

## **Sermon 139: Romans 12:2: The importance of a renewed mind**

### **OUTLINE**

Enemies of the renewed mind  
Uses of the renewed mind

### **INTRODUCTION**

Spiritual warfare is primarily a battle for the mind. In preaching the gospel you are seeking to bring the light of the Gospel to darkened minds, and in seeking to grow spiritually we are told here by Paul that this too is done through the mind being renewed. As Paul enters into this new section about living out the gospel he starts in the place of importance, by talking about the importance of the mind. Foundational to all the Christian living and the worship we seek to give through being a living sacrifice, it all has to begin with a mind that is renewed. To paraphrase what Paul is saying, 'If you want to be a living sacrifice and offering constant and acceptable worship, you must not be squeezed into the mould of the world, but be transformed by a mind that is renewed by God's truth not the lies of this age and so are able to discover God's will in order to do it.' As we consider this verse we want to look at two things, our present day enemies of a renewed mind, and what uses the renewed mind has.

#### **Enemies of the renewed mind**

From the womb to the tomb your mind is under constant attack. At all times your mind is being barraged with ideas, right or wrong. There are ideas that are the background noise of your life that are as ubiquitous as the air you breathe, but like living in a city you are constantly breathing in pollution. These ideas place pressure upon you and they shape you and squeeze you into a mould. Paul is aware of this and so calls for us not to be conformed to the world. In different countries and cultures there will be different pollution that we are subjected to. Are you aware of the influences that are seeking to win you to their way of thinking and thereby shape your thought? One of the big things we face is mindlessness. It appears that on all fronts the devil is seeking to distance us from mind, reason and thought. Let me list some of the enemies of thought.

Outside of Christianity we are still feeling the effects of modernism. This is the view of the world that is naturalistic and finds only naturalistic answers to all the big questions. Who made us, no one, matter is eternal; why are we here, no reason, we are here by chance; what am I, I am a chance collection of atoms, an evolved animal; what am I here for? There is no design or purpose, we must assign ourselves meaning from what feels good or makes us happy. What is truth? there is no objective truth only that which we have inherited from our surroundings or determine for ourselves. The effects of modernism have influenced the Christian mind and instead of holding fast the biblical teaching as a light in the darkness there has been a compromise and a negotiation, and Liberalism is the result. A religion without the supernatural that capitulates to all science says basing its authority not in the scriptures but in whatever science can help us prove. This worldview is saying to you, do not base the authority for what you believe on the bible, you must only accept what man by his mind can prove. This of course is automatically biased against all supernatural explanations. This has resulted in a reason versus faith antithesis where Christians are made to believe that reason and faith are irreconcilable, and Christians have retreated from reason and redefined faith as something subjective not objective, something private not

universal, something irrational and indefensible and something that has to trash the mind for survival seeking its validation in experience not fact.

After modernism came post-modernism, or ultra-modernism. Modernism filled with an optimism in man's ability believed that through education, political unity across the world, the emancipation of countries from tyranny, first world living things would inevitably improve. But with the world wars western thought became pessimistic, jaded and sceptical. There arose a rife scepticism that was wary of all truths that claimed to explain all things. Ideas were seen to be terrible weapons as we looked back on communism, fascism and Nazism. Every human thought project that claimed to have the truth was always replaced in the next generation. Truth was seen to be an illusion for no one could really know anything beyond their cultural lenses and experiences. A deep scepticism set in that claimed that no one could have the truth for all facts are interpreted facts and there was no one objective who could claim to have enough distance from their own experience to not be self-deceiving. Religion was held up to be one of the worst offenders when it came to claiming to have the truth and controlling people with ideas that were no self-aware enough to realise they could be wrong. We live in a day that has inherited this philosophy and a political and religious pluralism demands that none of us claim to have the truth, that all religious truth claims be removed from political and public spheres into the private. Any claims made to truth are answered with, 'well, that's your belief/opinion.' As if that is enough to remove the authority of what you say. Christians have imbibed this scepticism and lost their confidence in being able to know truth. They no longer see the bible as word not from men who are corrupted by their perspectives but from God, which holds universal and objective truth. so they too have retreated from holding truth claims with authority, they have surrendered the ground of doctrinal distinctives. They have been bullied out of using their minds and to indulge an openness that causes our brains to fall out.

One of the greatest enemies to human thought is our entertainment addicted culture. Through constant exposure we inoculate ourselves to the images we watch. Those things which once shocked us and stood out in stark relief are now not even noticed. We have all sorts of things normalised through what we entertain ourselves with. Homosexuality, premarital sex, adultery, drunkenness, violence, abortion, euthanasia, all these things are constantly paraded before our eyes and ears. Taboo topics are alluringly presented and sought after and we get used to them. Values, norms, cultural perceptions are now sculpted and packages by the media and instead of shaping culture we are passive consumers of it, and it takes the form of whatever the entertainers are doing. Fashions, interests, hobbies, sports, language are no longer shaped by national and cultural forces but by the media. Some have suggested that we live in the age of generation Z which will also be the last generation. This is so because with the homogenous culture that the internet and media produce, distinct generational differences will be flattened out as one culture impregnates the world. We are entertaining ourselves to death, lulled into a coma through pleasure. The church is as affected by the world and looks very little different from it because they imbibe all the same values and norms. We have stopped discerning and filtering our entertainment submerged under the tidal wave of it, and it has taken over and shapes us like everyone else. The TV which was originally heralded as a tool for news and education has destroyed education with its overstimulation and instant gratification. Trained to want only the MSG type imparting of info through entertainment, we have lost our ability to be educated. Reading is no longer done for fun but is a toil; books that are read are only novels or biographies with Hollywood moments in them. Education has moved from memorization to multiple choice, where we have to spoon feed the answers to our children. Critical thought is non-existent. And so Christians trained in this non-thought are subject to

every wind of doctrine. They approve by sentiment not by discerning the content of a message despite appearances.

Another enemy attacking our minds is the Ecumenical activism that insists doctrines divide and that Christians should put away doctrinal distinctives in order to work together. Another enemy are those forms of worship which put forward ritual and not informed worship. Another enemy is the arid hyper-intellectualism of Academia which is all about facts without any application of those facts. A major one is the anti-intellectualism of Pentecostalism and the Charismatic Church which views doctrinal formulation and purity with suspicion. The letter kills but the Spirit gives life is a slogan which marginalises truth for experience.

What are the pollutants that affect you? Has your confidence in God's truth and your ability to know it been eroded through the claims of science, by post-modern pluralism, but a hyper-spiritual anti-intellectualism? Or is it that you have been lulled into a stupor and find it too hard to think having picked up the lazy mental habits of a media oriented age? Do you realise there is a continual battle for your mind and are you resisting the forces that are seeking to shape you, discerning their existence and deliberately seeking to know God's truth to counteract them. This is how we worship. Worship is not set against truth and doctrine, the mind is the way by which we inform and better our worship. All good worship of God begins with a mind fully informed.

What is worldliness? Traditionally worldliness is someone who acts like someone in the world, who does the same activities. So in generations before us worldliness was someone who drank alcohol, danced, played cards, chewed tobacco, watched movies, wore make-up, smoked and wore blue jeans. Paul is reminding us that worldliness is something much deeper than mere action. Worldliness is also a way of thinking. Worldliness is the web of lies we believe and then live out. You see drinking alcohol is not worldliness it is the mind you do it from, the set of beliefs you subscribe to that you are acting out of. Some drink to escape pain instead of seeking refuge in God; some drink for identity as they have not grounded their identity in being God's child; some drink as their joy instead of seeking their joy in God. They believe lies about themselves, sin, God and many other things and live out those lies. This is worldliness not the act of drinking. Perhaps you can see where I am going with this.

You see as Christians we are not kept from worldliness by merely not doing certain actions. We could be doing all the right actions for the wrong reasons and be worldly and not experiencing the transformation that pleases God. A Christian can be worldly by making an idol of their job and seeking for their job to bring them happiness and define their existence and make them feel important through success. A Christian can have an idol by being materialistic living for the here and now and not defining their lives by their heavenly citizenship. Their lives are the pursuit of things, experiences, health but not holiness, God's glory in missions and loving service. Christians can make an idol of marriage or children, they can fall prey to the values of materialism and hedonism that dominate our age. Even though their lives might not be characterised by flagrant sin, their hearts are not living out of the truth that God is their king and all things are done for His glory, but out of the motivations they have absorbed from their culture.

Ironically moralistic religion is also a form of worldliness. Since worldliness is behaviour that lives out a lie, those people who believe that they can save themselves by strict living are in fact worldly, despite their self-deceptions. They are not living in light of the truth that we are all sinners and that there is none who can please God by good works. They do not hear the message that God offers a free salvation to be receive by faith not earned by works.

Since their minds are not renewed by God's truth and they are following a pragmatist view of things we must say that the most criminal person who lives like God and His truth is not real by pursuing pleasure is as worldly as the legalistic person who is not coming to God through Christ but is trusting in their good works. Please remember that the majority of the world is moralistic and religious and this is a pervasive form of worldliness.

### **Uses of the renewed mind**

We have looked at some of the contemporary enemies that face us that diminish the mind. Now we want to look at the importance of the renewed mind by showing how useful it is to the believer. We want to show that Paul's call here is not optional but foundational to all that we do. We could mention every area of life but let's focus on some of the central ones<sup>1</sup>.

Firstly, worship. Traditionally truth and worship have been set at odds. Worship is seen to be all about feeling, sentiment and experience, and doctrine is seen to be dead head knowledge. This couldn't be further from Paul's conception. He is talking about spiritual worship and he tells us that the way we worship God in a holy and acceptable fashion is by renewing our minds. We cannot worship what we do not know, this would run the risk of idolatry. And instead of worshipping God in ways that He deems appropriate we take it upon ourselves to decide what we think He would like, letting emotion, those things that attract people, that things that appear to get results taking the foreground. By renewing our minds by the truth of Scripture we learn that God is holy and does not need our worship though it is right that we give it to Him. This means that we are under obligation to worship Him, we are not doing Him a favour but our duty, and that as sinners we have no right to approach Him but in Christ. We must worship in Spirit and in truth, not merely with outward action but from the heart. We must worship our God as Trinitarian. We must worship Him in accordance with His word not laying aside His revelation for our own wills. We must view all of life as worship. We must not create idols in our minds or reduce God to human dimensions or experience. Instead of suppressing the truth about God we now submit to God's revelation about Himself and allow it to fashion our service.

Secondly, faith itself contrary to popular conceptions is not a nebulous thing. It is not a misdirected sense of utter dependence that has no defined object. It is not merely a religious or spiritual interest in a deliberately undefined deity. Many people today would define themselves as having faith or being people of faith but not have the faith of the Bible. If asked if they believed certain truths they would deny that Jesus is the only Saviour of sinners, that God would ever send people to hell, that God is holy and will one day hold all people accountable judging them according to their works. To say you believe in God does not mean that you have saving faith. There is important biblically defined content to saving faith. You must see your sin, that God is holy and must judge that sin, you must see your inability to save yourself and how the only provision God has made for your salvation is Christ. You must see that your only hope is to cast yourself on God's mercy trusting in Christ's work in your place as the only sufficient way your sin can be paid for. To say these things do not matter or that we are being pedantic or dogmatic is to seriously err. Jesus claimed that it was the truth that sets us free. We cannot claim these truths do not matter.

Thirdly think of Christian growth and holiness. How many times does the bible indicate that it is the fool that hates knowledge and does not pursue wisdom? The prophets even speak of being destroyed for a lack of knowledge Hos. 4:6. If you read the NT carefully you will

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<sup>1</sup> See John R W Stott, *Your Mind Matters, the place of the mind in the Christian life*, IVP London, 1974.

see that the apostles insisted that knowledge is necessary for Christian growth. 2 Pet. 1:5, 'For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge.' Eph. 1:16-18, 'I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, 17 that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, 18 having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints.' Eph. 3:14-19; Phil. 1:9-11; Col. 1:9-10. Contrary to popular belief all doctrine is practical, there is not a truth about God which you can learn which does not have some bearing on your life.

With regards to holiness knowledge is essential. John Owen said, 'that good which the mind cannot discover, the will cannot choose, nor the affections cleave unto.'<sup>2</sup> If the heart is deceitful above all things, and thereby deceives us then it is essential that we educate ourselves with God's truth that we be not deceived and continue holy.

Fourthly, assurance of salvation cannot come but from knowledge. It is for this reason that Paul prays that the Ephesians may have knowledge, 3:14-19, 'For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, 15 from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, 16 that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, 17 so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith---that you, being rooted and grounded in love, 18 may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, 19 and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.'

Fifthly, guidance. Let my last point be the point that Paul is making. You need to have renewed minds in order that you may discover God's will in order to do it, and that by doing it you will be transformed. 'But be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.' The word test means to examine, to inspect, to scrutinize, to think deeply upon. Here we see how God expects us to find His will. Once again contrary to popular belief the ordinary way of leading us is not by impression, it is not by playing biblical roulette, it is not by laying out fleeces, it is by having our minds educated by God's truth and by deep thought recognizing the path of obedience. God by His Spirit does sometimes give us strong impressions, but we must not think that this is the ordinary way in which we make our daily decisions to honour Him. To discover God's good, acceptable and perfect will, we do not need an inside line on God's eternal decrees and need a word of prophecy or an inner prompting to prod us in the right direction. Paul is here telling us that by properly educating our minds upon God's truth we will become accustomed to identifying the path of obedience. By mind and by examination we can determine the best way to serve God. Psalm 32:8-9 is another example of God's ordinary way of guiding us, 'I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you. Be not like a horse or a mule, without understanding, which must be curbed with bit and bridle, or it will not stay near you.' This is one of David's penitential psalms where he is reflecting on his sin. These words are God's words of instruction to him. Notice the place of instruction and teaching as the means of God's counsel. And then in v9 notice the negative where we are called not to be like an animal that does not use its mind but has to be led about with a bit and bridle. For some reason Christians have this notion that mature spirituality is not making decisions based on principles gleaned from God's word but following feelings, impressions, words, and fleeces which are more like bits and bridles. Please do not misunderstand me, I do believe that God can give us impressions and does. I have personally experienced this when I accepted the call to St Helena, there was an overwhelming desire and burning in my heart

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p32.

when the option was set before us. But when I came to NZ it was not under any impression but out of a decision to do the better thing for my family at the time. Both were the good, acceptable and perfect will of God. So whether you are choosing a job, a place to live, who to marry, don't think that every decision is to be made by impressions, renew your minds, know God and His commandments and by deep thinking you will discover those principles that you need to do His will. I would advise that you should never seek impressions, if God wants to lay something on your heart He will, but don't whip it up, don't become so introspective that you are always questioning, is this an impression. You will know it when it happens and it will not be an everyday occurrence.

So, Paul calls us to be holy, he tells us to be aware of the pressure the world is exerting upon us to squeeze us into its mould. But holiness is not merely running from worldly things and thinking, we need minds that are full of truth in order to know God's will in order to do it. We cannot allow this age with its many forms of attack upon the mind to prevent the Christian from having a renewed mind. We must be those who cultivate thought, think deeply, who are not led by passion and desire but by discerning God's will and choosing it.