

Free From Slavery

Message 11

The Key to Spiritual Growth

Romans 12:1-8

Introduction

If there is one question which haunts Christians more persistently than any other, surely it is this, “How shall I live the way God wants? From perplexity over what to do with your summer, to whether you should look more closely to the appealing young man or woman across the room, to how you can drop your sin habits for good – we all struggle daily with knowing how to live as Christians. If you doubt me on this, just go to any Christian book store and observe the titles on display there. I suppose that for every one on doctrine you will find ten on practical Christian living. And this is not all bad. God *does* want us to live in obedience to His will, and much of the Bible instructs us how to do so. So now we come to the section of Paul’s letter to the Romans in which he doles out practical instructions, but only after 11 chapters of theology! Why this is the case will be one of the insights we receive tonight.

Truth before Consequences

How you live is of vital importance. Paul has emphasized repeatedly that we are saved apart from anything we do. All our good deeds add nothing to our salvation, no matter how good they are – and all our evil deeds subtract nothing to our salvation, no matter how evil they are. But those who are “in Christ”, who are no longer in the flesh and of the world, will live very differently than those who are outside of Christ. So now as Paul begins to detail this different life, he begins by *begging* us to heed his teaching. The verb here is translated “beg” or “urge” or “beseech”. This is an urgent matter, and it is essential that we pay close attention.

But even before he gives his first instruction, Paul establishes the basis for all that is to follow. Using “therefore” he points us back to the teaching he has already given us – the first 11 chapters, which he summarizes as an account of the “mercies of God”. Isn’t that a magnificent way to encompass the message of salvation? What word captures more completely what God has done for us than mercy? All through these 11 chapters Paul has shown again and again that we are thoroughly sinful, but God saved us anyway. We did not deserve anything from God, but He gave us everything He had to give. When we should have died, God not only let us live, He died for us so we would be free from the power of sin and death forever. What mercy! What a God! What a staggering doctrine!

Now we come to the consequences of this doctrine – the life we must live. This will come as a surprise to most Christians. We tend to be bored by doctrine, and think it mostly irrelevant to getting on with life. But that is a colossal misunderstanding. It’s true that doctrine unhooked from real life is boring and useless, but a life not based on doctrine is unstable. Christian teaching these days tends to focus on the importance of loving each other and staying clear of major sins. Sometimes we are admonished to read your Bible and pray, and to witness to unbelievers – and we certainly do that in RUF. But if all we get is teaching to do the right thing, eventually we become frustrated and demoralized. We find that we can’t measure up to the demands placed on us, so we insist that the demands be lowered. Then eventually we discover that the Christian life has become a boring version of the way everyone else lives. And that’s because you can’t *live* by the law anymore than you can be *saved* by the law! And that’s really what many sermons and Bible studies boil down to – the law for Christians. And it’s inevitable. There is no way to escape living by a bunch of rules – unless you base your life on the doctrine of Christ’s salvation for us.

Look at all of Paul’s letters. They all have the same outline. Part 1 is doctrine, Part 2 is ethics. The

ethics is always based on the doctrine, and the doctrine always demands the ethics. In fact, look at the whole New Testament. The gospels and Acts form a doctrinal foundation, and the epistles provide the application to life. Doctrine by itself is useless, and ethics by itself is impossible. The reason we have hope that we can live for Christ is the reality that He saved us when we were sinners. This must be in front of us at all times. As long as we remember that we are saved by grace, we will see that we live by grace as well.

Body and Mind

Paul's first instruction is a dual command encompassing our whole being. First he instructs us to offer our bodies, then he instructs us to change our minds.

Most of us probably interpret Paul's command to offer our bodies as a reference to our whole lives, and that isn't far from the truth. But such a view misses the issue of why Paul chose the word "body" in the first place. No doubt a major reason was to counter at the outset the prevalent Greek idea that the body, as a material entity, was unworthy of divine interest. The Greeks considered the body to be the "prisonhouse of the soul". Much of Greek philosophy and religion was devoted to freeing the soul from the body so it could return to the spirit world from which it had originated. This is a pagan idea, and the New Testament consistently refutes it. The biblical view of the body is that it is a creation of God and is therefore good. Greeks would have been scandalized to think of offering something as base as a body to God, but our bodies are exactly what God wants. It was Christ's death in a body that saves us, and it is our obedience in the body that pleases Him. What you do with your body matters to God.

Next Paul commands us to be transformed. We are to be different people than we were before and than those around us. We were born in sin, and people around us live in sin. It is their natural element. However, we are not in sin, but in Christ – so we must be different. The trouble is, sin still clings to us. We covered Paul's struggle with this in chapter 7. Even such a great apostle as he could not escape the daily struggle with sin. And if you are really in Christ, if your eyes and ears have been opened to see and hear the gospel, you know sin still troubles you, too. Okay, so we must be transformed, but how? By renewing your mind.

This is another teaching that is disturbing to many Christians. Paul is saying here that the key to spiritual growth is in your mind. This directly contradicts the way ministry is done in some places. You will not grow spiritually by seeking to love God more, or by trying to love people more, or by developing greater commitment to obedience. All these are recipes for failure. In the short run you may show some signs of spiritual growth, but they will be false, and in time that will be apparent. No, you cannot develop as a Christian by pursuing deeper spiritual commitment or a fuller experience of God. Awesome worship, moving messages, terrific retreats – none of these will produce spiritual growth – unless they make you think differently.

Now some people will balk at my apparent preference for the intellect. Perhaps you have been afflicted by some intellectual Christian who tried to ram doctrine down your throat, but seemed to have no real love for God or man. Such a thing is definitely a perversion – for as we said at the beginning, true doctrine demands changed living. Even if such a person utters true statements, he is not teaching true doctrine, for his life contradicts his message. No, Paul is not giving preference to the intellect, nor is he elevating the mind. *The issue is not importance, but priority.*

When Paul says in verse 2 that we must be transformed, he means the whole person – body, mind, emotions, will. A transformed person will delight in God, will be zealous for the gospel, will obey in his body – but it all starts in the mind. It all starts with a clear understanding of the gospel, and that changed

way of thinking in turn changes the way you act, the way you feel, and your basic commitments in life. If you devote yourself to godly thinking, the rest can follow. So it's not that your mind is more important than your emotions or your actions. You *should* be thrilled with Christ, you *should* be obedient to all His commands. But lasting emotions and actions only follow a changed mind. Some people just want to study theology. This is wrong. Some people just want to love Jesus. This is wrong. Some people just want to do ministry. This is wrong. All are necessary. Mature Christians love Jesus, know some theology, and do ministry. Maturity involves the whole person.

This might be a new thought for you, but as you look around, you can see how this principle works out in different Christian circles. I'll start by mentioning the group I belong to – reformed Christians. We tend to be in churches with a name that includes the word presbyterian or reformed. We are probably the best at developing our minds. The problem is, growth tends to stop there. Consequently reformed churches tend to be characterized by intellectualism. Fundamental churches are very strong on Christian behavior, but they tend not to base it adequately on a changed mind. Consequently, it tends to degenerate into legalism – and such churches seem mostly interested in the music you listen to and how worldly you are. Pentecostal and charismatic churches are perhaps the most emotionally expressive – a good quality. But without a transformed mind, it tends to become shallow emotionalism. Some churches are successful at working on behavior, emotions, and conscience together. These typically would be what we call evangelical churches. But lacking a well developed mind, they often mistake pietism for true piety – and their lives never develop the depth to challenge seriously the world that competes for our affections.

So you see, none of us have this worked out. No church is immune to criticism. We all fail and have need to grow. But the next question is this: how can the mind be changed? This passage doesn't address this question directly, but we must give an answer since it is of paramount importance. Essentially, the mind is changed by those means God has given for Christian growth: the scripture, prayer, and the sacraments. Together we call these the means of grace. They are the channels God uses to minister to us. The Holy Spirit transforms us as we read the Bible and hear it preached, as we pray, and as we participate in baptism and the Lord's Supper.

These are the key. Without a steady diet of scripture, without ongoing prayer, without frequent communion, you don't stand a chance. You will be an immature Christian all your life. You may get a fine degree from Lehigh. You may even get a Ph.D. You may become a successful businessman, or become an elder in your church, or become a wonderful husband and father – but you will be spiritually immature. You may convert many, you may serve on the mission field, you may write theological books, you may be a respected pastor or counselor or worship leader – but unless you immerse yourself in scripture, devote yourself to prayer, and take the Lord's Supper, you will never grow spiritually. Is that the kind of life you want to live? No, I should hope not!

Now you can see we have a means of evaluating how much help you may receive from the many Christian opportunities before you – retreats, concerts, books, music, lectures, mission trips, camps. Some of these will really boost your spiritual growth, and others will do little for you. You can tell which are which by observing the degree to which they get you into God's word and prayer. And now you can see why the event which forms the pinnacle of Christian growth is worship in a true church on the Lord's Day. There the word, prayer, and the sacraments are present every week. Attendance at a true church on Sunday is the first step in real Christian growth.

Conclusion

We shall conclude tonight by noting that Paul adds a promise to his command to be renewed in your

mind. He says then “you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.” Knowing God’s will can be a difficult and confusing problem – and I know that some of you here are struggling with this. You see God’s promise? As your mind is renewed, you *will* do God’s will. What a freeing concept! In this challenging, changing world where we face opposition and temptations all around, you can overcome sin, you can obey God, you can love Him with all your heart – in short, you can succeed in the Christian life – if you will start by developing a renewed mind. Throw out the rubbish that’s in there now. Spend less time in worthless entertainment and more in God’s presence. As you do, you will be changed all the way through.

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