

Transformed People

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Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 0 0] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 9th of December 2001. The preacher is Paul Barker.

His sermon is entitled Transformed People and is based on Romans chapter 12 verses 1 to 8. And you may like to have open the Bible passage on page 922 in the Pew Bibles, page 922, Romans chapter 12.

And I'll pray that God will help us through this word. Heavenly Father, we thank you that you speak to us through the words of Scripture and pray that you may do so now. We pray that your word will be applied by your spirit to our hearts and minds so that they will be renewed and transformed for Jesus' sake.

Amen. There are 6,600 exhibits, apparently, in the Rodin Museum in Paris. Probably the most famous is his statue called The Thinker, though there are variations on that in different museums around the world by Rodin.

His statue of The Thinker is of a naked man who is sitting, his elbow is on his knee, and his hand is on his chin, as he's thinking, and thinking, and thinking.

[1 : 3 1] And I guess for the decades that he's existed since Rodin made him, he hasn't done much, but think. Thinking is undervalued in our society, I think.

Often doing is regarded more highly than thinking. So it's the people who get their hands dirty, who get on and do the job, who often are regarded more highly as than those who think.

Our hands and feet earn our living more than our thinking, for some people anyway. And even on the quiz programs, there was one called Master Mind.

It shows the devaluing of the mind when really the winner of the program is the person who fills up their mind with trivia, rather than profound thinking. And if I were to ask, what does it mean to be a Christian in daily life, we will probably express an answer in terms of doing more than thinking.

It's about doing good things, loving other people, etc. But in Romans 12, we come to a key passage in Paul's letter to the Romans.

[2 : 4 9] Simplistically, we can say that chapters 1 to 11 are about doctrine, chapter 12 to the end, about duty. Or 1 to 11 about our belief, and 12 to the end, about our behaviour.

And here at the beginning of chapter 12, we see a transition from doctrine to duty, belief to behaviour. That's putting it a little bit simplistically, because the two are a little bit more enmeshed than that.

But nonetheless, this is a pivot point in the letter. Paul brings to a head all the things that he's talked about. We saw him come in effect to the pinnacle of that last week.

And now he talks about our response to what God has done. Our duty in response to the doctrine of the gospel, or our behaviour in response to belief in the gospel.

And what is noteworthy at this pivot point of the letter, when Paul begins to say, how do we respond to all of this gospel truth that we've seen in the previous 11 chapters and we've heard over the last few months in sermons, is the priority given to the mind and our thinking.

[3 : 59] We might expect Paul to say, well, in response to all the mercy of God, be loving people. Come on, get your hands dirty and do something in response to God and what he's done for us.

But in effect, the mind takes priority here in these opening verses of chapter 12. And the reason for that is that right thinking leads to right action.

Whereas wrong thinking will lead to wrong action. So we need to get our thinking and our minds right if we are to live and practice right things in action.

Now for 11 chapters, Paul has been expounding the mercies of God. And we've seen that underscored time and time again in those 11 chapters. That the only way any person can be saved is by the free, sovereign issue of God's mercy.

For a Jew to be saved in Christ, it is an act of mercy. For a non-Jew, a Gentile, to be saved in Christ, it is an act of God's mercy.

[5 : 09] By God's mercy, we were foreknown by God before the foundation of the world. By God's mercy, he chose us, he predestined us. By mercy, he called us.

By mercy, he has justified us, declaring us righteous, forgiving our sins. And by mercy, we will one day surely be glorified in heaven.

All of that is mercy. And it's by God's mercy that we need fear no condemnation from God on that final day from his judgment and wrath. And it's by mercy that God has adopted us into his family, pouring into our hearts God's spirit, and thereby God's love for us.

It's by God's mercy that we're enabled to call God our Father. All of it is of mercy. Pure mercy from a merciful God.

And so in response to that mercy of God, Paul begins chapter 12 this way. I appeal to you, therefore, I plead with you, I urge you, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God.

[6 : 19] That is what follows is in response to the mercies of God. Because of God's mercies to you, therefore respond like this. Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.

The language is sacrificial and worship type language. In the ancient world, often sacrifices were offered in order to try and appease the God's wrath and to win his favor.

Whether in the Old Testament, in part, but especially in the pagan world of the Greco-Roman times. But here, we find a different sort of sacrifice.

Because through this letter, we have seen very clearly, especially in chapter 3, that God has already made the sacrifice of atonement in Jesus' death.

So the offering of our bodies here as a living sacrifice to God is not to atone for sin. It's not to win or carry God's favor. It's not to try and appease his wrath against our sin and failure.

[7 : 31] But this sacrifice of ourselves, our bodies, as a living sacrifice offered to God, is in response to the sacrifice that God has already accomplished for us in Jesus' death.

That sacrifice of atonement or propitiation as we saw back in Romans chapter 3. The people of Paul's day had a very low view on the whole of bodies, physical things.

They either despised them and thereby lived a life of denial of them or they indulged them because they thought they were transient and the soul or spirit was all that matters. But Christian theology is consistent in seeing us as integrated beings that are spiritual and physical and this is talking about our whole selves being offered to God.

Physical life as well as spiritual life if I can separate it like that. The sacrifice that we're to offer of ourselves to God is described in three ways.

It is firstly a living sacrifice partly because it won't be put to death on some altar. We're not offering to be martyrs in a sense for trying to please God.

[8 : 42] But our lives are offered to God. We are alive in Christ we've seen already in this letter. So our new life in Christ is offered to God as a sacrifice a living sacrifice.

Secondly it's described as a holy sacrifice something that is in a sense pure set apart for God honourable and devoted to God. But that holiness is not something that we accomplish but something that is bestowed upon us in Christ and by his spirit.

And then it's an acceptable sacrifice not because we are worthy we've seen that very clearly that we're not. but it's acceptable because of the sacrifice of Christ made for us already.

So this is not a sacrifice to get right with God it's a sacrifice in response to having been made right with God already by Jesus' death for us.

And it's to be our whole bodies all of us all of the parts of us offered to God. There's no limit here. there's no bits of us that can be offered to God and the rest kept back for ourselves or for some other use.

[9 : 53] All of us is to be a sacrifice to God. Our lips so that we may speak words of truth and love and praise to God. Our feet so that we may walk in the paths of righteousness and go where the gospel calls us to.

Our hands so that we can help the fallen bind up their wounds or offer them love or extend the gospel to them. Our ears so that we may listen to others and place them first but also our ears so that we may listen to God's word and heed it.

Our eyes so that we may look out for the lonely or the needy but also our eyes so that we may look to God and his glory and truth. It means our time so that our time is in effect no longer our own but offered to God in every part.

Not that we offer God an hour and a bit on a Sunday morning and the rest is ours but that all of our time Monday morning as well as Sunday morning our evenings our work our leisure time and so on.

Our work is offered to God our leisure time our retirement is offered to God our money our careers our family our all.

[11 : 14] Indeed every single aspect of our lives without limit and without exception is meant here when we offer our bodies as a living sacrifice to God.

He has bought us at a very high price the death of his son and our own lives offered back is not an offering too small.

As the hymn writer says were the whole realm of nature mine it would be an offering far too small. Love so amazing so divine demands my soul my life my all.

And that hymn writer could easily be reflecting on this verse in the light of chapters 1 to 11. when I was seven years old my father was transferred for three years to England and so we upped roots and went to England and during the three years that we lived in England my mother in particular would tape messages from her and sometimes me and my two younger sisters to send back to grandparents rather than just write letters and then my grandmother would tape a message over the tape and send it back but after a while particular tapes were kept and the last one that we ever sent after almost three years of living in England has been kept somewhere in family archives I presume.

It's many years since I've listened to it partly I never want to hear it again but it's a tape of a ten year old boy with a very plum proper English accent speaking about what's been happening at school and so on nobody would ever pick it for being me I'm sure but it is to my embarrassment three years in England had conformed my accent we know that children's accents change much more quickly than adults when I came back as an adult from three years in England before coming here there were tinges of English accent I'm told but not much but after three years as a child nobody would have picked or detected any Australian accent in my voice Paul says in verse 2 do not be conformed to this world he's talking about something much more profound than our accent but our accents changing in different places is just an indication of how subconsciously and easily we are conformed to the society in which we live not just to its customs and its accents but more importantly to its values and that's what Paul has in mind here do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your minds the world's view is far different from God's view on the whole the trouble is for many

[14 : 15] Christians today in the West is that we've grown up thinking that we live in a Christian society Australia or England or the United States in particular but we haven't and we don't our societies are not Christian they are not Christian values that really undergird them and are portrayed in newspapers in the media on television in films in books and in advertisements and we've got to stop fooling ourselves that the values of our society are Christian the world's views are far different from the gospel's views they were in Paul's day and they still are in ours and even I suspect at the height of so-called Christendom in say England or the United States they were still different from Christian values at their heart the world has different values for money for sexuality for time for leisure for families for relationships our views about ourself and certainly our views about God and our society is becoming much more blatantly different from Christian values which in some ways makes it easier for us to distinguish ourselves from the values of this world sometimes the world's pressures and values are blatantly different from Christian but other times not so obviously so a more insidious difference is there too many

Christians over the years and today are like chameleons changing colour at every whim and fad of society's values trying to hide and be camouflaged into the values of society but Christians Paul is saying here are to be different from society certainly not a chameleon but to stand out with our minds our world views and therefore our actions being very different from those of the world in which we live do not be conformed to this world Paul says but be transformed by the renewing of your minds non-Christian minds are dulled to the truth and gospel of God we've seen that already in this letter not least last week in chapter 11 non-Christian minds are part of this fallen decaying world's views we've seen that earlier in this letter too non-Christian minds are foolish though they actually claim to be wiser than all we saw that back in chapter 1 non-Christian minds are proud and boastful about themselves and their status and position non-Christian minds are futile in their thinking way back in chapter 1 which I preached on I think at the very end of June we read these words though they knew God they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him but they became futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened claiming to be wise they became fools and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or animals or reptiles they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the creator the minds of people who are not

Christians are minds that are dulled to the truth of the gospel it leads them into idolatry for they do not honour God as God but worship some sort of idol for us in a sophisticated western world we're probably not going to put up statues and bow down to them if they're on our mantelpiece but the idols of our society are just as real the idolatry of leisure of fun of sex of beauty of family of wealth and so on wrong lines leads to idolatry and that then in turn leads to immorality that is why the mind is so important and why Paul places priority on it here in chapter 12 because before he gets on to talk about how in practice and activity we lead our Christian lives our minds must be right and that is too why he talks about acceptable spiritual worship in verse 1 because wrong thinking leads to idolatry which is wrong worship right thinking renewed and transformed minds that is will lead to honouring

God as God which is right worship which leads not to immorality but morality in practice the Old Testament itself looked forward to what Paul is talking about here the Old Testament as we've seen in recent weeks knew that the people of God needed God to do something inside them in their hearts and minds in order for them to respond aright to God the law out on tablets of stone was insufficient to change people and so the Old Testament looked forward to the time when God's spirit would write God's word in the hearts and minds of God's people Paul is now saying that in the gospel that is now possible as indeed we've seen in recent weeks so the renewing and transformation of our minds comes when God's word is not just out there on tablets of stone or scrolls of papyrus or in the Bible but God's spirit has taken it and implanted it within us as Christian people then our minds begin to be renewed and transformed and the values of God come to be thought out in our minds rather than the world's values instead we know that if you put rubbish into a computer rubbish comes out garbage in garbage out is the expression the same with our minds fill our minds with rubbish and we'll behave like rubbish fill our minds with the truth of God's gospel then we'll begin to live lives that are right so see how this letter then has moved see the gospel is not just about forgiving us our sins the gospel has acknowledged that human beings have minds that are wrong that brings them into idolatry because they don't honour God as God and leads into immorality so the gospel is not just telling us be good people that is address the symptoms the immorality the gospel is actually getting to the root cause of the problem which is in our minds and that's what Paul is on about here we need to have minds that are renewed so that we do not commit idolatry but rather worship God as God and offer acceptable sacrifice to him in our lives and that then will lead on to lives that are moral rather than immoral that's what the gospel is about changing us entirely as people so that we may bring

God glory in our lives before I went to theological college I was an actuary and I worked initially for TNG before it was taken over and then worked for National Mutual Insurance Society and in my time at National Mutual they came up with a very large advertising campaign in what was becoming more and more a competitive market for insurance the slogan was one that I did not really approve of though I had nothing to do with it and rather was embarrassed by for the most important person in the world you when we think right about God then we will think right about ourselves the two are connected and that's the next issue that Paul raises in verse three for by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think but to think with sober judgment each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned and Paul has just said in verse two our minds need to be transformed and the very next verse he talks about what our minds should be thinking about ourselves so the truth of

[22 : 46] God and our right thinking about the gospel and God will therefore lead to us thinking right things about ourselves he's in particular addressing those the majority I'm sure of people who think more highly than they ought about themselves and when that happens a person is in direct conflict with the gospel of God for we've seen in the previous eleven chapters that the gospel of salvation is purely mercy therefore we contribute nothing to our salvation we are in fact as we've seen spiritually bankrupt that brings us down to our knees in humility if you think more highly than you ought of yourself you will tend to think that there is something about you that has either contributed to your salvation or that means that you deserve your salvation in some way that is not the gospel so when we think about the gospel aright then we will think not too highly of ourselves either for then we'll be eager recipients of the mercy of God for we offer him just empty hands as we've seen to receive the gospel

Paul tackles this issue because pride is such an important sin to deal with it is such an undermining sin if we practice pride in ourselves then it undermines the gospel and we will not respond to the gospel aright with thankfulness to God's grace but it also undermines our relations with each other at an interpersonal and an international level relationships break down because of pride in this letter we've seen Paul addressing the issue of Jewish pride and Gentile pride the Jewish Christians who thought somehow they had privileges that meant they could boast and the Gentiles who thought they'd been brought in at the expense of the Jews and therefore they could boast and Paul has pulled the carpet out from under both their feet but the same applies just generally in human relationships and in response to God the gospel we've seen time and again in this letter means that we have no grounds for boasting there is nothing we boast of because it is all undeserved mercy to us as that same hymn writer has said when I survey the wondrous cross on which the prince of glory died my richest gain I count but loss and poor contempt on all my pride the other reason why

Paul so quickly addresses the issue of how we think about ourselves is not just so that our thinking is right in relation to God but also with respect to other people for Christians are saved into the body of Christ we're not saved to be individualistic Christians who go on soul or lone ranger type Christian lives having little to do with Christian fellowship we belong together we are accountable together of necessity we have unity together in Christ not a unity that we attain but a unity that is given by and in the Lord Jesus Christ and therefore our relationships with each other in the Christian family are crucial how we respond to each other in church after church during the week is very important for our Christian lives it's not secondary it's not unimportant it's not optional so Paul goes on to say in verse 4 for as in one body we have many members and not all the members have the same function so we who are many are one body in

Christ and individually we are members one of another now the issue here is still I think the issue of right thinking and the issue of right thinking about ourselves tackling pride Paul acknowledges that in the Christian family in the body of Christ there is great diversity people have all sorts of different gifts which they exercise or are meant to exercise for the glory of God but one person's gift is not a cause for them to boast in their gift nor is the fact that someone else has a gift cause for you coveting or being jealous of that gift there is the issue of pride working itself out but the diversity is meant to contribute to the unity of the body of Christ and build up the body of Christ Paul gives a list of just seven gifts that are given by God there are others in other parts of the New Testament this is not a full and complete list he's just giving a sample to show if you've got a spiritual gift use it that's what it's there for spiritual gifts are not trophies to put on your mantelpiece things of pride to boast about

I've got the gift of encouragement or preaching or something here is my trophy on the cabinet but gifts are to use they are tools for work not trophies to boast in and that's really the essence of what he's saying here in England the Times newspaper in recent years has had a preacher of the year competition I think that's an abominable thing really I can't work out why preachers even nominate for it certainly no way I was ever going to enter into that when I lived in England for preaching is not a competition it's a gift to use and just like we shouldn't ever have sort of pastoral carer of the year or exhorter or encourager of the year all those sorts of things I think undermines what spiritual gifts are about they're not for recognition they're not for boasting and pride they're not for competition but they're for service in building up the body of Christ Paul says we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us that is the gifts are not things we deserve either they're God's grace extended in fact the word gift and grace are related words so whatever gift we have to use for the building up of the body of Christ we don't deserve it it's not our skill or prowess it's God's ability and we are to be its instruments of work so he says there's prophecy in proportion to faith probably that's to do with preaching but maybe specific words from God that are given from time to time for ministry you're to minister you're to do the job if you've got a gift of ministry and what that means is practical service ministry service serving other people that's the idea there practical needs being met the teacher has got to teach the exhorter has got to exhort or maybe better to say the encourager to encourage the person who gets alongside somebody to encourage them along build them up help them and so on the giver in generosity not that only some

[29 : 49] Christians give but this is meaning time and effort and ability and so on that is be generous in giving the leader is to be diligent not lazy not boastful about well I'm a leader but actually to get on and do the job for the benefit of other people in God's glory the compassionate person is to be cheerful to offer the comfort of the gospel to people but with Christian joy and cheerfulness now as I say that's just a sample of the gifts it's not an exhaustive list but Paul's point is to say the gifts and differences within the Christian family are not points of pride nor of jealousy or covetousness on the other hand but they are from God and they're to be used for his glory and the building up of God's people now some of the specifics of obedience is going to come in the chapters that follow the verses remaining in this chapter and then chapters 13 to 15 which we'll deal with next year this is not the end of Paul's practical exhortations but it lies at the top of the priority list our right thinking with God leads to our right thinking about ourselves and that will lead to our right relationships within the

Christian family and the Christian body all of the things that follow are about building up the unity and maturity of the Christian body and about bringing glory to God but from the source of all of that in a sense is the renewing of our minds by God's spirit applying God's word to them let's pray our heavenly father we thank you for the gospel of mercy and that we are your children Christian people purely by your mercy to us we pray that we may consistently think a right about the truth of the gospel so that we may think a right about you and about ourselves and about other people so that therefore our lives will be full of right action that bring glory to you and benefit to others for the sake of Jesus Christ Amen