



BETHEL
PRESBYTERIAN

MINISTRY OF THE WORD

Volume 20 Issue 4

January 24, 2021

A Life of Worship 2

Romans 12:1-2

One of the bigger challenges we have as we endeavor to grow in our walks with God comes from the error in thinking that God is like us! In explaining why His people rebelled as they did, God said this:

Psalm 50:21a, "These things you have done, and I kept silence; you thought that I was just like you..."

See, our inclination is to reason from self or creation to God. When in fact it should be the

other way around! Biblically if we are to know truth — and so have a proper understanding of reality — we must reason from God to this world.

Psalm 36:9b, “...In Thy light we see light.”

God is the creator of this world. Accordingly, if we are going to arrive at a proper understanding of anything, it will only come as we subject ourselves to God’s commentary on this world and go from there!

And that in essences is what Paul is doing in our text as he transitions from discussing doctrine to discussing practical responsibility. With this, recall what we saw last time. Romans 12:1-2 is a bridge verse in this epistle. We tend to think of the division between chapters 1-11 and chapters 12-16 is solid- black and white. In reality, the practical and *SPECIFIC* exhortations of this epistle really start in Romans 12:3!

Romans 12:1-2 is a transition verse, a bridge verse which no doubt is why the exhortation is so broad (as compared to the rest of this epistle). As such, it serves both to ground the exhortation of Romans 12-16 to the glorious truths of Romans 1-11, and integrate the truths of Romans 1-11 into the exhortations of Romans 12-16!

We saw that the basis/foundation of every biblical imperative/command is the salvific work of Christ on the cross whereby He forgave our sins and adopted us into the family of God. Sanctification always moves from the inside out. Recall Christ’s warning to the religious leaders of His day:

Matthew 23:25-26, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside they are full of robbery and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee, first clean the inside of the cup and of the dish, SO THAT the outside of it may become clean also.”

Because this is the case, the catalyst for any and all godly living is NOT what we typically resort to:

- Self-effort.
- Guilt.
- Fear of losing God’s good pleasure if we don’t act.
- Religious duty!

RATHER it is the glorious assessment with which God views us as His children even when we sin. And what is the assessment? That we are “acceptable to Him”! In and through all things — at all times — God sees us in Christ and so, even when we are at our worst, God accepts us in the beloved! It is as Jack Miller said in his sermon on *Parable of the Two Debtors* (Luke 7:40-50), “Jesus doesn’t carry a grudge and neither does His Father. When Jesus forgives your sins, they are completely forgiven.” When one lives in light of this glorious reality, “the outside of the

cup becomes clean”!

Now it is NOT enough to affirm the standing we have with God in Christ *every now and then*. We must labor — diligently labor each and every day — to ensure that we live out our Christian lives in light of this truth.

This brings us to an important caution on the part of Paul.

Romans 12:2, “And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind...”

This text represents an important caution which the servant of Christ must heed! It is twofold. First, we must reject worldly thinking.

Romans 12:2, “And do not be conformed to this world...”

Our first inclination in reading this is to take this verse as an exhortation against worldliness/worldly living. Are you entertained by the entertainments of the world? When you are crossed, do you respond like the non-Christian in anger? Or do you look like Christ, who “...while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting *Himself* to Him who judges righteously.” (1 Peter 2:23)

- Ladies, how about your dress?
- Men, how about your purity?

While these are important issues which ultimately are impacted by the exhortation that Paul gave here, I want you to see that this is NOT the first thing that Paul had in mind as he exhorted us “...not to be conformed to this world”! What did Paul have in mind?

To answer this, notice that Paul’s language is that of a put off and then put-on command. That is important for it impacts the way we understand this verse.

A put off and then put-on command is a form of biblical exhortation where instead of simply calling for obedience, the author pastorally addresses the bigger picture by telling the Christian (1) what he should NOT do, BUT then (2) what he should do instead. For example, consider Paul’s exhortation in Ephesians 4.

Ephesians 4:25b, “Therefore, laying aside falsehood, // speak truth, each one *of you*, with his neighbor...”

This is a typical of the put off and then put-on command. Notice that it involves opposites: instead of lying, we are called to speak truth to one another.

Ephesians 4:29a, “Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, // but only such a

word as is good for edification..."

Instead of cutting language, we are called to use the opposite, edifying language!

Ephesians 4:31-32a, "Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. // And be kind to one another..."

You get the idea. These are but a few of the many put off and then put -on commands of Scripture. The text before us is such a command, "Do NOT be conformed to this world, BUT be transformed..."

Notice that the fundamental contrast here is NOT between worldly *living* and Kingdom *thinking* (those are NOT opposites). RATHER the contrast is between *worldly* thinking and *Kingdom* thinking! We get this from the second part of the command, the put-on part. "To be transformed by the renewing of your mind" is a call for us to labor such that the "renewed mind" be a mind driven by "the mercies of God" and that is what dictates what we do (as opposed to the fallen, darkened mind)! Because this is the opposite of the put off command — "do not be conformed to this world" — it frames our understanding of Paul's intent behind this command.

From this we see that the put off and then put-on command revolves around kingdom thinking vs. worldly thinking, specifically as it relates to our approach to God. Will it be grace/Christ's conduct or our own that governs our relationship with God?

This brings us to Paul's first caution which now we know is NOT initially focused on worldly conduct or passions, BUT on that which governs our thinking as a Christian as we approach God: The redeemed mind vs. the worldly mind?

The worldly mind, or the sum-total of the fallen, darkened mind's passion is one of placation and manipulation! It is the passion to relate to God on the basis of religious activity! It is as Benjamin Franklin said, "*God helps those*" only after they have first, "*helped themselves!*"

It was as the passion of the typical Jew of Paul's day. Speaking of his countrymen, Paul wrote this:

Romans 10:2-3, "For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge. For not knowing about God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God."

Mishnah Judaism revolved around demonstrating to God and the world that because of what they did they were worthy of love! Accordingly, the religion of Judaism in Christ's day was focused on "establishing their own righteousness"! And this naturally bled over to the disciples as they interacted with the world. John speaking of Christ wrote:

John 9:1-2, “And as He passed by, He saw a man blind from birth. And His disciples asked Him, saying, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he should be born blind?’”

Again, the thinking in Christ’s day was that if bad things happen to you it is because God is punishing you for sin (this was the thinking of Job). In contrast, if God ordains good things for you, it is because you have lived in such a way as to earn it. This continues to be the bent of most of us in our walks today. And that is why Paul’s first caution is for you and me to be critical as to that which is driving us in our relationship with God. At this point we must not be conformed to the world!

If left to ourselves as Christians, we will approach God just like the worldling and endeavor to relate to Him on the basis of our conduct. We will think this way:

- If I do this, God will be pleased with me.
- If I do that, God will be angry with me!
- If I do this, God will reject me.
- If I do that, God will accept me!
- If bad things happen in my life it must be because I’ve done something wrong such that God is punishing me!

This is the mind of the worldling toward God; a mind of placation. This is what lays behind Paul’s exhortation to the Galatians.

Galatians 2:18, “For if I rebuild what I have *once* destroyed, I prove myself to be a transgressor.”

Even though they were saved, nevertheless the people of God in Galatia were being “conformed to the world” in their relationship with God by which they believed good works were necessary for God’s acceptance! Paul further exhorted them further.

Galatians 3:3, “Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?”

Though everything within us wants to relate to God on the basis of what we do, we must understand that this is worldly thinking and so something we must be done with once and for all!

Truly, we must NOT allow our minds to be conformed to that of the worldling in our relationship with God. For Christ brings a transformation on this very point — a transformation which we saw last week instructs the child of God to relate to the Lord exclusively on the basis of Christ’s work — “His mercies” — NOT their own!

Now once again, this does NOT mean that how I live — the things I do, want, or love — does NOT matter. Of course, it does, and so here too we are NOT to be “conformed to the world”! What must drive us is God’s grace! C. John Miller put it this way:

If you want to be winning in the fight [for holiness/godliness], if you want to be growing, if you want the Spirit's fruit produced in you, you have to obey. That's the whole point of *walking* by the Spirit. You have to obey and keep on obeying, whether you feel like it or not. But the source and life of this obedience is not the law, but the cross and the faith that claims Jesus. (Quoted in his Sermon in Galatians 5:22-23)

And we must live according to the renewed mind.

Romans 12:2b, "And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind..."

The exhortation here is the opposite of worldly thinking when it comes to our relationship with God. Instead of relating to God on the basis of our religious activity, we must relate to God on the basis of our "renewed mind."

The word for "mind" here is far more than simply our ability to think, contemplate, or reason. Non-Christians are able to do that. The focus here is on our mind as it relates to our relationship with God!

Ephesians 2:1-3, "And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience. Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest."

This is the "mind" that is the focus of Paul in our text. On account of the fall, the image bearer is born with a "mind" that:

- Is hostile to God,
- Resents God,
- Flees from God, and
- And because it can't ultimately flee from God, it endeavors to Placate God Through the False-Religion of works-righteousness (cf. Romans 1:22-23).

Not surprisingly, it is this "mind" that is redeemed by the cross work of Christ.

1 John 5:20a, "And we know that the Son of God has come, and has given us understanding [that is the same word for 'mind' used in Ephesians 2:3] in order that we might know Him who is true, and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ..."

It is this redeemed "mind" that Paul ultimately is referencing when he says, "...be transformed by the renewing of your mind." This implies a diligent activity whereby we work to put off the thinking of our flesh as we approach God and so Put On the thinking of a son/daughter!

According to Romans 12:2, this is what transforms us; this ultimately is what “cleans the outside of the cup”!

Now, that Paul felt the need to give this exhortation after eleven chapters in which he details the gospel indicates that this truly is NOT something that will come natural to us as Christians! See,

- It is in the “mind” that our new nature and our fallen humanness are intermixed.
- Accordingly, it is in the “mind” that we make choices as to whether we will live by God’s grace or by human effort.

And so, at every moment in our lives our fallenness wars against our redeemed mind (cf. Galatians 5:16-17) — endeavoring to take us captive in our walks to fear, guilt, distrust, and doubts about God and our standing before Him! Accordingly, as Christians the call is for us to exalt in God and His grace, in Christ and His cross work! That means a core element to godly living is taking our focus off of ourselves and what we have or have not done AND placing it upon God, His character, His mercies, and His salvific work!

In this regard I want you to see that sanctification by faith is NOT a passive “letting go and letting God”! RATHER it is the very active, violent pursuit of knowing and delighting in God, His character, and His work! Paul speaking of that which is necessary in order to grow in our walks (cf. vv. 8-11), exhorted:

1 Timothy 6:12, “Fight the good fight of faith; take hold of the eternal life to which you were called...”

The word for “fight” is ἀγωνίζομαι (*agōnizomai*) which came from the Olympic event of boxing. Now unlike the “sissy” sport today¹ which uses padded gloves, boxers in Paul’s day wore leather gloves laced with sharpened metal and glass. And the loser had his eye gouged out.

As such, ἀγωνίζομαι (*agōnizomai*) spoke of a life/death struggle of survival. Paul says, “If you and I are going to survive as Christians in this world, we must gird up our loins, act as men, get in the ring, and engage in a life/death struggle of survival which will determine our health as Christians. And what is that struggle? The fight of faith!” What is the object/focus of this faith? It is God, His character, and what He has given us in Christ!

Galatians 2:19-21, “For through the Law I died to the Law [that is, law-keeping as the basis of God’s approval], that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the *life* which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and delivered Himself up for me. [to live any other way truly is a worldliness which has harmed more Christians than ever has alcohol, music, long hair, or one’s dress!] I do not nullify the grace of God; for if righteousness *comes* through the Law [through law-keeping], then Christ died needlessly.”

If we allow our redeemed mind to dictate what we do, our lives will be transformed! In the words of Samuel to the newly repenting people of God — notice the focus.

1 Samuel 12:24, “Only fear the Lord and serve Him in truth with all your heart; for consider what great things He has done for you.”

Any service we might do in Christ’s name — as in the exhortations given in Romans 12:3-16:27 — will be established as we grow in our understanding of the greatness of God and all that He has done for us!²

So, as we approach the commands of Scripture (as in Romans 12-16) we must reject worldly thinking (v. 2a) and so strive to live according to a mind that is being directed by God, His grace, and His character (v. 2b)! Now as we do this, the result will be delighting in God’s word.

Romans 12:2c, “...that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.”

The word for “prove” (δοκιμάζω [*dokimazō*]) has two elements to it in the Bible. First is a test/trial which establishes the worth or genuineness of someone or something (as in the tempering of steel). Secondly and flowing from this, it is an indorsement of and so a delighting in that which is approved.

1 Peter 1:6b-7, “...you have been distressed by various trials, that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.”

The “proven” faith here is a faith that is tried and thus shown to be genuine. The end result of this is delight!

1 Thessalonians 2:4, “But just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not as pleasing men but God...”

That Paul was “approved by God” implies that God had tested him and thus shown his call to be genuine. As a result, God now took delight in Him! That is the word here.

Now, what is the object of this “proving”/delight? The “will of God” which is another way of saying “the word of God” or “the command of God”- that which is outlined in Romans 12-16! This is important! The tendency for us as we gaze upon the “will of God” in Scripture is to conclude that God has something against fun; He truly does NOT want us to enjoy ourselves! If ever you have been tempted to go down this road it is because you are thinking of God as the non-Christian does. Christian, “do not be conformed to the world” in your thinking!

Yet if approach the word of God “being transformed by the renewing of our minds” living in light of the “mercies of God”, we will “prove/delight in the will of God” such that we will

confess that God's word is NOT a burden, BUT the delight of our hearts- that is the idea behind "good [of beneficial result] and acceptable [something we both want and long for] and perfect [it won't lead us into error]"! All of this will be the disposition we have when we think of God's commands! We see this reflected in David's life when he meditated on the glory of God. Notice how this impacted his view of the word of God.

Psalm 19:7-11, "The law of the Lord is perfect, restoring the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple. The precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes. The fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever; the judgments of the Lord are true; they are righteous altogether. They are more desirable than gold, yes, than much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and the drippings of the honeycomb. Moreover, by them Thy servant is warned; in keeping them there is great reward."

Interesting! To reason with a mind which has been transformed by God and His grace is to long to submit to the word of God! Such was the passion of John.

1 John 5:3, "For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments; and His commandments are not burdensome."

When you and I "conform to the world" when it comes to our approach to God, God's word is a burden. This is another test which we are going to fail and so incur God's displeasure! But when you are "transformed by the renewing of your mind" and so are delighting in God's grace and glory — His will/word becomes our passion! Describing the impact that grace has upon the sinner, Richard Baxter wrote this:

Sin, that was before a jesting matter with him, is now so odious and terrible to him, that he flies from it as from death. The world, that was so lovely in his eyes, now appears but as vanity and vexation: God, that was before neglected, is now the only happiness of his soul; before He was forgotten, and every lust preferred before Him: but now He is set next to the heart, and all things must give place to Him... (Baxter, 2013, pp. 370-371)

Such is the glorious consequence of redeemed thinking. It makes us once again into a whole person as it weds our love for the Lord with a passion to submit to His will/word! If ever you find yourself resenting or disliking the commands of God, that is a sign that in your thinking you are being "conformed to the world" and therefore NOT living by grace! Guard your heart and so live in light of "the mercies of God" and His word will be your delight!

References

Baxter, R. (2013). *The Practical Works of Richard Baxter, Volume 7*. The Classics US.

End Note(s)

¹ I'm teasing here!

² Luke 7:47b: recall Christ's words in connection with the Pharisee and the prostitute, "...he who is forgiven little, loves little."- and the opposite would be, "he who is forgiven much, loves much"! Do you recognize the battle ground when it comes to our service in Christ's Kingdom! It is not firstly outward behavior or inward worldliness. Rather it is the Foundation/Basis upon which we approach God at any moment: is it on account of His tender mercies or our religious activity? It is only those who are "not conformed to the world's thinking, but transformed by the renewing of their mind" that will excel in their service!

² Peter 1:9: again, after describing nine characteristics of spiritual maturation, Peter explains how they become incarnate in the child of God, "For he who lacks these qualities is blind or short-sighted, having forgotten his purification from his former sins."