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Renewing Your Mind

a sermon on Romans 12.1-2

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This sermon starts backwards. Normally I end a sermon with the question, “So what? What difference will God’s Word make in our daily lives?” I can’t really do that this morning. Today I have to *start* with “So what?” because that is the question Paul begins to answer in our scripture reading. He has written to the Romans – and us – about God’s righteousness, human sin, grace, our adoption as children of God, and even God’s mysterious purposes for Israel. Now, having made God’s truth clear to all, he shifts gears and asks, “So what?” Given all of this, especially our desperate need and God’s wonderful grace, how are we going to live?

We are going to offer our bodies as sacrifices – living, holy, and pleasing to God. This is the only way to live that makes sense if everything Paul has told us is true. We are also going to be transformed through the renewal of our minds. Once that happens, we will recognize God’s purposes for us as good, pleasing, and perfect. God’s will is always good, pleasing, and perfect; but sometimes we can’t see that because we don’t look at things the right way.

I want to raise a protest, right here at the start, against drawing solid lines between our heads, our hearts, and our actions. You’ve heard people complain that a certain pastor preaches to the head but not the heart, or another pastor preaches to the heart but not the head. We can talk that way for convenience, and when you hear someone say something like that, you understand the complaint. But let’s not pretend our heads and hearts are separate from each other. You as a human being are your thoughts, feelings, and actions – all working together. To come at this passage rightly, we need to recognize that our thoughts affect our feelings. Our feelings and thoughts affect our actions. Offering your body as a living sacrifice to God and renewing your mind are closely related. We love God with heart, soul, mind, and strength. So this sermon is about renewing your mind, but it is not a head-only sermon. It is a whole-person sermon, because renewing your mind changes not just how you think but also how you feel and live.

For the rest of the sermon we will walk together through four steps to renewing your mind. The arrangement is mine, but each step is inspired by a word or phrase from our passage. We want to be transformed into the image of Jesus Christ. We want to leave behind the world’s pattern of living in favor of God’s will. We want to live, by God’s

grace, lives that are holy and pleasing to God. That's going to require change. We must renew our minds. How do we do this?

Step 1: See the mold for what it is.

I've never been one of those pastors who likes to ban things. "Don't read this book," they tell us. "Don't go see this movie. In fact, let's picket it." I admit, occasionally a timely warning is in order, especially where children are concerned, but I've seen this taken to ridiculous extremes. Besides the fact that telling people not to do something is the best way to get them to do it, I've got a bigger concern. It's not the obvious stuff that poses a threat. It's all the stuff you never notice because it's so common you take it for granted.

Take Halloween for example. Some churches are against it. Not many, but some. I sincerely doubt our children will grow up to be devil worshippers because they dress up as superheroes and princesses and ask folks for candy. But ... I do worry what little girls will learn about beauty and their worth from movies about princesses and popular television shows and movies and magazines and advertising and, well, just about everything in our culture. This is just one example, and it's an obvious one. Girls in America grow up learning to think about themselves in a certain way, and it's not always a healthy or good way. But what can you do? If you want to avoid the way our culture imposes its values on us, you have only two choices that I can see. (1) You can go live in a cave somewhere, like the desert fathers of the fourth century who fled civilization in pursuit of holiness. But this is not practical, and besides, God calls us into the world as salt and light. Or, (2) you can recognize the mold for what it is. Culture is a mold that tries to squeeze everyone into the same shape. Often this is so subtle you don't notice it happening. But you can learn to see it. You can learn to see through ideas and images to the hidden meaning. You can read books and watch movies, aware of how they are trying to shape you. And then you can make a critical choice about whether to accept or reject the values being thrust upon you.

Will Willimon, in his book *Pastor*, explains how we all pick up values and ideas from the world around us, mostly without noticing. And he gives a funny example. He observes that most Americans take pride in saying, "I am an original person. I think for myself." To which we could reply, "No, you're not. And you just proved it! You want to be unique, just like everyone else! You think being original is good and thinking for yourself is good – not because you came up with that on your own, but because your culture tells you it is good." Willimon's point is that we do not have a choice whether to be formed by a mold or not. All human beings are molded by forces larger than themselves. We do have a choice, however, what mold we will be formed in. The culture offers an easy mold. Jesus Christ offers a different one. It is harder, but the end result is life instead of death.

Paul wrote in our passage, “Do not be conformed to the pattern of this age.” When he says “this age” he is talking about any culture that does not acknowledge Jesus as Lord. Roman culture in the first century was a mold. American culture in the twenty-first century is a mold. Do not let yourself be squeezed into this mold. That’s bound to happen, though, unless ... Unless you see the mold for what it is. And you recognize how it is shaping you. And you intentionally reject it in favor of the values Jesus taught. You try to follow *his* example and *think* the way he did.

Have you detected how our culture teaches us to love money and to believe those who have it are more worthy of respect? We live in a culture obsessed with youth and beauty. Women, do you measure your self-worth in a mirror? Ours is a skeptical culture that rejects authority, not only when authority is proved wrong but just because it is authority. It’s a culture that says personal happiness is the highest good. A culture that puts sex at the center of what it means to be a human being. A culture that says religion is a private matter for those who choose it. Personal autonomy is so important you have an obligation to get rid of any rules or boundaries that keep you from doing what you want. Our culture makes it difficult for us to live in genuine community with others. I could go on. Everyday, all the time, the world is telling you who you are. It tells you how to think and what to feel. You either see this happening or you don’t. The more you recognize it, the more you can resist it. And now we move on to ...

Step 2: The truth will set you free.

I don’t want you to misunderstand me and think that I am saying the world offers one way to live and Jesus offers another for those who happen to want something different. What I am trying to say is: The world offers lies and Jesus offers truth. When the world squeezes you into its mold, you go blind and deaf. You do not perceive rightly, nor do you think rightly. And this causes all kinds of misery. Jesus, in contrast, gives you truth. He heals your blindness, so that you can see and think rightly. Jesus said, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

One of the cartoons decorating the door to my study is a Peanuts strip featuring Linus and Lucy. They are sitting at a window looking out at the rain. Lucy observes, “Boy, look at it rain ... What if it floods the whole world?” Linus answers in his matter-of-fact way, “It will never do that. In the ninth chapter of Genesis, God promised Noah that would never happen again, and the sign of the promise is the rainbow.” Lucy says, “You’ve taken a load off my mind,” to which Linus responds, “Sound theology has a way of doing that!”

He’s right. Sound theology – or let’s just call it God’s truth – has a way of calming our fear and relieving our anxieties. Once we hear the good news of God’s grace, we are free. We don’t have to prove anything to anyone. Better still, we are free to love

ourselves. Free to love others. Free to become, in Christ, the beautiful new creation God intends for us to be.

Paul tells us to offer our bodies as a sacrifice – living, holy, and pleasing to God. This, he assures us, is our ... Our what? Our “spiritual” worship – that’s how the Revised Standard Version puts it. Some translations say “reasonable” worship. The Greek word in the original text is hard to express in one English word. It means something is true to the nature of things – true to reality. Our way of life then, to the extent we follow the pattern of Christ, is true to reality.

Jesus offers a picture of the world. He says, “This is who God is. This is who you are. This is how you ought to live.” If he is right – and I believe he is – then only one way of life makes sense. Every other way of life, every rejection of his ethics, assumes he is wrong about God, the world, and us. You have to make a choice. And once you make your choice, you have to think and act in accordance with it. You are either an accident of nature or you are a person created in the image of God. Which is it? You cannot be both. Is the purpose of life to please yourself or to please God – or something else? Is your enemy an obstacle to be removed or a brother or sister to be redeemed? The answers become clear, once you know Jesus Christ, the living Savior. He reveals the truth, and the truth sets you free. He exposes the world’s lies for what they are. And this bring us to ...

Step 3: Exchange Ideas and Images

When you get a shirt that doesn’t fit, what do you do? You take it back and exchange it for one that does. This is what we Christians have to do with the ideas and images that shape our subconscious. We’ve learned enough to recognize that we’ve inherited some bad ones from our culture. Of course, no culture is all bad. Not everything we have learned is wrong. But we’ve certainly taken in a lot of bad stuff. So what we need to do is throw out the junk and replace it with Christian ideas and images. Or, to say the same thing another way, we want to cultivate a Christian worldview. Or, one more way, we want to think like Jesus.

Dallas Willard has written a book I recommend called *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ*. In it he explains ideas and images. Ideas are our “assumptions about reality.” They are “patterns of interpretation.” They are the way we think about things. And we take them so much for granted that most of the time we don’t notice them. He lists as examples of ideas, “freedom, education, happiness, ‘the American Dream,’ science, progress, death, home, the feminine or masculine, ... fair, just, [and] family” among others. If you want to see ideas in action,” he writes, “look at the place freedom, a major idea now, plays in automobile ads and rock lyrics” [p. 97]. “It is extremely difficult for most people to recognize which ideas are governing their life and how these ideas are governing their life” [p. 97]. An example he offers of this is the idea

of success, and how most people think of success in terms of promotions and possessions.

Images are different from ideas. Ideas are abstract. Images are concrete. Images also stir up strong feelings. Willard offers the following examples of images: Hair. Whether a man wears his hair long or short or in a pony tail. Or is he a skinhead? Or is his hair purple? He's projecting an image, making a statement. Clothes. You see a kid dressed in all black, or another kid wearing baggy pants that hang too low and show too much. That's an image, a statement. Flags are powerful images. Burning a flag is also an image. The most powerful image ever is the cross. It speaks, Willard says, of "the lostness of man as well as the sacrifice of God and the abandonment to God that brings redemption" [p. 99].

Ideas and images are so important, because the ideas and images that govern our thoughts determine how we make sense of the people and things around us, how we react to things that happen to us. Renewing your mind means throwing out false and destructive ideas and images and replacing them with the truth Jesus has given us. Here is just one small example, but it's an important one: Jesus taught us the power of suffering love. Being a Christian means having the cross impressed onto our lives. We are ready to embrace suffering when it serves God's purposes. Think of Dietrich Bonhoeffer who went back to Nazi Germany to resist Hitler when it would have been easier and safer to stay in the United States. Or think of elders and deacons who give up time and freedom and opportunity in order to love God's people at Westminster. The cross is not the only image Jesus gives us, but it is the one that should most dominate our lives. Jesus will also change how we define words like freedom and love.

Paul tells us to be transformed by the renewal of our minds. That's the alternative to being conformed to the world. When we are transformed, then we know what the will of God is. Not only do we recognize it, but we know in our hearts that God's will is good, pleasing, and perfect. So, root out those false ideas and images that conform you to the world. Replace them with ideas and images that conform you to Christ. Transformation is God's work in you, but you are his junior partner. He gives the power, but you are not to be passive. You have some spring cleaning to do in your mind. That's the way the Christian life works.

Step 4: Live into a new way of thinking.

Your thought life is important because it determines how you act, but this is not a one way street. In fact, I doubt our minds every really change until our lives do. Maybe change happens like this: You know the truth, but your gut instinct pulls you in the opposite direction. You want your will, not God's. But knowing the truth, you choose to do what is right. In time, this becomes a habit. Your new habit begins to change how you think and feel. Finally, your gut begins to pull you in the right direction. I'm not a psychologist, but that has been my experience. You have to start with the truth,

because without it you are lost. Once you put truth into practice, you start to live into a new way of thinking.

The Christian life is not just a set of ideas we believe, or even a particular way of seeing the world, it also includes certain practices that, if we do them regularly, help to renew our mind. We only have time for a few, so let me share some of those that have been most helpful to me.

1. Worship. But it's not enough just to show up. You have to be engaged. Pray in your heart during the prayers. Sign the hymns and really mean them. Pay attention, listen for God, and reflect on what you think he might be saying to you. What I say is only half the sermon. The real action of the sermon takes place in your heart and mind as you make connections between what the scripture reading means and your own life. I can only begin to do that for you. Most of the time, I don't know your inner struggles. I don't know how God is dealing with you. But you do, so the main action is up to you. Sometimes a thought or image from the sermon or a hymn or the call to worship will strike home, and you know in your soul that God himself is dealing directly with you. Welcome that and look for it.

If you want to renew your mind, take the sacraments seriously. Don't just go through the motions. Understand what you are doing, and mean it. Understand what God is doing, and receive it.

2. Scripture. How are you going to have a biblical worldview if you are ignorant of the Bible? Who can think with the mind of Christ without reading the gospels? If you are content to remain an infant in Christ, don't bother with the Bible. If you want to be strong and healthy, renewing your mind, you are going to have to read scripture. I realize it can be hard to understand. Nine and a half years of theological education have taught me that much. But that's why our church has classes. That's why there are other books and study guides to help. Besides, even if you don't grasp everything, you will get plenty out of the Bible. I have been reading through 1 & 2 Kings lately. Not much spiritual meat there, most people would say. I disagree. Those books do not offer much in the way of how to raise your kids or get along with your spouse, but through them I have encountered God's holiness. I know *him* a little better than I did before. And that growth will affect everything about me.

Last week I finished my Flannery O'Connor study group. Preparing for it I read both her stories and her collected letters. I felt I got to know her, at least a little, through her writing, especially her letters. I think many in our group felt that way too. We didn't just learn facts, we meet a person. Reading the Bible should always be like that.

3. Reading. I've been told I am a living fossil because I read so many books. Apparently many people don't do that anymore. Some people have never been big

readers. They just don't enjoy it. Reading good books is a great way to renew your mind, though. What if you are not a reader, but you don't want to miss out. I offer two suggestions: (1) Turn off the TV one night per week and pick up a biography. Biographies are about people, and it's easy to be interested in people. Pick someone you admire. Read about that person's life.

Lyle Dorsett, an Anglican pastor and a professor at Beeson Divinity School, once encouraged his congregation to read biographies of great Christians. Then he added this warning: "If the book doesn't talk about the brokenness and sin, burn it! It's from hell!" If you don't get the sin, you don't get the grace. Read honest books.

(2) Listen in your car. Get good Christian books on CD or download podcasts and play them in your car. Ravi Zacharias has a podcast I highly recommend called "Let My People Think." Download that and listen to it while you're stuck in traffic.

Finally, 4. If you have a good friend you can confide in, you are blessed. Talk about how you feel the pressure to conform, your struggles and fears and temptations. Encourage and pray for one another. A good friend who will help you grow in Christ is precious. We renew our minds with help from others.

In conclusion, see the mold for what it is. The truth will set you free. Exchange ideas and images. Live into a new way of thinking. Amen.

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Recommended Resources

Ravi Zacharias podcast "Let My People Think"
<http://www.rzim.org/resources/listen/letmypeoplethink.aspx>

Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002)
ISBN: 1-57683-296-1

James Emery White, *A Mind for God* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 2006)