformed by the renewal of your mind." He's calling on us to do something deliberate and conscious because you can do that. How do you do that? How do you do that practically? And that's what I want to focus on in the next maybe 15 or 20 minutes here.

How do you do this practically? I have six practical suggestions to help you in the process of mind renewal. So if you already put your pen away because I said I only had two main points, you can take your pen out again and be ready to write because now I have six and this is the stuff you want to take down. Here are six practical steps toward victory in your thought life. Here's what you need to be doing if you want to be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

1. Confirm your salvation. Confirm your salvation. Paul is writing to Christians here. Verse 1, "I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God," and then he appeals to them to have their minds renewed. If you're not a Christian, you need soul renewal before you can work on mind renewal. 2 Peter 1:10, "be all the more diligent to make your calling and election sure." If you struggle perpetually with evil thoughts and you have no interest in the things of the Lord, no love for Christ, it's probably that you've never truly been converted, even if you profess to be a Christian, even if you come to church all the time. We have no power apart from the grace of God to renew our own minds and if you're not a genuine believer, if you've never truly embraced Christ as Savior, you don't have what it takes to control your own mind. You can't renew your own mind because you don't have the affections you need to have in order to steer your mind in the right direction.

And Scripture is very clear about this. Romans 8:7-8, "the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God." And when he says "in the flesh," he's talking about unbelievers there; people who lack the Holy Spirit. Jeremiah 13:23, "Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots?" And the answer is obviously, no, and Jeremiah

goes on to say, "In the same way, you who are accustomed to doing evil can't do good." We can't by the sheer force of willpower change our own nature. We don't have it within us to change our nature. So if you've never been born again, if you've never truly trusted Christ for salvation, what you need is a new heart because "a corrupt tree can't bring forth good fruit," Matthew 7:18 again. So apart from a total new birth, you'll never be able to renew your mind.

So that's step 1: examine yourself to see whether you're truly in the faith. And if you're not a Christian and you've never been born again, what you need is salvation. You need to call on the name of the Lord and ask God to give you his Spirit. Romans 10:13, "For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

Step 2: clear your conscience. Clear your conscience. This is hard work and this is where mind renewal begins. Verse 2, "be transformed by the renewal of your mind." If you don't first clear your conscience, you'll never get anywhere trying to renew your mind. Remember Titus 1:15 which I read earlier, "To the pure, all things are pure, but to the defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure; but both their minds and their consciences are defiled." Impure thoughts defile your conscience.

So if you've settled the matter of your salvation, the next step towards renewing your mind is clearing your conscience. Pray as David prayed in Psalm 51:10, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me." How do you clear your conscience? Well, first you repent deeply and sincerely of your sins. Don't hide secret sins away from the light of truth. Bring them all out and deal with them thoroughly because Scripture says, "If I cherish iniquity in my heart, the Lord won't listen." And when you truly deal with your sin and lay hold of God's pardoning grace, you'll hear the echo of God's pardon in your own conscience.

Next, having repented of your sin, you need to make right what needs to be made right. Make a list if your sins are many and systematically set out to seek the forgiveness of those whom you have offended, make restitution in cases where restitution can be made, and make right whatever damage your sins may have done. It may be a long process and it's not an easy process, but once you devote yourself to this and start the process, your conscience will speak approval. If you've harbored secret sin for a long time, you'll discover that there is nothing more liberating than a clear conscience. This one thing alone will do more to deter you from the sin of thinking evil thoughts.

Anthony Burgess, who is one of the great Puritan commentators, suggested that some people deliberately give themselves carnal pleasures in their minds just in order to put a fogginess between their conscience and themselves. You need to get in the habit of listening to your conscience and you'll face fewer temptations to think evil thoughts and then inform your conscience with the word of God. Surrender to your conscience to Scripture and it will become a strong deterrent to evil thinking, a clean conscience.

Alright, step 3 in renewing your mind. 3. Commit to holiness in your private life. This is not the first time you've heard me say this. I've spoken on this subject a few times over

the years and without getting into legalism or lists of rules or anything, you need to commit to holiness in your private life. It's a simple truth. We're talking here about mind renewal.

Verse 2 says, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, so that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect." That's speaking of something that must take place in private. This is not something you can do publicly. It's not something you can do especially in the three or four hours a week you might spend in church but you need to learn to cultivate holiness in solitude, in private, in your own private life. That is the most important aspect of your spiritual growth. Fellowship groups and Bible studies and discipling relationships all have their place but there is no aspect of your spiritual life that's more important to you than your own private pursuit of holiness.

And if you're not willing to do that, don't come and ask me to hold you accountable because I won't be able to do it. You have to be committed to holiness in your private life or else no amount of accountability and fellowship can possibly help you in the long run. Everyone else is simply wasting time trying to disciple you if you're not willing to cultivate holiness in your own private life. It's great to seek accountability and fellowship, the company of other people is often a deterrent to sin. Fear and shame sometimes keep us from sin when we think others will know about it, but you can't be accountable for every moment. Eventually you're going to be alone and it is in those moments of solitude, when you're in secret, when you're traveling by yourself, that's when your true character reveals itself and you need to devote yourself to the pursuit of godliness in those private times.

Cultivate the fear of God. Learn to be ashamed at what God sees spilling out of your heart. That will do more than anything I know to cleanse your heart of evil thoughts and help in the process of renewing your mind. There are a thousand practical ways this works out, by the way. When you find yourself alone with nothing to do, don't – and I'm preaching to myself here – don't instinctively flip on the television and shift into passive mode or start surfing the web and seeing what people tweeted about today or whatever. Instead, read something edifying or look for something good that will help others, listen to tapes of good preaching, keep a journal.

Find ways to fill your leisure time with things that will edify you and when you go to bed at night, bring something edifying for your mind to think about in the dark. It may be a Bible verse you're memorizing that you can meditate on, something as simple as that. The Psalmist said, "I remember you upon my bed and meditate on you in the watches of the night." That's Psalm 63:6. So this is something David practiced. It's a prayer to God. You know, I think I've said this before too, this is what is so great about loving theology, being a student of theology, there are a thousand good things to meditate on in the dark when you can't sleep at night which is what I try to do. I do some of my best thinking about things like, you know, infralapsarianism and the hypostatic union when I have insomnia.

But the best and simplest remedy for evil thinking is the command in Philippians 4:8, "whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things," which is not what the television throws at us, by the way. It's the opposite. And above all, if you want to pursue holiness in your private life, memorize and mediate on Scripture. You need to do that anyway. Make some cards with memory verses and learn at least one a week. That will give you plenty to do in those moments of solitude.

Now, you have to decide to do this. You have to commit yourself to it and you have to start doing it when your mind is clear and when you are not already being assaulted by lust or evil thoughts. You have to be proactive. If you take a passive approach or if you think you can simply react to temptations by deciding then to meditate on Scripture, whenever an evil thought arises you try to set that aside and meditate on Scripture, you're going to fail. You need to fill your mind with righteousness and start meditating before those evil thoughts have a chance to assault your mind. It takes diligence and discipline but that is exactly what Paul is calling for here when he tells us to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. He's not giving us an easy command here.

The next step, 4: cultivate your spiritual gift. Cultivate your spiritual gift. In other words, have an edifying pastime. Find a hobby or a volunteer activity that you can devote yourself to where you make use of your spiritual gift. Stay busy. Don't give yourself time for too many idle thoughts. And remember, they don't have to be evil thoughts to do damage to you. Idle thoughts, vain thoughts, can defile the heart just as much as vile thoughts. Thinking about trivial and worldly things is ultimately as hostile to true godliness as entertaining impure fantasies, if that's all you ever do. And one of them leads to the other. Both will rob you of opportunities to glorify God.

Here's what I'm saying: it's a sin to waste time, especially if that means squandering opportunities to use the gifts God has given you for the edification of others. You're in Romans 12, look down at verse 6, "Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them." So find out what you're good at, what you enjoy doing, what honors God when you do it, and then seek ways to use your gift for the edification of other people and, believe me, in the long run you'll enjoy that far more than some of the mindless activities you might be doing in your leisure time right now, you know? Stop watching Barney Fife reruns and find something, you know, edifying to do with that time and the quality of your life will be vastly improved.

5. Continue steadfastly in prayer. Look down at verses 11 and 12, "Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer." Prayer is a great deterrent to impure thoughts. It's a little hard to indulge in evil fantasies when you're directing your mind towards the Lord.

I don't need to say a whole lot about this. It's a pretty obvious point. Cultivate your prayer life. Get in the habit of praying. Let this habit replace some of those old, evil, habitual ways of thinking and when an evil thought presents itself to your mind and tempts you to

entertain this evil or trivial thought for a while, respond immediately by going to the Lord in prayer. But don't wait for those times to pray. Learn to pray whenever your mind is idle. You know, turn off the talk radio stations and pray while you're driving in your car. Pray while you're stuck in some waiting room. Get in the habit of allowing your mind to turn to God whenever you have an idle private moment and you will eventually reprogram your mind so that evil thoughts don't continually arise.

Here's a final step towards mind renewal. Look at the end of verse 9. This is step 6: cling to what is good. Cling to what is good. Learn to abhor what is evil and cultivate thoughts about what is good. If you're going to start memorizing Scripture, learn Philippians 4:8 first, "whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just," and so on, "if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things."

And notice the flip side of this also in verse 9 of Romans 12, "abhor what is evil." Cultivate a holy hatred for evil. Learn to abhor that which is evil. If you're in the habit of entertaining fantasies about sinful things, contemplate the evil consequences of that act instead. Next time you're tempted to fantasize about adultery or fornication, instead you should prayerfully contemplate what the consequences would be if you sinned that sin and got caught. Think about what it would mean for your family and your friends. Learn to have fear and loathing for sin and that will help quell your evil thoughts.

But cling to that which is good. Ephesians 5:3-4, "sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints. Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving." Cling to that which is good.

I preached on that passage once about filthiness and foolish talking and got perhaps the most negative push-back I ever got from a group of pastors because I was at a pastors' conference. People saying, "Well, that's legalistic," etc. etc. Well, it's right here in Scripture so I'm sorry if that sounds legalistic to you. I'm sorry if you think – and I'm not talking to any of you, but there are hordes of pastors out there who think their filthiness and foolish talk is a valid tool for contextualization, a way they can sort of connect with their generation. Scripture says don't do that.

Cling to that which is good and instead of all the filthiness and foolish talk, let there be thanksgiving, and clinging to that which is good also means avoiding the opportunity for evil. Romans 13:14, "make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires." Don't put yourself in situations where you are tempted. Don't drive through parts of town where evil is on display. Don't walk where it's slippery and you won't be prone to fall.

You know, if you're tempted to look at pornography on the internet, I have a very practical suggestion for you: arrange your desk and furniture so that your wife or someone else can always look over your shoulder and see what you're looking at. And if that doesn't work, get rid of your computer and your internet connection. "Yeah, but I need that for my job." Well, change jobs because no change is too radical if your mind is enslaved to evil thoughts. Remember what Jesus said about this very subject, Matthew

5:29-30, "If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell." That's pretty radical, isn't it?

No measures are too radical to take if you are in bondage to soul-destroying sin and evil thoughts will destroy your soul. "For you may be sure of this," Paul says in Ephesians 5:5, "that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God." Then he adds this in verse 8, "for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true)," those very things we should be thinking about, "and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord." Romans 12:2 tells us how to do that. "Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them."

That's the pathway to a pure mind. You know, there is no secret to victory in this area. People always want to know, "Well, what's the secret to victory?" There's no magic remedy. There is no silver bullet. There is no easy answer that will end this problem for you once-and-for-all, but the answer lies in a commitment to a life of self-control and disciplined thinking and Paul says, "I beseech you to do these things by the mercies of God."

Again, you can't renew your mind without the enabling grace and strength of the Lord and my prayer for you is that you will learn to lean on him for that grace so that you will be genuinely transformed from the inside out by the renewing of your mind.

Let's pray.

*Father, we pray that you would cleanse and renew our minds with your truth. Fill our hearts with a love for righteousness and a love for Christ and give us grace to discipline even our bodies for your glory. May we embody true holiness starting within, within the heart, so that we will be fit to reflect the glory of Christ in whose name we pray. Amen.*

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