

## 063 The Power of Proper Self-Perception

Romans 12:3-8

Message by Dr. R Bruce Montgomery ~ Grace Church ~ 1/22/17

We left off two weeks ago in **Romans 12:1,2** talking about giving our minds to God.

As Christians we are called to resist being conformed, (squeezed into the mold) of the world's way of thinking – what we refer to as secular humanism – but rather to undergo a radical transformation by the renewal of our minds.

Paul ends **verse 2** telling us the result of having a renewed mind: namely that we will be able to discern the will of God – what is good and pleasing and perfect.

He's told us what to avoid thinking like, but he hasn't told us yet how and what the renewed mind should think about.

If you were going to describe what the Christian mind thinks, what would you say, and where would you start? Listen carefully to what Paul deals with first in talking about how the renewed mind thinks.

**Romans 12:3** *For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you.*

This is remarkable! Of all the things he could have said about the specific ways in which the renewed Christian mind does not conform to the world's way of thinking, he chooses to start by addressing the issue of pride - what we think about ourselves in relationship to other people, and in particular what we think of ourselves compared to how we view our fellow believers in the church.

This has to be the starting point, because the issue of pride and the place of self in relationship to God and to other people is the deepest human problem in the universe.

Using the same pattern as he did in **verse 2**, he says something negative and something positive. In **verse 2** he writes: *Don't be conformed to this world . . . do be transformed by the renewal of your mind.*

Here he says *Don't think of yourself more highly than you ought but rather think of yourself with sober judgment.*

Although not quite as readily apparent in our English versions as in the Greek, the root verb of **to think** (*phronein*) occurs four times in **verse 3**.<sup>1</sup> The meaning of **to think** is not referring here just to the mental process, but to a particular mindset, how you view things

Paul plays on the root to distinguish a self-perception that is out of bounds with one which displays sound judgment.

There is no such thing as neutral thinking. There is good thinking, there is bad thinking. There's a wrong way of thinking about ourselves that we must reject (i.e. thinking too highly of ourselves), and there's a right way of thinking (having an accurate, sober judgment of ourselves).

When our thinking has been truly transformed and renewed by the Spirit, it is impossible to have an exaggerated view of our own worth. Instead, as the verb *phronein* can be translated, the renewed mind will "*observe proper moderation or discretion*" in its understanding of itself.

Since our minds have been renewed, our judgment, our self-assessment, will be changed as well. A mark of being conformed to this world is to think more highly of ourselves than we should, but if the Spirit has transformed us we will think with sober judgment.

To **think too highly of ourselves** is to have an overly inflated view of our own importance.

A couple of big words we use to describe such people are *egomaniac* or *megalomaniac*. My grandmother referred to them as people with a "swelled head."

In psychological literature megalomania is used loosely to mean having delusional fantasies of wealth, power, or omnipotence. The ideas of megalomania are called grandiose delusions.

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<sup>1</sup>Paul is a masterful writer, as he exhibits here. His classic formulation would find a ready appreciative audience in the more literate members of the Roman churches Paul is writing to.

Megalomania is associated with another personality disorder called narcissism, which is defined as a long-term pattern of abnormal behavior characterized by exaggerated feelings of self-importance, an obsession with personal appearance, an excessive need for admiration, and a total disregard for what other people feel or think.

Narcissism is summed up in the humorous ditty I learned as a child:

*I love myself, I think I'm grand  
When I go to the movies, I hold my hand.  
I wrap my arms around my waist,  
And when I get fresh, I slap my face.*

Arrogant people love to tell you how educated they are. They think they know more or are simply smarter than other people.

They focus on what they've accomplished.

They boast about how much they've acquired.

Maybe they brag about the famous people they have associated with.

They can't ever hear a story without trying to top it. And they are never, ever wrong.

It would be nice if this type of pride didn't exist among Christians, but unfortunately it does. Many Christians are ambitious, they crave prominent positions and want everyone to acknowledge their authority. They thrive on power and control.

If they aren't in a leadership position at the present time, they will boast about they've done for the Lord and his church in the past.

Maybe their pride comes from having known or worked with a Christian leader or institution.

Some take pride in their denomination, acting like it's more important to be a Presbyterian or Lutheran or Baptist or Pentecostal (or whatever else the might be) than to be a Christian. National gatherings of churches tend to foster a certain smugness about their group's uniqueness in God's plan. I don't think God is impressed. I know I'm not.

In **Colossians 2:18** Paul warns about people whose minds have puffed them up with *idle notions*. He says such a person

**Colossians 2:19** has *lost connection with the Head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow.*

Nothing causes more damage to a local church than a believer who overrates himself or herself and tries to perform a ministry he or she cannot or is not called by God to do.

On the other hand, when each believer is functioning in the gifts the Spirit has given and equipped them to do, there is tremendous power released!

Satan knows that, and so one of the chief ways Satan attacks and destroys effective churches isn't from the outside, but from the inside, through introducing a spirit of competitiveness, of "thinking more highly of ourselves than we ought." Let's be honest – we all tend to have a false evaluation of ourselves and our role in the body of believers. Don't be thinking of how of how this message applies to others you may know, but look in the mirror of God's word and allow him to speak to you about this issue.

Thinking too highly of ourselves is not a new phenomena. At our elders' meeting last Tuesday Cesar Moreno shared from **I Corinthians 1:18-31**. Paul spends 14 verses emphasizing to the believers in Corinth that they have nothing to boast about. Paul is elaborating on message of prophet Jeremiah. **Jeremiah 9:23,24** *This is what the LORD says: "Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom or the strong man boast of his strength or the rich man boast of his riches, <sup>24</sup>but let him who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on the earth, for in these I delight," declares the LORD.*

Evidently boasting (thinking too highly of themselves) was a recurring problem in the church in Corinth, because in his second letter he has to remind them the same thing: **II Corinthians 10:17** *"Let him who boasts boast in the Lord."*

If anyone had cause to boast, it was Paul. But as he wrote in **Galatians 6:14** *May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.*

**Philippians 2:3 Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves.** In verse four he talks about looking out for the interests of others, not just yourself. Then hits us hard with the example of Jesus' humility in **Philippians 2:5-8 Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: *6Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, 7but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. 8And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross!*** (The most shameful, lowly, disgraceful way to die – reserved for criminals).

To return to our text.

Antidote to the deadly poison of having too high an opinion of yourself is seen in last half of the verse **Romans 12:3 *“but rather think of yourself with sober judgment***

Sober judgment is accurate judgment, thinking about who you are in Christ. It involves seeing ourselves as God sees us, not in comparison with others.

Having renewed minds delivers us from the self-centeredness typical of people in the world (which we are not to conform to) and enables us to look at ourselves objectively and realistically.

We need to have a balanced, sensible, realistic view of ourselves.

I like what the late Ray Stedman, former pastor of the Peninsula Bible Church of Palo Alto, CA. says in one of his books.

He said that every morning when he got up he tried to remind himself of three things:

1. **I am made in the image of God.** I'm not an animal and I don't have to behave like an animal.
2. **I am filled with the Spirit of God.** Even though I don't deserve it in the least degree, I have the power of God at work within me. God himself is willing to be at work in me through the problems and pressures I go through this day.
3. **I am a part of the plan of God.** God is working out all things to a great and final purpose in the earth, and I am

part of it. What I do today has purpose and significance and meaning. This is not a meaningless day I am going through. Even the smallest incident, the most apparently insignificant word or relationship, is involved in his great plan. Therefore all has meaning and purpose.

As Stedman concludes, thinking rightly of ourselves gives us **“confidence without conceit.”**

I realize that some people suffer from low self-esteem. They think too little of themselves. But that's not the point here. There is less danger of a person depreciating himself/herself than exaggerating his or her own importance.

In terms of worth or value before God, we all stand on level ground. We are all chosen by God's sovereign will, his choice of us is the result of unmerited favor, and this grace is received through faith in Jesus Christ. Any notion that any one believer is better than any other is pure nonsense. It's what one author calls “insane” thinking.

**Romans 12:3 *“but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you.***

The standard of by which you measure yourself is the faith God has given you.

The word “faith” can be used several ways in, but throughout Romans Paul uses this word for faith (*pistis*) to refer to the human act and attitude of believing. This trust in Christ is the common denominator for all believers.<sup>2</sup> This confident trust in God which recognizes all faith and grace are from God prevents any misjudgment of ourselves.

What does **“measure”** and the mathematical term **“in proportion to”** in verse 6 refer to? Evidently Paul sees it as something variable. If you want to assess yourself accurately, measure your faith in Christ.

In choosing faith as the assessment standard by which to measure ourselves, Paul is choosing an act and attitude that is not

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<sup>2</sup> The basis for a true estimation of ourselves is faith. Just like every other believer, who you are is totally dependent on the mercy of God in Christ.

within the pale of the secular mind. Faith is unique to the renewed minds of believers.

Faith is total dependence on another. There are many counterfeits parading as faith, but remember these two things about genuine faith and you won't be fooled. The **origin** of true faith is always God, and the **object** of genuine faith is always God. Faith by nature looks away from itself and looks to Jesus Christ and enjoys him as the sum and judge of all that is true and right and beautiful and valuable and satisfying.

John Piper: *"So what Paul is saying is that the essence of the new Christian mind is what we see and savor - we behold and we embrace - Jesus Christ and not ourselves as the supreme truth and supreme treasure in the universe."*<sup>3</sup>

As Paul watches people puff themselves up thinking too highly of themselves, he says, *"here is how to get an accurate perception of yourself and your worth. Make your faith in Jesus the measure of your mind and heart and life."*

Our faith in Jesus is the measure of our significance and value and esteem, because faith means looking away from ourselves and embracing him as the embodiment of all that is significant, and valuable, and worthy of honor. The measure of our renewed mind - our new self in Christ - is the degree to which we look away from ourselves and place our trust in him.

Pray for God to increase your faith, to strengthen your trust and reliance on him.

We are saved **"by grace through faith"** **Ephesians 2:8-9**, and we must live and lovingly serve in the same way **-by grace through faith**. And that **faith is a gift of God**. We don't earn it, we don't deserve it, and so there is no room for boasting.

The tendency to arrogance seems to frequently raise its ugly head in the area of spiritual gifts. Instead of praising God for his gifts, people give attention and recognition to the one who is wielding the gift. This easily leads to false pride.

Just like our salvation, our spiritual gifts have come because of God's grace. They must be accepted and exercised by faith. We can't take any credit for our gifts. All we can do is accept them and use them to honor his name.

Each believer has different gifts. Paul lists some of those in verses 4-8. Some are given the gift of exhortation (encouragement). Some preach. Some teach. Giving and showing mercy are important gifts. God has given the ability of administration to others (will hold off discussion on the individual gifts until next week).

The point I want to emphasize today is that in order for the church to be healthy and to grow each Christian must exercise his or her gift by faith for the good of the whole church.

Paul is saying here that we will have a proper perception, a correct estimation of ourselves when we examine ourselves in keeping with the faith we are demonstrating as we exercise the various gifts God has given us. There's no place for pride to enter the picture, because all the gifts are equally important to God and must be received by faith.

### **Conclusion**

This verse and the ones we'll look at next week are very relevant to us here in Grace Church at this exact juncture.

God has given us a **vision to "attract people to Christ with love, grace and excellence."** I shared at the annual meeting about the five major objectives the elders feel God has given us to accomplish that vision in 2017. In order to accomplish those objectives, by faith we adopted a budget that requires a substantial increase in giving.

Since the rain kept so many away, I will review them for you next Sunday morning.

But know this. It can be done. There is tremendous power in a church when each of us has a proper self-perception of ourselves in relationship to God, and in relationship to one another.

May God enable us to work together as one body under the headship of Jesus Christ to accomplish his purposes here and around the world.

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<sup>3</sup> John Piper, *Thinking with Sober Judgment According to Our God-Given Measure of Faith*, a sermon preached August 29, 2004 at Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis, MN>