

The Gospel Story: A Renewed Mind

Romans 12:1-8

Pastor Bryan Clark

If you believe it, you will live like it. That's what we want to talk about this morning. If you have a Bible, turn with us to Romans, Chapter 12. I would suggest to you all theology is practical theology. Theology that doesn't ultimately affect the way you live every day is theology not rightly understood. But it's also true that there are sections of the Bible that are heavily weighted on what you must believe, and other sections talk about *this is what that belief looks like, lived out in the most ordinary, practical decisions of life*. Romans 1 through 11 is deep, rich, life-changing theology. But starting in chapter 12, Paul gets very practical with giving us a glimpse of *this is what that theology looks like lived out in everyday life*, and he starts by reminding us: until we get a right view of ourselves, we will not have a right view of others.

Chapter 12, verse 1 starts with the word *therefore*. If you're inclined to mark up your Bible, I would circle that because that *therefore* is a reference to the previous eleven chapters. You can literally *therefore* your way all the way back to the beginning of Romans.

Therefore (therefore, on the basis of what we've learned in chapters 1-11), **by the mercies of God I urge you, brethren, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship.** (*NASB, Romans 12:1)

Paul says he urges us, based on the previous eleven chapters, that we would **present our bodies as holy and living sacrifices**. The word **present** is a technical term that would have been used in the ancient religions for presenting and offering for sacrifice. Now it's hard for us in our contemporary culture to really grasp the concept of sacrifice. You know, we think we're sacrificing if we give a little extra money or we give a little extra time, but that's not how a first-century reader would have heard these words. People in the ancient world were obsessed with sacrifices. It was sacrifices to somehow appease the gods, and they understood that a sacrifice was significant. When you give something to the gods as a sacrifice, you're not lending it; you're not loaning it. You're not saying to the god, "You can borrow this for a couple hours." You understood *I'm giving this to the gods and it's consumed; it's gone; it's no longer mine*. When Paul says **present your bodies**, in essence what he's saying is: it's the entirety of who you are—you're all in, and you're not saying, "God, you can have a couple of hours a week; you can have a little bit more of my money; you can have a little bit of my talent." The idea of a sacrifice and to sacrifice your body is, "God, here I am. You get all of me all of the time."

But Paul has a bit of a play on words in that this is a **living sacrifice**. In the ancient world they would take something that was living and, when you offered it as a sacrifice, it would die. But because Christ has died our death for us, we take something that was once dead and it's been made alive. So what we give back is a *living sacrifice*, which the text says is **acceptable to God**.

Now that language makes it sound like God is saying, "*That'll do*". That word **acceptable** is a little bit confusing. The Greek word means *well pleasing*—this is delightful; this is a celebration! We don't come hanging our head saying, "This is my duty; this is my obligation; this is religion—I have to do it." We come, rather, saying, "I was once dead, but now I've been made alive! And so I give God my life as a living sacrifice because this is where life is found; this is where joy is found;

this is where meaning is found.” As a matter of fact, he says at the end of verse 1...**acceptable to God which is your spiritual service of worship.**

Now in my opinion it's very unfortunate that the New American Standard uses the language *spiritual* service of worship. It's very confusing. The old King James says *reasonable*, which is exactly what the Greek word means. It's the Greek word from which we get our English word *logic*. It's reasonable. It's logical that, based on what God has done for us in the previous eleven chapters, the reasonable thing would be that we would give ourselves back to God. Anything less than that is illogical; it's unreasonable, because this is life. Verse 2:

And do not be conformed to this world,

What are we supposed *to do*? We're supposed to give ourselves to God *as a living sacrifice*. What are we not to do? Well, we're **not to be conformed to this world**. The word translated **world** is not the word *cosmos*, which is typical in the New Testament. It's rather a word that means an age, a season. Maybe in our language we'd use the word *culture*, like contemporary culture. This is the season that we live in. This is our culture, and we're not to be squeezed into the mold of this culture.

That word **conformed** is actually a pottery term. It means to be squeezed and shaped into a certain mold. I think of Play-Doh. You know, your kids get that machine that you put Play-Doh in and then you put a different dye or a different form, and you push the lever down and it squeezes the Play-Doh out and the Play-Doh takes on the shape of the dye or the form. That's exactly what this word means. So basically you have this culture, and that's like this dye. The default for every person is to be squeezed into the mold. That's what's implied, that that is the default position.

Now I think that's interesting to think about because I think many people, if not most people in our culture who resist God, who keep God at arm's length, do so because they want to be in charge of their own life. *I want to be independent. I want to be autonomous. I want to make my own way. I want to call my own shots.* There's this illusion that *I'm my own man*. And yet I would suggest to you it is just that—it is an illusion—because, at the end of the day, I'm merely a product of the culture; I'm a cultural puppet.

As a matter of fact, several years ago I was having a discussion about some of these things with a group of teenagers, and we were talking about some of these things, and their big hang-up was that they wanted to be independent; they wanted to be autonomous; they wanted to make their own way. *I wanna be my own person.* And they felt like God was restrictive, and God kind of puts them in a mold. And I said, “You know, I can appreciate what you're saying, but I just want you to look at yourself. You all have the same hairdo; you're all wearing the same clothes; you all have the same glasses; you all listen to the same music; you all use the same vocabulary; you all go to the same activities; you all own the same values. You're not braving some *new way*. You're a product of the culture. The culture is just squeezing you into a mold.”

But that isn't just true of teenagers. It's true of all of us. We could divide our culture into a handful of pockets—politically, socially—but at the end of the day everybody in those pockets look the same; they talk the same; they have the same vocabulary; they have the same thoughts; they have the same beliefs; they have the same values. They're not independent. They're not autonomous. They're not making some “brave new way”. They're just simply a product of the culture.

In the 60's and 70's, people talked about a sexual revolution, like that was really some new idea. *"It's wild and crazy!"* People have been sexually immoral for thousands of years—nothing wild and crazy or new about it. As a matter of fact, Solomon says, "There's nothing new under the sun." We just continually repackage rebellion and sin, but it's not new. But Paul invites us to a new way of life. *"Don't be squeezed into the culture's mold,"*

What's the alternative? Well, he says: **But be transformed.** That's the Greek word from which we get our word *metamorphosis*; we need to be *metamorphosized*. It's a passive verb which means *I don't transform myself; I am being transformed*. How do I do that? **By the renewing of your mind.** You have to learn to think differently. What is the thinking that's different? Well, obviously it's based on chapters 1-11. We'll define that more in just a minute.

...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 (well pleasing; it's a celebration) and perfect. (Vs. 2b)

The word **...prove** is a Greek word that was used to describe the testing and verifying or validating of precious *metals*. If somebody brings me a coin in the ancient world, I have to figure out: *is this coin real?* So I test it and, in the process of testing it, I validate it. That's what this word means. It then symbolically was used to describe soldiers and leaders who would go out on the battlefield, for example, and their mettle would be tested and they would be determined to be courageous or to be strong or to be powerful. Sometimes you hear people still use the terminology today. *"It's going to test your mettle."* That's where the phrase comes from. It's the idea that we are testing and proving that God's will is the best, that God's will is good; God's will is a celebration; God's will is perfect—it's the way to live.

So you basically have two options: One is to be conformed to the world with all the despair, with all the struggle, with all the heartache that goes with that. Or we can be transformed by the renewing of our minds to think differently in order to validate that God's way is better; God's way is good; God's way is the way of life; it's the way of joy; it's the way of hope.

Many people are very familiar with Romans 12:1-2. A lot of people memorize these verses, but sadly, oftentimes that's where we stop. As a matter of fact, I think it's unfortunate that the paragraph break is made right here because clearly the conversation continues on. We're still left at the end of verse 2 with the question: What do we think differently about in order to have a renewed mind? Paul tells us in verse 3. You start with a right view of ourselves. As a matter of fact, a *renewed mind* would mean we're thinking differently about something, so I'm going to read verse 3 with a bit of an emphasis. See if you can pick up my subtle hint:

For through the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to THINK more highly of himself than he ought to THINK; but to THINK so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith.

There's no question that the renewed mind of verse 2 is then identified in verse 3, because he says it three times, "This is how to *think*," and, specifically, "This is how to *think* about yourself," because until I get my mind correct about myself, it's never going to be correct regarding others.

Now to be conformed to this world is to be driven by self-righteousness. In other words, if you reject chapters 1-11, if you reject Jesus as the only way of salvation, the only option left on the table

is self-righteousness, and I would underscore the *self* part of that. If I'm driven by *self*-righteousness, then every day is *selfish*; every day is *self*-focused. It has to be. That's the way *self*-righteousness works. So all I think about is myself. What about *me*? What about *my* needs?

But if I believe chapters 1-11 and believe, rather than self-righteousness, that I have been made righteous on the basis of God's grace and mercy that He offers me freely as a gift of His grace, and I receive it by faith, then I find my significance and my value by being rightly related to God and I have been set free because it's not *self*-righteousness; it's the righteousness of God. And because it's on the basis of God's grace and not on the basis of my performance, I don't have to think about myself every day, and I'm set free to think about others. If grace is true, then I should not think more highly of myself than I ought to. In other words, if grace is true, I didn't perform for this. It's not on the basis of anything I've done; therefore, I have no legitimate basis for pride. I have no legitimate basis for spiritual arrogance. I didn't do it; I'm merely the recipient of it. Therefore, this is sound judgment. That is basically the word that he means there. It means *this is right thinking*. God's grace and mercy doesn't produce in us self-righteousness. It produces in us a spirit of humbleness, of brokenness, of humility, because I'm merely the recipient of the mercies of God.

But this is where it becomes a bit of a challenge: Rightly understanding the theology of Romans 1 through 11, we realize that who we are in Christ is absolutely magnificent. We have gone from enemy to friend. We have gone from rebellion against God to actually being God's child, to being a vessel of His mercy, to being recipients of the family fortune. God says, "*You're a champion!*" What I have become in Christ is absolutely magnificent! I need to believe that, and if I believe it, I will live that way. But you have to balance that with the realization that that description is on the basis of God's grace and mercy, not on the basis of my performance. Therefore, I realize I have no basis for arrogance. I have no basis for pride.

It isn't unusual for me to refer to us as a gathering of sinners, misfits and losers—but I never leave it there—sinners, misfits and losers who have been made right through the power of Jesus. Sinners and misfits and losers is not my description of who we are in Christ. It's a reminder that we all came to Christ the same way. There were no high performers. There was nobody more deserving. There was nobody that was above somebody else. We all come to Jesus as sinners and misfits and losers in need of a Savior, but we have been made right by the power of Jesus. Therefore, we understand how we come; we understand grace, but we also embrace this magnificent description of who we are in Christ. Once I begin to see myself correctly, then it frees me up from this self-focus, from this selfishness, from this narcissism that defines our culture today.

Have you noticed as our culture has drifted farther from God and become more secular, we've become more and more selfish? We've become more and more self-focused. We've become more and more narcissistic. That's not a coincidence. The more God drifts out of the picture, the more I have to become my own god. I'm self-righteous. I have to be selfish—that's the way the system works. But God, on the basis of His grace, sets us free. Verse 4:

For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, *each of us is to exercise them accordingly: if prophecy, according to the proportion of his faith; if service, in his serving; or he who teaches, in his teaching; or he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness.* (Vs. 4-8)

It's interesting that Paul goes out of this discussion about rightly viewing ourselves, immediately into the diversity of the body, and that we all belong to one body. We have different functions, but we're all working together for one common purpose—ultimately for God's glory.

Now I think **gifts** is not so much a reference to some supernatural ability, but rather it's actually taken from a form of the word for *grace*. I think that *gifts* is the idea of a calling, and a *calling* is on the basis of God's grace. Every single person who has trusted Christ as Savior has a high and holy calling. You don't have that calling because you earned it or because you deserved it or because you're especially talented. It's on the basis of God's grace. And all God asks is that you be faithful with your calling. And then he goes on to list a sampling of that so you get a sense of the different functions of the diversity within the body.

So I want to go back to this concept of a body illustrating diversity. That's probably Paul's favorite metaphor for describing who we are as the Church. It's important, for starters, to understand according to 1 Corinthians 12, the moment you trusted Christ as Savior, you were placed into the *Body of Christ*, meaning you have a calling; you have a function; you have something that contributes to that which lasts forever, and you have that on the basis of God's grace. Even though people often talk about the universal church, meaning at the end of the day we're all one church in Christ, the universal church manifests itself through the local church. Of the many, many, many references to the church in the New Testament, over ninety percent of them are in reference to the local church. There are people who want to be lone rangers. There are people that want to do their own thing and they say, "Well, I'm just part of the universal church." They kind of have these hang-ups with the local church. But the New Testament knows nothing of that theology. It knows nothing of a believer out there disconnected from a local church. Just look at the illustrations. It's a body and, as a body, there are members, and the only way that member has function is if it's attached to the body.

So think about it this morning. Let's imagine we have a table up here, and we have all kinds of members of the body. We have fingers; we have toes; we have ears; we have noses; we have eyeballs. We have all these members of the body, but they're detached from the body and they're just displayed on the table. None of them has any usefulness. They have no function. They're detached from the body. The only way Paul's illustration makes sense is if we understand the members are attached to the body, just like mine are—my fingers, my hands, my legs, my eyes, my ears. They all work together on one body in order to accomplish something, in order to function. So that's the basic idea of the metaphor.

When I think about *calling*, I think about it in two categories. Let's call one *informal* and we'll call the other *formal*. Informal, if I was to use the body metaphor, would be like the blood. The blood runs through all the members, and so it's the idea that there are certain things that we as believers are all called to: So all of us are called to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul and mind, and to love my neighbor as myself. That's true of all of us. We're all called to be a witness for Christ in our neighborhood, where we work. We're called to show compassion and love to people. There are just certain things that define all of us. I am called to serve my family. I'm called to serve the people that live next door. I'm called to serve the people I work with.

Sometimes I hear people say, "*Well, my family is my ministry.*" So is mine! "*Well, my work is my ministry.*" So is mine! "*Well, my neighbor is my ministry.*" So is mine! It's all of ours! But the whole point of the text in Romans 12 and in 1 Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4 is everybody also has what we might call a formal calling. In other words, this is your part as a member of the body; this

is your specific function. This is what you uniquely bring to the body in order for the body to function. It's something that's more specific; it's more unique to you. It's something that's defined. There's some sort of leadership. There's some sort of accountability. There's some sort of a team. There's some sort of a purpose. There's some sort of connectedness to the body in order to make it work.

Now in talking about *informal*, which is what we're all called to, and then the *formal*, which is your specific, unique calling—and every Christian has both—don't misunderstand me. I'm not making a divide between what happens here on this campus and what happens off the campus. I'm not saying it's formal on the campus and informal off the campus. That's not the distinction I made; I don't think that's true. What I am saying is your formal calling may be on this campus; it may be off this campus. It may out at the City Mission. It may be with City Impact. It may be with Campus Life. It may be with the Crisis Pregnancy Center. It may be off the campus into the community, but there's still a sense of calling. There's still a sense of definition. There's still a sense of structure. There's still a sense of responsibility. There's a sense in which this is connected to the larger vision, to the larger body, and we're all working together. So you figure out what is my specific calling that God has called me to in order to contribute to that which lasts forever.

Now what Paul is saying is some are upfront; some are behind the scenes. Some in our culture are viewed to be more important than others, but in God's economy that's not true, and that's the whole point of the text. There's diversity but no one should think more highly of himself, and equally so, no one should think less of himself or herself, but we're just all in this together, ultimately to accomplish the mission for God's glory, and that involves a lot of diversity.

But there's another way to explain this, and I want to see if I can kind of shift gears a little bit. Some of us have been talking about this quite a bit over the last few weeks. I think there are often two groups of people that are called, and historically they don't always get along, and I think that's unfortunate. There are those who feel called to what we might call more the *core* ministries of the church, kind of the traditional definition of what it means to be the church. And then there are those that are kind of dreamers—they're out there a little bit. They're a little bit “edgy”; they like to move more with the trends, the things that come and go, and kind of feel like they're on the cutting edge. But what sometimes happens is the people in the traditional church throw stones at them, and the people out there throw stones back, and you have this divide. Rather than *either/or*, why can't we think in terms of *both/and*? But in order for *both/and* to work, it has to look like this—I'll illustrate it this way:

It isn't unusual for young church planters to have a whole new idea about church. “*This is what church should look like!*” They're a little bit frustrated by the traditional church so they're going to start something new and fresh—and that's fine! We cheerlead that! But this is what always happens: We're going to do something new and fresh as young people, but pretty soon those young people get married, and pretty soon those young people have children and then suddenly they need a nursery. And then pretty soon they need a children's program. And then what about our teenagers, and what about our marriages, and what about this problem; what about this issue? And pretty soon they look exactly like what they left because that's the essence of discipleship. It's the essence of what it means to be the church. It's about families. It's about singles. It's about children. It's about teenagers. It's about adults. It's about men. It's about women. It's about counseling. It's about struggling. It's about coming together. So inevitably the church ends up looking like that, and I might call that kind of the traditional or the core ministry of the church.

If a church is strong and healthy in its core, it provides a platform for the dreamers to dream. They can get out there and try things that are a little bit edgy, that have to do more with trends that kind of come and go. Over my almost thirty years in ministry, I've seen hundreds of trends of things that come and go—ministries that for a season were highly effective, but the season comes and goes. Unfortunately, some churches try to define themselves around those trends. If you start your church around a trend, what do you do when the trend's over? And that's usually the problem. The trend kind of goes away and then the church doesn't know who it is, and so it chases the next trend and then chases the next trend. It's trying to find itself. You can never build a church that way.

A church has to understand who she is. Churches are like people. We have a personality, and this is who we are and this is what we're about, and this is what we're really good at, and this is what we have to dedicate ourselves to. And so there's a sense of strength. There's a sense of tradition. There's a sense of stability. There's a sense of rootedness that, when those trends come and go, people don't just disappear into the darkness but they're rooted to something that lasts, something that's healthy, something that's enduring. But that cannot work if the core church is unhealthy. If the core church is unhealthy, all it can think about is getting healthy, and there's no opportunity, there's no platform for the dreamers to dream.

Think about it in terms of a physical body. If I take care of myself, if I eat right, if I exercise, if I'm healthy as a person, it provides the opportunity to do some crazy things. Because I'm healthy, I might decide to go skydiving. I might decide to go rock climbing. I might decide to go scuba diving. I might decide to go horseback riding. I might decide to go motorcycle riding. There are all these things I could do if I'm healthy enough to do them. But you know if you're one of those people that struggle every day with chronic health issues—every day is about just getting through the next day—you really don't even have the energy or the opportunity to think about anything else. You're just trying to get through one day at a time.

A church is just like that. If the core church is unhealthy and constantly struggling, that's all it will ever be. But if you're healthy, if you're strong, if you're stable, if you're flourishing, it's an opportunity to release the dreamers, the people that want to try something new, maybe a little edgy, something that's out there a little bit. But at the end of the day it still connects into the greater body that is more enduring and is more lasting and rooted and traditional.

So this brings me to my point, and this is how I want to end this morning. Here we are fifty years strong. The core of Lincoln Berean, after fifty years, is strong; it's healthy; it's thriving. And it is that way because of you—it's because of you! When people ask me, "What is special about Lincoln Berean Church?" the first words out of my mouth are always the same: It's the people. We have remarkable people that give of their time, that give of their talents, and that give of their treasures to invest themselves in the things that matter. And the result of that is, after fifty years we continue to have a church that's strong, a church that's thriving, a church in its core that is rooted and it's stable and it's progressing. And because of that, we have the freedom to say to the dreamers, "Dream a little bit! It's okay to go out there and chase a trend. It's okay to reach out into the community and to meet a need that's very acute right now. It's okay to reach beyond our campus and to reach beyond our borders to things that will come and go but in the moment are highly effective."

Over the last years, God has done amazing things beyond our borders out into our community, out into our state. There are some amazing things happening to pastors and leaders across our country that is coming out of the ministry of Lincoln Berean and around the world. And all of that is

possible because of you—because of you who have invested yourself in the core to make us strong, to make us healthy, to make us thriving—because you have sacrificed of your time and your talents and your treasures. So this morning I just want to celebrate you! I want to express appreciation for those of you that serve so faithfully, so quietly in order to make the core ministries of the church flourish, in order that we might dream, in order that we might reach out, in order that we might ask God to do more. The reason in this body of believers that the dreamers have permission to dream is because of the sacrifice of the people of Lincoln Berean that make that possible. So thank you, and to God be the glory.

Our Father, we're thankful for many, many here this morning that faithfully serve on our campus and off our campus, but as members of this body, such great diversity but also such great faithfulness, a sacrifice of time, a sacrifice of talent and treasures, to create a strong, healthy ministry that creates a platform for the dreamers to dream, Lord, that you might use us not just to make a difference in Lincoln, but to make a difference in our country and in our world, Lord, for Your Glory. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

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The Gospel Story: A Renewed Mind

A Study of Romans

Romans 12:1-8

Pastor Bryan Clark

Opening Discussion

1. Do you think you have a calling by God? If so, what is your calling?
2. Over the years, what have been both your frustrations and your joys related to this idea of a calling?
3. How might you distinguish between what God expects from all believers as a way of life and your specific calling? If all believers only focused on what we might call more of a way of life and ignored their specific calling, what would be the result?

Bible Study

1. Read Romans 12:1-2. What does the “Therefore...by the mercies of God” refer to? What have you learned in chapters 1-11?
2. What does Paul consider a “reasonable” or “logical” response to what we’ve received “in Christ”? Conversely, what would be an unreasonable response to what we’ve received?
3. The word “conformed” means to be squeezed into a mold. What do you think it means to be conformed to this world? Is there really anything new under the sun these days?
4. How are we “transformed?” What do you think this means? Does lasting change come from behavior modification or a change in thinking? Why?
5. Read Romans 12:3-8. What is “renewed thinking” according to 12:3? What would “conforming to this world” mean in light of 12:3? How do you explain an arrogant Christian?

6. The “for just as” beginning 12:4 indicates that getting verse 3 right is the key to getting verse 4 right. In other words, we have to view ourselves correctly (in light of God’s mercies) to view others correctly. In what way does a faulty view of ourselves change how we view others?
7. Discuss the “body” metaphor for the local church. Can any “member” operated detached from the greater body? How is diversity celebrated in the human body? What do we learn from this as it relates to the body of Christ? Clearly there is that calling that applies to every believer as a way of life and then that calling that is uniquely your calling as a member of the body of Christ. Why are both callings essential?
8. How can we, together, address both the need for stability and effective, consistent discipleship with the need to reach out and address various needs that come and go in our culture? Would it make more sense for believers to all work together for the common mission or fragment our efforts and even throw stones at one another?

Application

1. What is the reasonable response to what you’ve learned in Romans 1-11? Have you done this? In what ways are you proving that the will of God is good, acceptable and perfect?
2. What are some practical ways you can make sure you are not conformed to this world but rather are transformed by the renewing of your mind?
3. What is your calling in this season of your life? What are some practical steps you can take if you’re still not sure what your calling is? What do your group members see as something you seem “wired up” to do? What are you good at? What are you passionate about?