**BE TRANSFORMED BY THE RENEWING OF YOUR MIND**

**(Romans 12:1-21)**

***“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.” (v. 2)***

Hello children of God! Have you held on to your precious identity and privileges as God’s children that we learned through last week’s conference? We are truly the most blessed of all people that we can call God, “Abba, Father”. In his opening message, Pastor Stephen shared with us a saying: “When a child knows his father’s heart, he becomes mature”. Based on today’s passage, I think we can add, “When a child knows his father’s heart and *mind*, he becomes mature.” Today’s passage reveals that unless our minds are renewed spiritually, we cannot truly love God or render the glory that is due him. The depth and effectiveness of our Christian lives depends on it. From Paul’s words, we can learn what this renewed mind is, how to get it and how to use it. I pray that the Holy Spirit may open our minds to receive this word.

1. **Offer yourself to God as a living sacrifice (v. 1)**

Let’s begin by looking at verse 1a. ***“Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy…”*** The first eleven chapters of Romans were primarily concerned with Christian doctrine. Apostle Paul explained how we, who were once dead and helpless in our sins, were given the marvelous grace of salvation in Jesus. Through faith in his atoning sacrifice, Jesus’ perfect righteousness was imputed to us as a free gift. So instead of pouring out his wrath onto us, God poured out his Spirit into our hearts. Rather than banishing us from his presence forever, God adopted us as his beloved children. God loves us, the unlovable. In view of such overwhelming mercy, how should we live? What is our response to grace? Paul uses the rest of his letter to spell out the practical applications of what he has taught so far.

Verse 1b continues, ***“…to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship.”*** Paul gets us thinking about worship. Worship involves revering and adoring God for who he is and what he has done, and it takes many forms. In Old Testament times, sacrifices played a central role in the life of worship. Burnt offerings, grain offerings and fellowship offerings were given to express one’s love and dedication to God. Sin offerings and guilt offerings were also offered as a means of atonement, to bring God’s people back into a right relationship with him. But in the New Testament era, true and proper worship is different for the Christian. Jesus has completely fulfilled the work of atoning for our sins through his blood shed on the cross. Animal sacrifices and temple worship are no longer required. Jesus redefined the whole concept of worship when he said in John 4:23, *“Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks.”* What God really wants from us is…us! The only sacrifice that can please him and which is acceptable in his sight is the complete surrendering of our hearts and wills. This is what Paul means when he says to offer our bodies as a ***“living sacrifice”.*** The way in which we live out our everyday lives, loving God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and loving our neighbors as ourselves (Mk 12:29-31), this is our true and proper worship.

Properly understood, we realize that this “living sacrifice” kind of worship should be more passionate and more zealous than that in the Old Testament era. For it involves our total submission to the lordship of Christ in all areas of life. A living sacrifice is the lovely woman who gets up early to pray because she dares not venture into her day without the priorities of Christ in front of her. A living sacrifice is the faithful young man who turns down the lucrative job offer because it’s clear it will hinder his ability to serve God’s kingdom. It can be cooking a meal, preparing for a conference, building a Bible house, telling a friend about Jesus, reflecting on God’s word, going out as a missionary, praying for a sick coworker…whatever Jesus wants us to do, we do it, no strings attached, from our hearts. This takes real, oftentimes painful self-denial on our part. To live for Jesus is, in a sense, much more difficult than dying for him; that’s why Jesus referred to it as “losing” our life for him and for the gospel (Mk 8:35).

D. L. Moody once noted, “The problem with a living sacrifice is that it keeps crawling off the altar.” We are naturally resistant to the call to be living sacrifices, and the fundamental reason is fear. Surrendering ourselves completely to Jesus’ will fills us with a sense of loss. It means giving up our own way and losing those sinful pleasures we have grown to love. We want to offer God “something”, but we cannot give the best, we cannot give it all. We hold something back for ourselves, like Cain (Gen 4). But this attitude of fear and of holding back is a major problem. Such lack of trust cuts us off from enjoying intimate fellowship with God.

This reminded me of the hymn, “Is Your All on the Altar?” (#525). The first verse and the refrain are as follows:

*You have longed for sweet peace,*

*And for faith to increase,*

*And have earnestly, fervently prayed;*

*But you cannot have rest*

*Or be perfectly blest*

*Until all on the altar is laid.*

*Is your all on the altar of sacrifice laid?*

*Your heart does the Spirit control?*

*You can only be blest*

*And have peace and sweet rest*

*As you yield Him your body and soul.*

Unless we are all-in for God, we can never expect God to reveal his fullness to us. We cannot have it both ways: intimate fellowship with God and with the world. We must choose. The one who gave his best for us, even his one and only Son, is worthy of everything we have and are. Is your all on the altar? In view of God’s mercy, may we be unafraid to offer ourselves to God as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing in his sight.

1. **Be transformed to have a renewed, Christ-like mind (v. 2)**

Perhaps you are thinking to yourself, “That sounds really good in theory. But it is too much. It is too hard for me.” That’s because it is! At least, it is too hard under your own willpower. To worship God as a living sacrifice requires a radical change in one’s inner person that can only be wrought by God’s power. Let’s read verse 2 all together. ***“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.”*** All of us were born into this fallen world with its distinct pattern of selfishness, rebelliousness and idol worship. As we learned in Romans 1, our rejection of the truth about God inevitably led us to depraved minds that rejoiced in every kind of evil. We were under the devil’s power, living in sin without even thinking about it, just as fish are surrounded by water. We conformed to this pattern to fit in with the world, justifying our behavior saying, “Everyone else is doing it!”

But we can conform to this pattern no longer. Jesus has opened our eyes to a new and different way, a total life transformation that comes through the renewal of our minds. The word ***“transformed”*** used here is the same as the word “transfigured” used to describe Jesus’ glorious change on the mountain (Mk 9:2). Our lives can be full of Jesus’ glorious image as well through the complete rewiring of our minds, the control center of our person. We must be rewired to see sin for its destructive and fruitless nature. We must see why it grieves God, and be grieved over it ourselves, leading us to willingly enter into a spiritual battle against the temptations of the flesh and of the world. At the same time, our minds must put their treasure in good, heavenly and eternal things. We must come to value our relationship with God as the greatest of joys, and doing his will as the most rewarding work. In short, the renewal of our minds is a change in what we are chasing after. It is not a type of bondage, but true freedom. Pastor John Piper explains this well when he says, “Freedom is doing what you love to do…if what you love to do is what you ought to do.” What joy it is to both do what we want and ultimately be rewarded for it rather than punished!

How can we obtain such a renewed mind? Again, it is not by our own willpower or through a checklist of works. It is a change wrought through the power of the Holy Spirit, begun at our spiritual rebirth and continued on throughout the rest of our lives. It is indeed mysterious, but happens in real and noticeable ways through our learning and conforming to the word of God. From our perspective, it basically involves denying our fleshly, worldly mindset and submitting to whatever the Spirit reveals to us through Scripture. I think 2 Corinthians 3:18 describes this well. *“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.”* The key is *Christ-mindedness.* The Holy Spirit works outwardly to put Jesus in front of us through God’s word. Then he works inwardly to captivate our minds by his glory. The Spirit personally reveals what Jesus did for us on the cross so that we cannot but adore him. He bends our minds according to Jesus’ teachings so that we come to see things from Jesus’ perspective. He fills us with the desire to imitate Jesus in thought, speech and action. We then desire the fruit of the Spirit, which includes *“…love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Gal 5:22-23).*

A wonderful thing happens when we have a renewed mind. Look again at verse 2b. ***“Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.”*** What an amazing privilege this is! Many Christians express their deep longing to know God’s specific and detailed will for their life before they commit to him more fully. But God is not trying to hide his will from anyone. He is gladly revealing it to all who submit to the Spirit, who love Jesus and who listen to his word. Jesus’ commands and his promises are neither vague nor abstract. They are truth and they are life, and anyone who listens to his word will find God’s *explicit* will for their lives. We have only to seek it out. And seek it out we must, for apart from knowing God’s will, we will make ourselves “perfectly useless” to God in the big picture of his kingdom.

When Pastor John Piper was young, he was haunted by the fear of reaching the end of his life and crying, “I’ve wasted it!” This spurred him on a quest to find a single, all-satisfying, unifying passion for his life. Though he attended college with the vision to be a medical doctor, his plans took a hit when he caught mono during the start of one fall semester. As he lay in the health center for three weeks, he was deeply touched by the sermons he heard on the campus radio. He realized that he could only find what he was searching for through the word of God, and soon after made a decision to be a full-time minister. In seminary, John had a breakthrough when the Scriptures showed him that the main purpose of humankind is to both glorify God *and* delight in him. All his life, John had seen glorifying God and the pursuit of happiness as irreconcilably different directions. Now he realized that they are supposed to be one in the same, as delighting in God with all our hearts is the means of giving him the utmost glory. Piper says, “When I saw this, I knew, at last, what a wasted life would be and how to avoid it.” With such a renewed mind, John has spent the past several decades challenging believers around the world to find true satisfaction by exalting Jesus in every area of their lives. Only when our mind is controlled by the Spirit, captivated by Christ and fed by the word of God can we know God’s will with certainty and not waste our precious lives.

1. **A renewed mind seeks to love and serve others (vs. 3-21)**

The next question we might ask is, “What exactly does a renewed mind look like?” Paul spends the rest of this chapter beginning to answer this question. He shows us how a Christ-like mindset should transform the way we view all our relationships.

Look at verse 3. ***“For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you.”*** One of the most troubling problems with the pattern of this world is that it tricks us into thinking much too highly of ourselves, even setting ourselves in competition with God. Such groundless pride leads us into a terribly selfish lifestyle and makes us unable to live at peace with others. So is the answer to hate and condemn ourselves until we have no self-esteem left? No. Paul says the mind of Christ is to think of ourselves with ***“sober judgment”***, that is, based on the truth, the way God sees us. Like Paul, we must remember God’s amazing grace in our lives. We must remember how much God loves us and how he has given us many wonderful qualities so that we may bring him glory. If we make sure to see our lives and our talents as gifts of God, we will not be tempted by pride. We will be able to deny ourselves for the good of others, as Jesus did.

Next, what does Christ-mindedness look like within the church? Verses 4-5 read, ***“For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.”*** Paul uses one of his favorite analogies, the body of Christ, to teach us about the “unity through diversity” on display within the church. Just as a human body is arranged with many different parts working together in harmony to keep it healthy and growing, so Jesus’ church is made up of a wide variety of individuals. All members submit themselves to the head, that is, Christ, and support one another by building up each other in love (Eph 4:16). No one can claim they are independent from the other members or superior to them, for every member is indispensable, and all belong to one other. When brothers and sisters in Christ see each other in this bigger picture, we can make individual sacrifices that serve the greater good.

For example, Christ-mindedness gives us a right attitude towards our God-given spiritual gifts. Paul lists just a few of these in verses 6-8, including prophesying, serving, teaching, encouraging, giving, leading and showing mercy. Each of these gifts is absolutely essential for a healthy church community. But we must not view the possession of these gifts in a selfish way, which can lead to jealousy and competitiveness. Paul’s emphasis is not on *having* these gifts, but *using* them for the building up of our fellow believers within the body of Christ. God has graciously entrusted every believer with unique spiritual gifts that others lack. In this way, by God’s wisdom, we need the gifts of others, and they need ours, in order for each of us to be healthy and strong. We should thus celebrate the gifts of others and encourage their use, while using our own to humbly serve others.

I can see lots of spiritual gifts in our community that I don’t possess, but which have served to build me up. Pastor Stephen has always exercised incredible thoughtfulness towards my needs and is constantly encouraging me. Chuck displays amazing honesty and openness to share his heart, which has blessed my spiritual growth so many times. Ben has a very sharp mind and is incredibly faithful; he really helps me to challenge myself. And my wife has a wonderful gift to encourage me through her kind words every day. Many of you are very good at dealing with people. Several are prayer warriors and serve behind the scenes in very important ways. Each of you is indeed precious and unique in this community of Christ. Let’s celebrate one another’s spiritual gifts. Let’s also prayerfully find out what gifts God has given us and use them, with all our hearts, to build up one another.

In verses 9-21, Paul expands the Christ-like mindset more broadly, explaining its impact on relationships both inside and outside the church. These verses are very practical and don’t require much explanation (just putting into practice!). But we can find a couple major themes.

One is in verse 9. ***“Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good.”*** Like our Lord Jesus, we cannot love simply in words or in pretense. Love must come from the heart, must result in action and must be for what is ultimately good in God’s sight. This means being devoted to one another in the church, serving others’ needs before our own (10) and showing compassion for those who need it (13,15). We also positively influence others by sincerely loving God first. We should maintain our own spiritual fervor and actively serve God’s work as our life’s passion (11). Verse 12 beautifully summarizes such a lifestyle: ***“Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.”*** The renewed, Christ-like mind doesn’t get discouraged in any situation but pushes forward in love, for the glory of God.

The other major theme can be found in verse 21. ***“Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”*** As we know, Jesus’ kind of love is not limited to those within our spiritual family or even those who treat us well. We are called to the highest standard of loving our enemies. This is impossible when we conform to the pattern of this world. But the renewed mind knows that all things are in the hands of God, who said, ***“It is mine to avenge; I will repay” (19).*** Such simple trust in God’s justice allows us to win the spiritual battle and frees us from any feelings of hatred. If we want to be even more like Christ, we will take things one step further to bless, serve and pray for our enemies. Doing good to those who mistreat and persecute us is like “heaping burning coals on their heads”. It has power to lead them to repentance, to the great joy of our Father in heaven.

Today we learned that in view of God’s great mercy, we owe him everything. He deserves the very best of all we are and all we have. But nothing we do can please God unless we are transformed by the renewing of our minds. By gazing into the glory of Christ as found in the Scriptures, we can and will be changed into Christ-like people. God is molding us into disciples of love who can be blessings to the world. Let’s seek to cultivate Jesus’ mindset in all things and love one another in all sincerity.