

LESSON 4

Renewing the Mind

Therefore, brothers and sisters, in view of the mercies of God, I urge you to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God; this is your true worship. Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may discern what is the good, pleasing, and perfect will of God.

— Romans 12:1-2

Finally brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable—if there is any moral excellence and if there is anything praiseworthy—dwell on these things. Do what you have learned and received and heard from me, and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

— Philippians 4:8-9

God does the transforming, and he does it where we think. Our part is deciding, day after day, what our minds keep going back to.

Where the Book Falls Open

BEFORE COVID, EVERY CONGREGATION HAD SONGBOOKS THAT SAT IN THE RACKS FOR YEARS. Pick one up, stand it on its spine, and let go. It falls open to the same few places every time: the song we sing at every funeral, the one the song leader reaches for when he is out of time, the invitation song from a decade of Sunday nights. Nobody designed that. The binding formed from a few hundred Sundays of thumbs in the same margins, and now it opens itself there.

Our minds do the same thing, and left alone at eleven at night, they fall open to the same page. For some, it is the argument we lost in the middle of the week, rehearsed until the comeback is perfect. For others, it is something we fear, or a running tally of everyone who owes us something. It might be a screen we reach for without ever deciding to. None of us sat down and picked that page. The binding learned it.

In View of the Mercies

Romans 12 opens with a *therefore*, and it is one of the load-bearing ones in Scripture. Eleven chapters stand behind that word. Paul has spent them on our guilt and God's righteousness, on grace and faith, on baptism and the Spirit, on Israel and mercy, and he closes the whole argument with a doxology: *For from him and through him and to him are all things*, Romans 11:36. Only then does he ask anything of anyone.

Therefore, brothers and sisters, in view of the mercies of God, I urge you to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God; this is your true worship, Romans 12:1.

Notice what Paul asks for first: the body, the part of us that shows up and can be counted, and he calls that offering *your true worship*.¹³ The turn to our mind arrives in the very next breath, and the two of

them go together. We are never asked to think holy thoughts and then get around to the rest of ourselves. *In view of the mercies of God*: that is the ground we stand on before the first command arrives.

What is the command? *Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may discern what is the good, pleasing, and perfect will of God*, Romans 12:2.

A Command in the Wrong Voice

Look at the action words: *do not be conformed* and *be transformed* are both passive.¹⁴ Paul never tells us to transform ourselves. He tells us to *be transformed*, which is an odd thing to order anyone to do. You can be told to stand up. Being told to be grown is another matter entirely.

Lesson 1 talked about this already. *We all, with unveiled faces, are looking as in a mirror at the glory of the Lord and are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory*, 2 Corinthians 3:18. Same word, same passive voice, and those two verses are the only places Paul uses it. Both describe something being done to us, and both tie it to where the attention is fixed. In 2 Corinthians, the change comes through people looking at the glory of the Lord. In Romans, it comes by the renewing of the mind. Paul is describing one thing twice.

So, the means sits in the middle of the sentence: *by the renewing of your mind*. Renewing is a making-new-again word, and the only other place it turns up in the New Testament it belongs to the Holy Spirit.¹⁵ That work is his as well. What Paul hands us in this verse is an address: God transforms us, and he does it where we think.

The purpose clause tells us what a renewed mind is for: *so that you may discern what is the good, pleasing, and perfect will of God*. Discern is a testing word, the one used for assaying metal and then approving it as genuine,¹⁶ so the renewed mind is for the middle of the week. It is how we know what to do when nobody is standing there to hand us a verse for the situation in front of us. Lesson 11 takes up those decisions in earnest.

Paul's first application of it is worth noting, because the very next verse tells us not to think of ourselves more highly than we *should*. *Instead, think sensibly*, as Romans 12:3 says. Three words about the mind in one sentence, all aimed at how we size ourselves up. A renewed mind starts close to home.

Dwell on These Things

Philippians 4 gives us the practice. Paul has just told a worried church to pray, and he has promised that *the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus*, Philippians 4:7. Guard is a soldier's word, the one for a garrison posted at a gate. Having set a guard on the gate, Paul says what should be let through it.

Finally brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable—if there is any moral excellence and if there is anything praiseworthy—dwell on these things, Philippians 4:8.

Last week's reading asked us to count them. Six *whatevers*, then two more in a different grammar, which makes eight. Every one of the eight is a positive. Paul had every reason to write the other list. He was writing to a church with a quarrel in it, and he wrote from custody. A catalog of what to keep out of our heads would have been the easier letter. He wrote this one instead.

The *whatever* is worth a minute too, because Paul does not fence the field off into religious material. Whatever is true is true wherever we happen to find it, and an honorable thing a neighbor does belongs on this list as surely as a verse does.

Dwell is the surprise. In Greek it is an accounting word, the verb for entering a figure in a column.¹⁷ Paul uses it of Abraham, whose faith *was credited to him for righteousness*, Romans 4:3, and he uses it in a verse Lesson 2 spent a week inside: *So, you too consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus*, Romans 6:11. Same verb in all three places: reckon it, enter it, count it as true.

That is a long way from letting the mind drift through agreeable thoughts. Dwelling is deliberate reckoning, and it is most needed when we would rather spend the hour rehearsing something else.

We have to follow through. *Do what you have learned and received and heard from me, and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you*, Philippians 4:9. He let that church watch him, and what they were told to dwell on they also saw walking around.

What We Keep Opening To

Here is the question this lesson puts to you. What has your mind been opened to this week, and who has been doing the opening?

Most of us never decided. We took whatever was handed to us, several hours a day, in small pieces, from people we will never meet. A mind that spends four hours on outrage and eleven minutes in Scripture opens to outrage. None of it gets fixed by trying harder to think well. Romans 12:2 stands in the passive for a reason. What we are handed is smaller and more ordinary: one imperative out of Philippians 4:8, one item at a time, on purpose. A binding is slow to learn a new page, and the old one does not close because we wish it would.

And the mercies of Romans 12:1 are still standing behind every bit of it. We have already been accepted, and that acceptance is the first true thing the list gives us to dwell on.

On the evening of the resurrection, a group of men sat in a locked room in Jerusalem while the risen Christ stood in front of them eating a piece of fish. These were men who had heard him teach for three years. He reminded them of everything he had already told them, and then Luke records one thing more: *Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures*, Luke 24:45. Luke puts the verb in the passive. Their minds were opened for them.

The last door was unlocked from the other side, by the one who had been teaching them all along, and that is the voice Romans 12:2 is written in. Our part this week is real, small, and repeated. The transforming belongs to the one who opened their minds that night.

Key Concepts

Complete each statement. Answers in endnotes.¹⁸

1. Romans 12:1 urges us to present our bodies as a living sacrifice in view of the _____ of God.
2. Romans 12:2 tells us to be transformed by the _____ of our mind.
3. Romans 12:2 says a renewed mind is able to _____ what is the good, pleasing, and perfect will of God.

4. Philippians 4:8 tells us to _____ on whatever is true, honorable, just, and pure.
 5. Luke 24:45 says that Jesus _____ their minds to understand the Scriptures.
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Discussion Questions

Opening

1. Think of something you own that has a habit worn into it: a chair, a pair of boots, a song you always land on. What made it that way?

2. When your mind is left with nothing to do, where does it go? You don't have to say out loud where it goes, only how you would describe the kind of place it is.

Core

3. Read Romans 12:1–2. Paul spends eleven chapters before he gives a command. What difference does it make that *in view of the mercies of God* comes first?

4. Both commands in Romans 12:2 are passive. If God is the one doing the transforming, what exactly is left for us to do?

5. Read Philippians 4:8. *Dwell* is an accounting word, closer to *reckon* or *count it in* than to *daydream about*. How would that change what obeying this verse looks like on a weeknight?

Deeper

6. Paul's list is all positives. Why do you think he tells us what to let in rather than giving us a list of what to keep out? Which of the two lists would we write more quickly?

7. Read Philippians 4:9. Paul told them to do what they had *seen in me*. Who have you watched live this way? What did you learn from watching that you couldn't have learned from being told?

Journaling Prompts

15–20 minutes. Nobody reads these but you.

1. Write down what you gave the last hour of yesterday to, before you went to sleep. No verdict on it yet, just an honest record.
2. Pick one of the eight things in Philippians 4:8. Write about something from this past week that genuinely fits it, and why you have not thought about it since.
3. There is a page your mind falls open to that you wouldn't choose if you were choosing. Write about how long it has been open, and what it would cost you to start opening a different one.

Weekly Practice

THIS WEEK. Memorize Philippians 4:8.

Say it out loud in the last ten minutes before you sleep, when your mind is least guarded. Then name one thing from that day that was true, or honorable, or commendable, and count it in.

Looking Ahead

Lesson 5 – Learning to Want What God Wants, Psalm 37:4; Philippians 2:13; Galatians 5:16–17

Lesson 4 asked what we think about. Lesson 5 asks something harder: what we want.

A renewed mind can know God's good and pleasing will and still not want it. David writes as though that gap can close: *Take delight in the LORD, and he will give you your heart's desires*, Psalm 37:4.

Read Psalm 37:1–7 and Galatians 5:16–17 before the next class. Count the commands David gives in verses 3 through 7 and notice how many of them amount to waiting.

¹³ True worship in Romans 12:1 renders *logikos*, a word from the same family as *logos*, reason or word. Older translations give *reasonable service*. Paul asks for the body first and names that offering with a word drawn from the mind, so the presenting of the body and the renewing of the mind are being held together as one act of worship.

¹⁴ Conformed is *syschēmatizō* and transformed is *metamorphoō*. Both stand in Romans 12:2 as present passive imperatives. Paul uses *metamorphoō* only here and in 2 Corinthians 3:18; the only other New Testament occurrences are the Transfiguration accounts, Matthew 17:2 and Mark 9:2.

¹⁵ Renewing is *anakainōsis*, from a verb meaning to make new again. It appears twice in the New Testament, here and in Titus 3:5, where it is renewal by the Holy Spirit. The related verb shows up in 2 Corinthians 4:16 and Colossians 3:10.

¹⁶ Discern is *dokimazō*, a word used for testing metal and then approving it as genuine. The same verb stands behind Paul's instruction to test all things in 1 Thessalonians 5:21.

¹⁷ Dwell is *logizomai*, a commercial term for reckoning an amount into an account. The CSB renders it *credited* in Romans 4:3 and *consider* in Romans 6:11.

¹⁸ ANSWERS: 1. mercies · 2. renewing · 3. discern · 4. dwell · 5. opened