

New Hope Global Sermon January 7 2021 – You Have to Change The Way You Think!

Introduction:

For billions of people 2020 was an unusually difficult year. There have been blessings along the way and obvious evidences of God’s presence and goodness day by day. But for many of us, the problems that caused upheavals in 2020 remain. So, if we don’t want a rerun of 2020 in 2021, what’s the solution?

You Have To Change The Way You Think!

That’s the challenge I want us to address as we start 2021. This can’t be a blanket, fast-food kind of change for every part of us. That transformation takes time, lots of time. But we can make incremental changes as we address one area after another. And the area I want us to focus on this week is any specific negative pathway that our thoughts traveled down recurrently in 2020.



The practicality of Romans 12:1-2

A key scripture that will help us change the way we think is Romans 12:1-2. Let’s look at it in two different versions:

PASSION: “Beloved friends, what should be our proper response to God’s marvelous mercies? I encourage you to surrender yourselves to God to be his sacred, living sacrifices. And live in holiness, experiencing all that delights his heart. For this becomes your genuine expression of worship. ² Stop imitating the ideals and opinions of the culture around you,^[a] but be inwardly transformed by the Holy Spirit through a total reformation of how you think. This will empower you to discern God’s will as you live a beautiful life, satisfying and perfect in his eyes.”

NLT: “And so, dear brothers and sisters,^[a] I plead with you to give your bodies to God because of all he has done for you. Let them be a living and holy sacrifice—the kind he will find acceptable. This is truly the way to worship him.^[b] ² Don’t copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God’s will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect.”

God says believers’ mind transformation is a 5 step process.

Step 1. 12:1 – We recognize the mercies of God, – what Passion amplifies as “His marvelous mercies.” John Stott says, “God’s purpose is to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy” (*Romans commentary*, John Stott, p. 923). God knew the extent of our sin and yet He chose to open the way for us to be forgiven and made a new person through faith in Jesus Christ. Through the Spirit we are then empowered to grow up into Christlikeness and to experience all the fullness of God. That’s amazing, and utterly undeserved on our part.

Step 2. 12:2 - Our response to God’s marvelous mercy and amazing grace is surrender, “living in holiness, experiencing all that delights his heart.”

Step 3. 12:2 - Surrender is then spelled out: “do not copy the behavior and customs of the world.” “Stop imitating the ideals and opinions of the culture around you.”

The promise of changing the way we think comes after these first 3 steps. Mercy, surrender, resisting the pressures of the world. It is a fairly simple, straightforward process. But, actually, step three is radical because we

often don't recognize all the ways the world patterns of thought have become our own. So let's look deeper into the various behavior and customs, ideals and opinions of the world that we are told to stop imitating.

The ideals and opinions of secular culture

One of the most insightful, recent books that exposes these patterns and opinions of the world is *Faith for Exiles* by David Kinnaman and Mark Matlock (Baker Books, 2019). These authors have been involved in Barna research for decades and their insights force Christians to more honestly explore how the "patterns of this world" are squeezing them into its mold. Consider these statements:

1. "The culture glories in pride, power, prestige and pleasure" (p. 23)
2. digital tools, devices and content drive our perceptions and experiences of reality" (p. 19).
3. binge television, immersive gaming and social media scrolling – 'digital Babylon' (the author's title for western culture) glitizes and blitzes our days so completely it chokes out deep spiritual longings" (p.17). "One's Google device wants to be a person's ever-present, all-seeing, secret keeping BFF" (p.18).
4. "the new moral code [in the West] says that the individual is the center of the moral universe"(p.57).
5. "self-centered, self-indulgent, me-first mindsets have produced entitlement rather than the Christian priorities of sacrifice and service" (p. 185). Common thinking is "I deserve to be happy."
6. You choose you - the culture celebrates elective identity. the brands chosen to project that identity come from celebrities, sports icons, bands, race, work etc. (p. 45). God's understanding of one's image and worth is no longer the priority.
7. "Ambition turns into creating a personal brand...instead of right-sizing our ambition to God's purposes in life (pp. 146, 152).
8. Safety and security are absorbed as kingdom values (p. 192).
9. "Millions of young people are learning about sex – what it is, how to do it, how to think about it – based on what content a search algorithm decides they should encounter online...sex is for personal fulfillment, and self-denial is unhealthy; any kind of sexual expression is fine, as long as it is consensual" (pp. 77, 80). "Most teens today think porn is positive or neutral" (p. 87).
10. "the consumer is the center... Our economy seeks to "service" consumers and to cause current consumers to consume more and more . . .Simply put, consumerism is the idea that personal happiness is equated with acquiring and consuming products – usually alone. We choose our 'community' based on our 'consumption' . . . Consumerism paves the way for the worship of self, and self-worship leaves us alone with the object of our devotion . . . When the individual self is glorified over the greater good of the community, rights begin to take precedence over responsibility, isolated pursuits replace the struggle for the common good, desires are twisted to resemble needs... But a continual focus on feeding "me" rarely creates the more biblical and unifying "us" (Kevin Ford, *Transforming Church*.2007, (pp.58, 34, 59).

The authors counter all these cultural patterns with these thoughts:

Jesus is the deep source of our identity here on earth and in eternity. Cultural discernment involves the life of the mind and the robust perspectives we must cultivate together in order to think Christianly about ourselves and the world. Meaningful relationships are about devotion to other believers who shape us to become more like Christ. Vocational discipleship relates to personal calling and finding what God has made each of us to do. Countercultural mission is the outward-facing expression of all the other practices – what we do together as the body of Christ for the sake of the world (p.180).

Transforming our Minds From Within

Step 4. - God says when we fulfill the mandates of steps 1-3 described in Rom. 12:1-2, the Holy Spirit will empower us to be transformed by the renewing of our mind - step 4. And God has given us all the tools to make that happen – in His Word, in the Spirit and in the body of Christ.

As the Apostle Peter says,

“Everything we could ever need for life and complete devotion^[a] to God has already been deposited in us by his divine power. *For all this was lavished upon us* through the rich experience of knowing him who has called us by name and invited us to come to him through a glorious manifestation of his goodness.^[b] ⁴ As a result of this, he has given you^[c] magnificent promises^[d] that are beyond all price, so that through *the power of* these tremendous promises^[e] you can experience partnership^[f] with the divine nature, by which you have escaped^[g] the corrupt desires that are of the world.” (Passion).

We have all we need to live with a transformed mind. And we have what we need to defend against the constant barrage of cultural values which are against God. Paul exhorts the Christians in Ephesus to:

¹¹ “Put on all of God’s armor so that you will be able to stand firm against all strategies of the devil.
¹² For we^[a] are not fighting against flesh-and-blood enemies, but against evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against mighty powers in this dark world, and against evil spirits in the heavenly places. ¹³ Therefore, put on every piece of God’s armor so you will be able to resist the enemy in the time of evil...¹⁴ Stand your ground, putting on the belt of truth and the body armor of God’s righteousness. ¹⁵ For shoes, put on the peace that comes from the Good News... ¹⁶ In addition to all of these, hold up the shield of faith to stop the fiery arrows of the devil.^[c] ¹⁷ Put on salvation as your helmet, and take the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.” (Eph.6:11-17)

In putting on this armor each day, the helmet of salvation is where I start because this addresses the negative spirits in our mind of lying, of accusation, of catastrophizing, of fear, of worry, of discouragement and depression, et al. Christ has nailed all these spirits onto the cross and risen triumphant over them (Col. 2:15). So putting on the helmet of salvation means we fight for our minds by resisting the devil and refusing to internalize his lies through Jesus’ authority, victory, and the power of his blood. That clears the way for the shield of faith to quench all those fiery darts of negative thinking and the Word of God to speak truth to them with confidence.

Step 5. – As we live out these four steps, then God promises we will “learn to know God’s will for you”. The disappointed expectations, confusions, and sufferings which were dominate in 2020 often challenged believers’ faith in finding God’s “good, perfect, and pleasing will.” But, the promise in Romans 12 is true. When we fulfill the conditions of verse 1 and 2, particularly ridding ourselves of the pervasive patterns of worldly thinking, then we WILL experience the “beautiful satisfying” life God has for each believer. This is not a promise of stress free life without suffering, but it is a promise of living in God’s best and finding His grace all sufficient.

These five steps describes how to change the way we think as we go into 2021. This new year does NOT have to be a rerun of all the negative thinking and destruction of body, mind and soul that was so debilitating in 2020. Some of the problems obviously remain, but our attitudes in facing them can be different as we are transformed by the Spirit from within. That gives us solid confidence and hope for the unknown months ahead. As many of us have said to one another repeatedly this past year: “Nothing is impossible with God.” (Lk.1:37). In that faith we wait for the Lord to do “exceedingly abundantly beyond all we can ask or imagine.” (Eph.3:20). Did you realize that the end of that promise is “according to His power that is at work within us” (Eph.3:20)? This is God’s promised work for and in the believer. And this God is our God forever and ever; He will “fulfill what He has begun in us” (Phil.1:6). Hallelujah! Amen.

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