

*Romans 12, Pt. 1*

One of the greatest Reformed thinkers of the late twentieth century was a man named R. C. Sproul. Sproul founded a ministry of teaching and writing, mostly focused on reaching and enriching the thinking of laypeople. Pastors and theologians, of course, listened to Sproul, but his heart was always for the person in the pew. Sproul did this because he sincerely believed something that he learned from the Reformed tradition - everyone's a theologian. Everyone - whether they admit it or not - has thoughts about God, ourselves, the world, and reality. The question is not "Do you have a theology?" but "Do you have a true theology?" No one escapes the questions of ultimate reality. Consequently, Sproul focused on changing people's thoughts about God, creation, and the Word of God, so that they might have biblical and faithful understandings of the most important things. Transformation, for Sproul, was primarily transformation of the thoughts. A Reformed thinker of the next generation pushes us to transformation from a different direction. James Smith, a philosopher at Calvin College, teaches that *You Are What You Love* (the title of one of his books). For Smith, whatever you do religiously is actually your religion. Smith focuses on our behaviors, relationships, and the communities from which we derive our identity. Smith cares about theology as well, but his main concern is that we pay attention to how we live and those whom we live with. If we want transformation, then we need to transform our behaviors and consider our relationships and communities.

Is this an either-or situation? I don't think so. Transformation happens both as we change our thoughts and as we consider our behaviors and relationships. Let me give you an example. Let us say that there is a young woman who wants to be a chemist. What does she need to do? Well obviously she needs to learn lots of stuff about chemistry - periodic table, electrons, protons, chemical equations, and the like. But she also needs to find formal acceptance with a community. That probably means going to school, getting a degree, receiving certifications, and being offered a job. There may also be the informal acceptance that comes when one lives with other people in a community, a connection that comes from sharing interests and activities with other people.

And so through both knowledge and formal and informal ties with others, this young woman becomes a chemist. Or to move things a little closer to home, ordination to ministry is not just about acquiring biblical and theological knowledge. It is also about being recognized by one's fellow elders in the Lord as a person of piety and commitment. Ordination always involves the laying on of hands because the laying on of hands is a sign of the acceptance of other people within the community of identity. Do you see how we have to come at things from both directions? If you want to be transformed, then you need to change your thinking. And if you want to be transformed, you have to work on your behaviors and relationships. You have to look at the health of your community.

This is what Paul does in the letter to the Romans. In the first eleven chapters, he gives us a theological framework. This framework includes the declaration of God's righteousness, the truth of human inability to faithfully live out the demands of God's law, the way of mercy given in the atoning death of Jesus, justification by faith, peace with God, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, the need for new birth, and the hope of a redeemed creation, including the hope of a restored Israel. But in the last five chapters, Paul speaks to us about behaviors, relationships, and the community of the church. The truth of God's righteousness comes not just through propositions (though these are crucial) but through a righteous community in which God's people live righteously in an unrighteous world. Paul may never have ministered personally to the people of Rome, but he nonetheless cares deeply that they are the kind of people who know "what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect" (v. 2).

People ask me often about how to know God's will. Thankfully, the Bible is very clear about knowing God's will. Paul is very clear about what it takes to be transformed. Today, though I know that we have a whole chapter of material to get through, I really only want to dig into the first two verses. You can know God's will for your life. Paul gives us two commands. He tells us to give our bodies as living sacrifices. This points us in the direction of behaviors, relationships, and community. And he tells us to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. This points us in the direction of how we think about the world.

Before we flesh out those two ideas, I need to say something about the biblical view of human nature. Some people think that we can break the human person down into composite parts. What are human beings made of? Then, suggestions are offered concerning what composes a person. The lists vary from author to author, but you are familiar with many of the ideas - spirit, soul, body, mind, heart, and will. But this is not quite the biblical view of the matter. According to biblical teaching, the human person is a single unified being. We are multi-faceted. We can be viewed from different perspectives, but it is basically true to say that the human being is not a composite of parts but a single whole. I can make this point simply. Moses said, "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might" (Deut. 6:5). Jesus said, "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind" (Matt. 22:37). Now, without even considering the underlying Greek and Hebrew words, we see that these two verses employ four different terms - heart, soul, and might v. heart, soul, and mind. Was Jesus telling the people to love God in a different way than Moses was telling people to love God? Moses told people to love with their might, but Jesus told people to love with their mind (though Jesus does toss in the word strength in Mark's account). And in neither of these verses do we see reference to spirit or will. So, what's the deal? The deal is that the Bible as a whole does not teach us to think of the person as a composite of parts. Instead, the person is a whole, and the whole person can be referred to in different ways. Sometimes, we talk of heart. Sometimes, we talk of soul. Sometimes, we think of body and soul. Sometimes, the verse speaks of both soul and spirit. The language is fluid because we are simply speaking of whole beings from different perspectives.

Paul tells the Romans to offer their bodies as living sacrifices. By body, he means the human person as it interfaces with the world and other people. You are finite. You are limited. Because you are an embodied self, you can be in one place at a time. You can do one thing at a time. You can be in a relationship with particular people under particular circumstances. Everybody thinks that they can multitask, but nobody really can. You are a body. To offer up your body to God is to offer up your embodied, finite life. It is the behaviors that you perform in the world, the nature of the community in which you live, and the quality of the relationships which you nurture with other embodied, finite people. It is how you are living in the world at a particular moment of time.

God wants to be a part of all of this. You cannot be transformed, you cannot know God's perfect will, if you are not sacrificing to him your relationships, behaviors, and the nature of your community. So much of what follows in the closing chapters of Romans has to do with how we live together as God's people in particular times and places.

We offer our embodied lives as sacrifices to God, not to earn God's favor, but as thanksgiving and worship for the mercies we have received in Jesus. This is why Paul calls this a "spiritual" or "rational" service of worship. It is what we do in response to what he has given us in Jesus.

Paul also says that we must be transformed by the renewing of our minds. The mind is the self as it collects propositional truths and analyzes experience. The mind is the organizing, understanding self. This is the facet of our lives that Paul has been working on in the first eleven chapters. There are great truths that must be known about God. There are frameworks through which we must understand the world and our experiences. Guess what? If your mind is not being renewed by God's Word, then it is being pressed into a mold formed by the world. No one gets to opt out of thinking important thoughts about how the world works. Your mind - your organizing, understanding self - is always being shaped. The question is - Is it being shaped towards God's will or away from it?

Paul is calling us to transformation. And that comes from two directions. We must renew our minds, and we must renew how we live in the world and how we relate to others. Both must be happening. And both of these things happen in the church when the church is a community of God's grace and God's truth. On these important matters, we as a church cannot settle or compromise. We must love hard, forgive much, and relate to one another well. At the same time, we must think hard, study long, and filter out unhelpful ways of thinking. Next week, Paul will guide us into both roles and relationships within the body of Christ, this righteous community within an unrighteous world. For the moment, it is enough to remember that we must offer our full selves to Jesus - body and mind, will and heart. This is our spiritual service of worship.