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TITLE: GROWING AS A FAMILY THROUGH RENEWING OUR MIND

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Our theme for this year is GROWING AS A FAMILY THROUGH RENEWING OUR MIND. Renewing our minds is necessary for growing as a family. The way we think about God, ourselves and each other affects our growth.

Are you happy? I'm not necessarily talking about the laughing, though that may be a sign of happiness. In happy I don't mean the hole-in-one or strike toto feeling. Nor am I talking about the feel good when you break your personal best or when you are winding down with friends over a few drinks and a good feast. Neither am I talking about the high you get in travelling.

I'm talking about the happiness you still feel when people don't like you, when friends forsake you, when you didn't get that promotion, when someone stole your recognition/credit. The kind of happiness that you get even though under normal circumstances or when life just...well, suck. A kind of satisfaction that doesn't really depend on your current circumstances. A kind of simple satisfaction that leads you to say this.

Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart...Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life that he has given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun (Ecclesiastes 9:7, 9).

God says food and shelter is all I need. Survival is enough reason for gratitude. Contrasting the early Christians and their contemporaries, one author notes:

The youthful joy and vigour of Christians was the constant wonder of observers... the contrast with the prevailing pessimism of contemporary thought. The effect of the Spirit is fresh vitality and a true direction of the mind" (Parry¹)

He is talking about the word renewal in Rom 12:2 which we are going to look at in a while. True renewal brings about happiness. This happiness is much more than the happiness you get in relationships, job satisfaction and travel goals. It is about a lasting hope. The world is bleak

¹ Quoted by Morris in Footnote 19 (rom 12:2)

because it doesn't have a lasting hope. It requires bouts of temporary satisfaction. The satisfaction are so temporary that you have to come back to it again and again for refuel.

We go for what works, what maintains quality of life, progression, recognition and family values. Some chase after personal goals whatever they may be. They make resolutions to have fulfilled relationships, strong friendships, to satisfy their wanderlust, health goals (eat simple, live easy, no need worry so much). The ways of the world are so so so many that it benefits you? And it does. So it must be good for you. Really? Do you think so?

TEMPORARY SATISFACTION LEADS TO CRAVINGS

These temporary satisfactions leads to cravings. You want more to sustain meaning, so you do things over and over again. Familiar things. You try to relive the past. You don't get it, then you become miserable. Meaning seems to depend on proving yourself. We change jobs and spouses and lifestyle to find that constant in life. What nuisance. How tiring. Anything that is not rooted in the God of eternity is fleeting and it leaves you discontented and dry. Let's renew our minds. Let us think correctly. It is the only way to rest and happiness.

RENEWAL COMES FROM RATIONAL WORSHIP

“...present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.” (Rom 12:1)

Look at the word spiritual. Many other versions like the King James and the Lexham English bible it translated “reasonable worship/service”. Some versions translate it “intelligent”. If you would leave it to me I will use the word “rational”. The Greek word is logikos (Λογικός) which sounds like the English word “logic”. One dictionary explains

Λογικός...reason, word. Pertaining to reason and therefore reasonable, or pertaining to speech as reasonable expression (Greek Dictionary²)

Worship is rational and logical. It explains reality. Other religions say worship is personal and subjective and the mind is not needed or a hindrance. Churches are influenced by this unbelieving philosophy. Some churchgoers will say, “I don't want to think so much. I am not a “cheem” person (Chinese Hokkien dialect for deep or difficult to understand). I just want simple Christianity.” Then maybe Christianity is not for such a person. Because the worship of God is never meant to stagnate and stay shallow. A follower of Jesus should not fear knowledge but embrace it. Worship is thinking and responding to God's complex will.

² Zohadites

God is deep and difficult to understand. Science testifies of the complex designer. Accomplishing our salvation has all its complexities. And like Paul, we praise God because of the same complexities. When I say complex, I don't mean man-made philosophical arguments or difficult jargons. I'm talking about the deep concepts of the bible.

There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures (2 Pet 3:16)

The bible is not always easy to understand. It takes work to understand. In Ephesians 4, Pastor-teachers are supposed to equip the saints, not spoon feed them. Here Peter is saying that people twist Scripture because they are "ignorant". Ignorant does not mean stupid. It means they don't want to learn what Scripture has to say. The word is used of lazy students³. These commentators inform us.

Together the two words form the picture of a people who may be highly intelligent and well educated, but when it comes to knowing the narrative of Scripture and the major concepts of the NT they are uninstructed and therefore unstable. (Davids⁴)

They have distorted or twisted the teaching of Paul, along with other parts of the Scriptures...refused to submit their lifestyles to the scrutiny of Scripture, but instead twisted the Scriptures, in order to condone their sinful lifestyles. (Walls & Anders⁴)

So you can be a PhD but you don't care about what Scripture teaches, you are ignorant and unstable. However, I am not making a case just because of the word "logikos". This passage and all of Romans is driven towards rational worship. Just look at the words in this passage.

"I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. 2 Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect (Ro 12:1–2).

"Therefore" refers to everything that comes before chapter 12. Paul spent 11 chapters teaching about God, salvation, universality of sin, predestination, Israel, justification by faith, etc. He burst out praising God in wholehearted doxology after writing all that. Chapter 12 onwards show how that deep theology affects everything we do. Theology is application.

Being holy and acceptable requires thoughtfulness at all times. I need to learn holiness from God's attributes. I need to learn acceptable from what he loves and hates. All that is knowledge. Romans 12:2 says not to be conformed to this world, means I have to be thinking how society's

³ The "ignorant" person... is uninstructed...by reason of their sloth and unwillingness (Davids, 304) ⁴ Ibid

⁴ Walls, & Anders, I & II Peter, I, II & III John, Jude (Vol. 11, pp. 143–144).

system contradicts God. For example, Chinese thinking says that everyone is born good. But the bible says that everyone is born bad.

Renewal is of the mind. He doesn't say renewal of feelings towards God. He doesn't say renewal of behaviour. It is the transformation of our minds that is central to our worship. This is not contrary to the OT, when the Hebrew uses the word heart, it means visceral or inward parts. Heart and soul does not exclude the mind. We are foremost thinking creatures. Just as God is a thinking God. He reveals himself through his word (Logos) which is thought.

This renewal leads to testing and discernment. These obviously require lots of thinking. I need to know what exactly is good, acceptable and perfect. Then I will test and approve according to that standard. It's a nightmare when a quality control (QC) personnel has no clue what the manufacturing requirements and international standards are. Christians are QC testers of God's moral will, so we do well not to be lazy to learn what God has to say.

RENEWED WORSHIP LEADS TO JOY

Worship leads to joy but it is a process. Because no one can say "good acceptable perfect" unless he is satisfied. Unshakeable joy is not instantaneous. It comes in stages

Stage 1: REGENERATION

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual (rational) worship. (Rom 12:1)

When Paul writes to the church he assumes that there are true and false believers. In Timothy he wrote about shipwrecked faith. In Gal he talks about false brethren. In 1 Cor 5 he says that if anyone calls himself a brother (which means he is a professing Christian)⁵ and if he does not repent, he should be disciplined. (On the side, the secret to escaping church discipline is simply confessing that you are not Christian). So,

Paul expects obedience even of one he suspect that is not truly Christian. So here he calls all hearers, "brothers"

He assumes they have experience the "the mercies of God". In context, this talks about predestination, election, justification, the grace of God and so on. In summary, what God has done to save you. This is the reason for presenting your bodies. This means that he is saying, "If you are saved then...present your bodies – demonstrate it.

⁵ brother (ἀδελφός... i.e., who accepts the name of Christian (Thiselton, 413).

It is only when we have experienced the mercy of God, will we be motivated to be living sacrifices. Paul says that he considers all things as loss that I may gain Christ. Or for me to live is Christ to die is gain. We are all motivated by gain. Unless the love of God is a gain I would not be motivated to obey. Of course, there are people who think they could gain God by being outwardly obedient. They created for themselves a false sense of assurance. They tell themselves that people are lousy, or lesser than them, so that they can look better to themselves – according to their own internal standards.

For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome (1 Jn 5:3).

If God loves us, we will also love him. And we know that God love us when obeying Him is not a hassle. If you don't have salvation, obedience is bothersome. If we are not consumed by the love of God, we won't worship, because it is an irritating chore. Coming to church and reading your bible will be like washing plates and ironing clothes. That's emptiness that does not bring you joy. Joy begins with a relationship with the Lord of the universe – our Lord.

Stage 2: DISCIPLINED THINKING

Worship is thoughtful presentation of oneself. It requires your attentiveness. Worshipping God consumes every second of your life. Every second you are either pleasing God or grieving him. We need to be attentive and aware to our thoughts and feelings and what we say and how we respond to people and events.

Lordship is Exclusive and All- Consuming

This is what Lordship is all about. Jesus is the Lord of every part of us and the world around us. Lordship is life is not a dichotomy. There is no secular vs religious. God is exclusive, and he expects you to submit EVERY hour of your life –A Christian is attentive to the Lord's desires and commands. This is living sacrifice.

Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual (rational) worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind (Ro 12:1-2).

Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourself to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness. (Rom 6:13).

Worship takes the entire person. This must include the mind. That is what “present yourselves” and “present your bodies mean”. It means every part of us is involved. In Romans 6 he parallels “yourselves” with “members”. Members refer to the sum of parts that makes a person.

Weaponizing Our Thoughts For God’s Purposes

Then he uses the word “instruments”. That word is a metaphor. It means weapons of warfare. Paul is asking us to weaponize ⁶our whole life for the purpose of God. Like anything military, it requires discipline and submission. Spiritual battles are fought in the mind. Satan wants to rob you of your joy through doubt and disobedience.

This requires disciplined thinking. We are not to conform to this world. Conforms in the Greek literally means “to be fashioned after”. It has the idea of following the blue prints or the designs. It is keeping with the pattern. The spirit of our nation is to have a “divine discontentment” in order to succeed and progress. We are not to be “fashioned” according to it. We are to resist. We have to think correctly. And we have to teach ourselves to think correctly. And we have to keep correcting ourselves in every area. That leads to action.

The Spirit Does the Transforming

The word transform is written in the passive voice. Which means you are not doing the transforming. Titus 3: 5 says that renewing is done by the Holy Spirit. 2 Co 3:18 says we are transformed by the Spirit. However, in partnership with the Spirit, it is our responsibility to not be molded by the world or this age. This world or age is the fallen world and Satan’s rule. It is this life as opposed to the eternal state. Anything that does not keep God and eternity in mind is worldly thinking. And we must not let it shape us but let the spirit transform us.

STAGE 3: APPROVAL THROUGH TESTING

that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect (Ro 12:2).

The whole point of disciplined thinking is to arrive at experience. There is a purpose. “that” comes from the Greek phrase that is a purpose clause. It could be a result. Either way, experience is the product of renewed thinking. Which means the purpose of not conforming and renewing is to test the will of God. What is this will of God?

⁶ If the metaphor is military, Paul was saying, “Don’t let sin take command of any part of your body and use it as a weapon for evil purposes.” .. “We are faced with the tremendous alternative,” writes Barclay, “of making ourselves weapons in the hand of God or weapons in the hand of sin.” (Mounce, Romans, 154).

The Will Of God Is The Objective Revealed Will Of God.

It is the objective moral will of God. One's pastor's kid I spoke to told me that he always thought that the will of God is only for the highly spiritual or a select few. Then he was corrected by reading a book on biblical discernment. Many do think that they heard the voice of God and know the will of God for them. They call it a "calling" but it is actually just their own subjective concept. God never speaks apart from his truth. He never contradicts Scripture.

For example, no calling will tell you to neglect church, to stop loving your brother. No calling will take you away from God's rigorous demands for parenting. No calling takes a man away from being an emotional and spiritual shepherd of his wife and children. No calling disrupts the stability of the family. The will of God is the objective commands of God to us.

Arm yourselves with the same way of thinking...so as to live for the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for human passions but for the will of God. (1 Pet 4:1-2).

Rejoice always, 17 pray without ceasing, 18 give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you (1 Thess 5:16-18).

when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised (Heb 10:36).

These and more says the will of God is the objective revealed will of God. The will of God is not a crystal ball to figure out how you should live. How you should live is clearly stated in the bible.

The Example of Open And Close Door Decision Making

Christians think that an opened door is a sign from God. That's superstition. Whether the door is closed or open. God is sovereign. Plus, there are commandments to follow. If the door is opened, you may choose not to go in, because "all things are permissible but not all things are profitable."

Or he may open a door and it says you will have to suffer for his sake, will you take it? The prophet Agabus told Paul not to go to Jerusalem.

The revelation came from God. But Paul went against the prophet. The door was "closed" but Paul "smashed it down". He really wanted to go to Jerusalem even at his own expense, because he loved Jesus.

More often than not the opened door idea is a means to satisfy one's own desire. The will of God is objective and constant to His character. The bible is clear on what he wants and what he prohibits. We live according to those principles. We also live by the wisdom he gives us to make decisions throughout our lives. Paul is talking about God's objective will. Tim Keller talks about

how God does not show you his will. Rather, he puts you in it. You ARE in the will of God. You cannot do anything apart from His purpose. He puts you in his will to live according to his ways.

Testing and Approving

We are to test and approve the quality of God's objective will. I think HK has great food. It is said that Cantonese cuisine is unrivalled in Chinese cooking. I cannot affirm that it is good unless I have experienced it. You don't say food is good unless you have tasted it. You can hear people talking about their walk with God. But you cannot say this until you have experienced it yourself. When I have experienced it then I can truly say that I'm happy. The psalmist talks about experiencing God's will.

Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good! Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him! (Ps 34:8).

That's why there are people who can talk and talk about theology but they are empty and its obvious. They do not take refuge in him that is why they are not blessed. They are not happy. They don't trust Him. They continue to be stubborn and unteachable; undermining their shortcomings and as a result, no convictions, no happiness.

But God's will is **good** – High quality stuff. You can put it this way. God's will is good because it is profitable. It is not talking about benefits and personal or self-centered gains. It is not just good but acceptable. Namely, **acceptable** to God. So it is good because we find what is pleasing to God is also simultaneously pleasing to us. The New International Version best translates it as “test and approve”.

Approving the will of God means to understand and agree with what God wants of us with a view to putting it into practice (Moo⁷)

Perfect means lacking nothing. In this case it means that the will of God does what it sets out to do. This is what brings me joy. Testing and approving that the objective will/commandments of God are profitable for me. It is also pleasing to both God and me. Plus, it is complete. This is what makes me happy. That's the process. Regeneration, disciplined thinking, approval through testing.

Are you happy? Your expectations affect your satisfaction. Are you thinking correctly? Do you expect your Christian children to marry Christian spouses. Are they Christians?

⁷ Moo, D. J. (1996). The Epistle to the Romans (p. 757). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

Your adult kids say that church is something for their parents, “*I just tagged along when I was young. Sunday school taught me morals and therefore it was good for me. But now it is irrelevant.*” I hear these words all the time when talking to young adults. “There is nothing in Christianity for me. It is irrelevant. It is my parents’ religion.”

But you insist, and you keep telling them they are Christian. And you insist that they follow your ways. Isn’t that the same as ancestor worshippers asking their children to be ancestor worshippers? Is Christianity supposed to be a family tradition?

It is not. It is a personal, individual, desire that leads to a decision to deny oneself and follow Christ. It’s like going into that scanner at the airport. One person at a time. Christianity cannot be inherited, it has to be owned. You can teach them and encourage them but you cannot insist. They have to be united with Christ. They have to trust and love Jesus and as a result obey Christ.

Your religion is not their religion. Love of God is personal. You can’t have your own ideas of what Christianity is and then impose them (adult or underaged). You can’t threaten to shoot them in the head. No appeal can make a person a Christian unless God decides to save them. This is wrong thinking. Relinquish. **Be renewed in your mind.** Not easy but it is commanded.

So this year our preaching will cover a few things. We will continue in Luke. And do some doctrinal teaching sermons. We are introducing a series called “Sanctified Sensibilities”. Which expounds Scripture on how to think and behave as a Christian. We may or may not cover these but here are a few examples. We will talk about things like anxiety, friendships and relationship, profit, responsible speech, common-sense, maturity and so on.

We will also be changing the way we do prayer meeting. The focus will be corporate. It will be about God and all of us as a church. Here is an example: February we will pray for the praise and worship ministry, April we will pray for Christ Centered homes, July foreign missions, October we will pray for preaching and teaching and November we will pray for leadership and discipleship.

There will also be a study on the Lord’s prayer. We will go through one line a month. This month we will learn about the first line, “Our Father in heaven” A person who trusts God prays unceasingly. But still we have to get our prayers right. Align it to God’s will. Prayer meeting will be a time of learning how to pray and praying well. Pray for us as we prepare. I will close with a dynamic but accurate rendering of Rom 12:1-2. Here is the NLT

And so, dear brothers and sisters, I plead with you to give your bodies to God because of all he has done for you. Let them be a living and holy sacrifice—the kind he will find acceptable. This is truly the way to worship him. 2 Don’t copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you

think. Then you will learn to know God's will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect. (NLT, Rom 12:1-2)