

Renewing Your Mind --- Romans 12:2

May 10, 2020

And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove (know) what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.

Introduction

John Bunyan was born in 1628. He became a blue collar worker like his father, a tinker by trade. A tinker would travel from town to town and mend metal utensils. Bunyan was a very rebellious young man. It was said of him that he, “. . . had but few equals, both for cursing, swearing, lying, and blaspheming the holy name of God”. In his late teens, he joined the army where he continued his wild life style.

In his twenties, the Lord Jesus Christ intersected his life, and he was never the same. Bunyan became a powerful lay preacher during his day. John Owen, who was a church leader and great theologian of his day, said of Bunyan that he would gladly exchange all his learning for Bunyan’s power of touching men’s hearts.

Bunyan did not earn a degree at a university and because of this he did not have the credentials to have a license to preach in England. As a result, John Bunyan suffered miserable persecution in England. For twelve years he rotted in jail for preaching the Gospel. But in those twelve years he gave the world one of its greatest pieces of literature, Pilgrim’s Progress.

John Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress is in the all time bestseller list. It depicts the journey of a man leaving the City of Destruction on his way to the Celestial City. The genius of the story is how Bunyan weaves deep spiritual truths throughout the adventure by way of allegory. He uses characters as symbols of spiritual truths. For example after becoming a Christian soldier, Pilgrim is confronted by a ferocious creature called Apolyon who is symbolic of the devil and opposed to all Christians.

One of my favorite parts of Pilgrim’s journey is when Christian is held captive in Doubting Castle by the giant named Despair. Pilgrim and his traveling companion, Faithful, wondered off the straight and narrow road to—what looked to be—an easier pathway. Little did they know that they had wandered into the land of Giant Despair.

Giant Despair finds them and takes them to his home, Doubting Castle. He throws them into the dungeon and beats them everyday. He starves them and tells them they should commit suicide and end their sad existence. After weeks in this condition, Christian remembers that he has a key that can open any door. They use it and barely escape the Giant.

Bunyan vividly depicts what happens to us as believers when we get away from God. We begin to doubt who we are as believers, we doubt God, we doubt His Word, and our foundation is taken away. Despair begins to beat us everyday, counseling us to just end our lives. However, it is the key of faith (the key of trust) that unlocks the dungeon doors of despair and doubt and releases us from bondage.

My point in giving this brief depiction of John Bunyan is to emphasize the fact that John Bunyan was not a man of academic degrees and great learning. He was a tinker by trade, but he gained great insight into the Scriptures simply by a consistent reading of the Word of God. Bunyan is an amazing example of the important role that our minds play in the sanctification process. He was continually renewing his mind in the truth of the Word of God.

Our text this morning focuses on tangible mind renewal for Christians. I have mentioned to you a small pamphlet by John Stott entitled, "Your Mind Matters". It deals with numerous spheres of Christian living, and it argues that each one is impossible without a consistent and energetic use of our minds: Christian worship, Christian faith, Christian holiness, Christian guidance, Christian evangelism, and Christian ministry. We need to think.

Stott writes that, "anti-intellectualism . . . is . . . part of the fashion of the world and therefore a form of worldliness. To down play the mind is to undermine foundational Christian doctrines." He goes on to write, "Has God created us rational beings, and shall we deny our humanity which He has given us? Has God spoken to us, and shall we not listen to His words? Has God renewed our mind through Christ, and shall we not think with it? Is God going to judge us by His Word, and shall we not be wise and build our house upon this rock?"

If you think about them, these are important and helpful questions. This morning I want to consider what Paul is teaching us when he exhorts us in verse 2, "*And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.*"

Review

Last week we considered, verse 1, *“Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, pleasing to God, which is your spiritual service of worship.”*

We saw that there are three motivations that Paul mentions in this verse that drive us—that spur us on to offering ourselves a living sacrifice to God: namely, God's grace; our desire to please Him; and worship. Paul told the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 15:31, *“I affirm, brethren, by the boasting in you which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord, I die daily.”* Why did Paul daily die in the service of Christ? In light of God's grace to Paul and because Paul desired to please Christ, the sacrifice of self was part of his daily worship of the Lord. The same is true for us.

John Calvin wrote, “Paul’s entreaty teaches us that men will never worship God with a sincere heart, or be roused to fear and obey him with sufficient zeal, until they properly understand how much they are indebted to His mercy.”

I told you at the beginning of our study of Romans that the subject of grace is at the heart of Paul's letter to the Romans. Grace undergirds the book of Romans. Paul mentions grace in his opening remarks and carries that theme all the way through to the last chapter.

Romans 3:23-24 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus;

Jesus made it clear that he came to seek and save that which was lost. The ultimate expression of grace was His death on the Cross. The Gospel of Christ is centered on the grace of God.

Titus 3:5-7 He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by His grace we would be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

We considered that, sadly for the most part, grace has ceased to be amazing in our modern Christianity because the Church has ceased to preach the depravity of man and the eternal justice of God. Grace can only be understood in light of the helplessness and hopelessness of man. Grace means giving an eternal, infinite gift to one who is utterly unworthy or undeserving.

Martin Lloyd Jones writes, “There is no more wonderful word than 'grace.' It is not merely a free gift, but a free gift to those who are without hope and without God and without merit.”

So we considered the three motivations to offer our bodies a living sacrifice unto the Lord and you can go back and listen to that on the website. We now move on to verse 2, and we find an important part of the process of offering ourselves a sacrifice to the Lord. Paul gives three exhortations to believers that highlight the importance of the Christian mind and the role that our thinking plays in the sanctification process. He give three clear imperatives in verse 2:

*And **do not be conformed** to this world, **but be transformed** by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove (**know**) what **the will of God** is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.*

So—number one, Do not be Conformed; number two, But be Transformed; and number three, Know the Will of God.

I have mentioned to you numerous times before, and I do not have a problem with repeating myself on this account, the Word of God is vital, critical in your Christian growth. The sad condition of the Church today can be traced to this one area of the lack of daily interaction with God through His Word. He tells us in 1 Thessalonian that the Word of God *performs a work* in us. Peter tells us that we can only grow *as we long for the pure milk of the Word of God*. We have an example in Israel that God told them, “*My people perish because of the lack of knowledge.*”

What Paul tells us this morning is vital to our daily lives while we are on this earth.

Do not be conformed to this world

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

Just a quick observation as we begin to look at verse 2. It begins with the word “*and*” so all of the motivations that compel us to present our bodies as a living sacrifice are the same motivations to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. In light of God's grace, because we desire to please Him, and as an act of worship, we are not to be conformed to how this world thinks, but be metamorphosized (be transformed) by the renewing of your minds.

There are two key words in the first part of verse 2: “*world*”, which in many other

texts of Scripture is the Greek word “cosmos” but not here. The Greek word here for world is literally “age” meaning “the present age.” The second key word is “conform” which is a compound word having at its root the word “scheme”.

So the phrase means, “Do not let the age in which you live force you into its scheme of thinking and behaving.” The best known paraphrase of this verse is by J. B. Phillips, which states, “Don’t let the world around you squeeze you into its own mold.” The idea in this phrase is that the world has its ways of thinking and doing things and is exerting pressure on you as a believer to conform. But instead of being conformed, you are to be changed from the inside out by renewing your mind.

This is a warning against worldliness. But we have to stop and make clear what aspect of worldliness Paul is referring to. The clue to what is in view here is that in the next phrase Paul exhorts believers to be “*transformed by the renewing of your mind*” instead of being conformed to the world. This means that he is primarily concerned about the world's way of thinking. He is not just concerned about worldly behavior. In other words, the worldliness we are to break away from and reject is the world’s systematic way of looking at things. We are to break out of the world’s way of thinking and instead let our minds be molded by the Word of God.

In our day, Christians as a whole have not combatted the world's way of thinking very well, and this is the reason why many are so often “worldly” in behavior too. In fact, it is a sad commentary on our time that American Christians in general have almost the same values and behavior patterns as the world around them.

So how can we describe the world's way of thinking that we are to reject? There is no single word that perfectly describes how the world thinks. But there are many current words that, when put together, describe the mindset of the world. The world's way of thinking involves words like humanism, relativism, pluralism, hedonism, and materialism just to name a few “-isms.” These words describe the mental framework and values of the people of our time. Like I said before, the word for “world” in the Greek means “age.” Paul is exhorting believers not to be conformed the thinking of the age in which they live.

The word “secular” comes close to what Paul says when he refers to “the pattern of this world.” Paul essentially says, “Do not conform to a secular way of thinking.” There is a sense in which we operate in the secular society. Christians live in the world and are rightly concerned about the world’s affairs. We have legitimate secular concerns. But the kind of secularism that is in mind here involves a godless mentality.

One of the best single statements of secularism is something Carl Sagan said in the television series “Cosmos” a few decades ago. He was standing in front of a spectacular view of space with its innumerable galaxies, saying in a dramatic tone of voice, “The cosmos is all that is, or ever was, or ever will be.” That is bold-faced secularism. It’s focus is entirely on the material universe, what you can see and touch and weigh and measure.

This secular mindset rejects any thoughts about eternal matters and thinks only of the now. The thinking goes something like this, “If now is the only thing that matters, why should we worry about God or righteousness or sin or judgment or salvation, if now is all that really matters?”

R. C. Sproul writes, “For secularism, all of life, every human value, every human activity must be understood in light of this present time What matters is now and only now. All access to the above and the beyond is blocked. There is no exit from the confines of this present world. The secular is all that we have. We must make our decisions, live our lives, make our plans, all within the closed arena of this time—the here and now.”

I want to take a moment and consider some of these words that describe the secular thinking of our age today; for example, humanism. Secular humanism is a way of looking at humanity apart from God. It is a wrong and harmful way of thinking.

One example of secular humanism can be found in the Old Testament book of Daniel involving Nebuchadnezzar. One day Nebuchadnezzar, the great king of Babylon, was on the roof of his palace looking out over his splendid hanging gardens which overlooked the prosperous city of Babylon. He was impressed with his handiwork and said, “Is this not the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?” It was a statement that everything he saw was “of” him, “by” him, and “for” the glory of his majesty. That is secular humanism. It says that everything revolves around man and exists for man’s glory.

Secular humanism is opposed to God and hostile to Christianity. You can actually look up a number of Humanist Manifestos that articulate their hostility towards God and the Bible. An instance of this is stated in the 1933 Humanist Manifesto: “Traditional theism, especially faith in the prayer-hearing God, assumed to love and care for persons, to hear and understand their prayers, and to be able to do something about them, is an unproved and outmoded faith. Salvationism, based on mere affirmation, still appears as harmful, diverting

people with false hopes of heaven hereafter. Reasonable minds look to other means for survival.”

So Paul speaks to us in our modern, 21st Century and says, “. . . do not be conformed to a secular humanistic thinking.”

There is another word that describes our modern way of thinking, namely relativism. Relativism says that there are no absolutes in any area of life and everything is up for grabs. Forty years ago (in the 80's), a professor at the University of Chicago wrote a book in which he said on the very first page, “There is one thing a professor can be absolutely certain of: almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative.” That way of thinking has grown by leaps and bounds over the last 40 years.

But in reality, relativism caves in on itself. As I said, it basically says that there are no absolutes. By declaring there are no absolutes, it has itself, made an absolute statement. When someone tells you, “There are no absolutes,” you need to ask them if they are absolutely sure about that. So Paul is encouraging us to not be conformed to a wrong thinking of our age—like secular humanism and relativism.

Another secular way of thinking that is rampant today is materialism. If as Carl Sagan use to say, “The cosmos is all there is, or ever was, or ever will be.” The outcome of that thinking then is this: be as healthy as you can; live as long as you can; get as rich as you can; and then die.

A brochure was published that compared the world’s thinking and the Bible’s teaching in six important areas: God, man, the Bible, money, sex, and success. The differences were amazing. Here are some of the world’s statements that were printed:

- ! “Whatever satisfies me is what’s important.”
- ! “If I earn enough money, I’ll be happy. I need money to provide security for me and my family. Financial security will protect me from hardship.”
- ! “Anything is acceptable as long as it doesn’t hurt another person.”
- ! “Success is the path to fame, wealth, pleasure, and power. Look out for number one.”

From the world’s perspective the Christian way, which is opposite of what I just mentioned, does not look so attractive or even right. Here are the Christian values that were published:

- ! “God is in control of all things and has a purpose for everything that happens.”
- ! “Man exists to glorify God.”
- ! “Money cannot shield us against heartbreak, failure, sin, disease, or disaster.”
- ! “Success in God’s kingdom means humility and service to others.”

God's values and the world's values are diametrically opposed. For the most part, the idols of today (the people to whom the world looks up to are the rich, the famous, the sports figures, the entertainment idols, political figures, and so on). They represent the material things of this world (clothes, money, fame, and above all, pleasure). This is what today’s people want to be like! They want to be rich and famous and have things and enjoy them.

One pastor wrote this concerning the contrast of Jesus' value system as opposed to worldly values, “How different is the Lord Jesus Christ! He was born into a poor family, was laid in a borrowed manger at his birth, never had a home or a bank account or a family of his own. He said of Himself in Matthew 8:20, *'Foxes have holes and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.'* At His trial before Pilate recorded in John 18:36, He said, 'My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight ... My kingdom is from another place.' When He died, He was laid in a borrowed tomb.

“If there was ever an individual who operated on the basis of values above and beyond the world in which we live, it was Jesus Christ. He was the polar opposite of materialism. But at the same time, no one has ever affected this world for good as much as Jesus. It is into His image that we are to be transformed rather than being forced into the mold of this world’s sinful and destructive mind sets.”

In opposition to the secular mindset of humanism, relativism and materialism, we as believers are called to constant mind renewal. We could also talk about pluralism—you know the “coexist” bumper sticker which touts that all religions are equal so live and let live . . . or hedonism which is the pursuit of sensual indulgence or There are many -isms that make up the secular worldview. We are not to be conformed by any of them. But we are to be transformed in our thinking.

Transformed in our Thinking

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

There is a deliberate distinction between the two words *conform* and *transform*.

Whereas conformity is something that happens to you outwardly (pressure to conform), transformation happens inwardly. The Greek word translated “transformed” is μεταμορφόω from which we get metamorphosis. It is what happens to the lowly caterpillar when it turns into a beautiful butterfly.

This Greek word is found four times in the New Testament: once here, once in 2 Corinthians 3:18 to describe our being transformed into the glorious likeness of Jesus Christ; and twice in the gospels of the transfiguration of Jesus on the mountain where he had gone with Peter, James, and John. Those verses say, *“There He was transfigured before them.”* (Matthew 17:2 and Mark 9:2)

The same word used by Paul to describe our transformation by the renewing of our minds so that we will not be conformed to this world is used by the Gospel writers to describe the transfiguration of Jesus from the form of His earthly humiliation to the radiance that stunned Peter, James, and John. That is why Paul writes as he does in 2 Corinthians 3:18 saying, *“We, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into His likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.”*

So in 2 Corinthians Paul says, “It is happening.” But in Romans 12:2 he says, “Make it happen by mind renewal.” Paul puts the responsibility to accomplish this necessary transformation upon us. However, we cannot be transformed by our own efforts. So how does it happen? Through the renewing of our minds. And the way our minds become renewed is by study of the transforming and renewing Word of God. Without that study, we will remain in the world’s mold, unable to think and therefore unable to behave as Christians. With the study of the Word of God and empowered by the Holy Spirit, we will begin to take on something of the likeness of the Lord Jesus Christ and become increasingly like Him.

So a basic part of this mind renewal is a daily, consistent interaction with the eternal God through the Scriptures. I have told you numerous times that I believe there is something intrinsically good and healthy about reading and having to lift a thought off of the written page. I appeal to the fact that God Himself chose to reveal Himself through the written page. He could have had the digital video recorder invented thousands of years ago so that Peter and John could follow Jesus around with their cell phones and record Jesus, taking a few selfies with Him along the way. But God did not do that. He chose to reveal Himself through the written Word.

I found one man who agrees with me and wrote this, “To engage the written word means to follow a line of thought, which requires the ability to classify, make inferences and to reason. It means to uncover lies, confusions, and over-

generalizations, to detect abuses of logic and common sense. It also means to weigh ideas, to compare and contrast assertions, to connect one generalization to another.” Basically what he is saying is that reading helps your ability to think.

The written text is what our minds need. God intends for us to read. I was reading what one pastor said about the impact of T.V. back in the 80's before laptops and smartphones began to have their influence. He said this, “Television forms our way of thinking or, to be more accurate, our not thinking. It has been hailed as the great teaching tool, but that is precisely what it does not do, because it seldom presents anything in enough depth for a person actually to think about it. Instead, it presents thirty-second flashes of events and offers images upon which we are invited to project our own vague feelings.

“If all we are talking about is entertainment, none of this would matter very much, except for the amount of time people spend watching these thread bare, mind-numbing diversions rather than disciplining their minds by serious study. But if television is really conditioning us not to think, then it is a serious intellectual, social, and spiritual problem.”

I wonder what he would say today, 40 years later, as he considers the effects of our super-techy, digital ocean that we swim in today? Is the entertainment streaming through our computer screens, smartphone screens, and T.V. screens teaching us how to think?

So the question arises, how do you engage this process of rejecting the ways that the world thinks and being changed by renewing your mind? The answer to that is the revelation of God. Think of each one of the -isms I mentioned before: Revelation replaces humanism with theism. The reason for man's existence is to glorify God. Revelation is the specific answer to relativism. If God has spoken to us, then what He has said is truthful and can be trusted absolutely, since God is truth. This gives us absolutes in an otherwise relative and chaotic universe.

The stance and conviction of the Church throughout church history has always been that God has spoken through His Word and His Word can be trusted. Without an absolute Word from God, we are adrift on a sea of relativism without any moorings.

But now listen to this. This is vitally important. If God has spoken, there will always be a certain firmness about the Christian faith and Christians. There will be a certain unyielding quality to our convictions. The world does not like, nor do they accept absolutes. We will insist upon absolute truth and will not bow to

the thought, “Well, that’s just your opinion.” The inspiration of the Word of God takes it out of the realm of someone's subjective opinion.

So the way not to be conformed to the way that this world thinks is to be transformed by renewing your mind by daily interaction with God through His Word. The third and final exhortation/imperative that Paul gives is to know the will of God.

Know the Will of God
*so that you may **prove what the will of God is,**
that which is good and acceptable and perfect.*
Romans 12:2c

How do you know what the will of God is for your life? I always appreciated the old joke of a man who was desperate to know what God wanted him to do with his life, so he told God that he would just let his Bible fall open and wherever it opened, he would take it as a sign of what God wanted him to do. So the first verse that he saw when it opened was, “. . . *and he (Judas) went out and hung himself.*”

Well the man thought that could not be right and so he tried it again, and it fell on, “*Go thou and do likewise.*” Well, now he was really concerned so he tried it one last time and he read “. . . *and what you do, do quickly.*” Obviously that is not the way we learn to discern God's will. We know what the will of God is for our lives by careful study of His Word.

It may be shocking to hear this, but I know God's will for your life, and I am going to tell you what God wants for your life. There are clearly delineated passages that tell us exactly what the will of God is for each one of us. First, in 1 Timothy 2:3, “*God desires all men to be saved.*” So you can know without a doubt that God's will for your life involves you being born again. God desires for you to be saved. That is the whole reason for Christ's coming to earth and dying in your place and His resurrection. He wants you to repent and trust in the Gospel.

Second, in Ephesians 5:17-18, God’s will for Christians is to be filled with the Spirit. Ephesians 5:17-18 says, “*So then do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. 18And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit,*” The life of a Christian is to be permeated with the Holy Spirit. Every moment of a Christian’s life is to manifest the Spirit’s leading.

Third, Peter says in 1 Peter 2:13-15, “*Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, whether to a king as the one in authority, 14or to*

governors as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do right. 15For such is the will of God that by doing right you may silence the ignorance of foolish men.”

God's will for Christians is to be submissive to the government of the land. All governments are servants of God to punish wrongdoing. Therefore, Christians are to abide by the law of the land except where it violates God's law.

Fourth, in 1 Thessalonians 4:3, Christians are to be sanctified according to God's will. *“For this is the will of God, your sanctification; that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality”* This passage specifically refers to abstaining from fornication yet it goes further than that. We are not to be involved in sexual sin, and also we are to strive to be pleasing to God in all our behavior.

Fifth, God's will includes suffering. In 1 Peter 4:19, Peter clearly states, *“Therefore, those also who suffer according to the will of God shall entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right.”*

It is clear that God's will is that some Christians suffer. Suffering tempers the Christian and makes him more like Christ. James 1:2 and following exhorts us to consider it all joy when we encounter trials knowing that it produces godliness.

Lastly, God's will is for Christians to give thanks in all things. 1 Thessalonians 5:18 states that Christians are to be characterized by a thankful heart.

So, God's will is for you to be saved; to be filled with the Holy Spirit; to submit to government; to be sanctified keeping yourself from sexual immorality; to suffer and to be thankful.

John MacArthur wrote a very helpful pamphlet entitled, “Found God's Will”. He makes the point that if a Christian is striving to do God's will in these areas found in Scripture, then he can do whatever he likes in the subjective areas of life (such as career, choice of spouse, where to live, etc.) If a believer is abiding by the known will of God, he will not sin in God's specific will for his life because the above guidelines found in Scripture will serve as boundaries for his or her choices.

Conclusion

So Paul gives us three clear exhortations in verse 2: first, do not be conformed

to the thinking of this world; second, but be transformed by the renewing of our minds; and third, so that you know the will of God.

James Boice says this of today's Christian mind, "Today, not only is there little or no genuine Christian thinking, there is very little thinking of any kind. The Western world (and perhaps even the world as a whole) is well on its way to becoming what I have frequently called a 'mindless society' This cultural mindlessness is a major aspect of the 'pattern of this world' that we are to recognize, understand, repudiate, and overcome. We are to be many things as Christians, but we are especially to be thinking people. We are to possess a 'Christian mind.' "

5/10/20