

“Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, *which is your spiritual service of worship*. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.” —Romans 12:1–2

R. C. Sproul stated, “The Bible is addressed *primarily*, though not exclusively, to our understanding. That means the mind. This is difficult to communicate to modern Christians who are living in what may be the most anti-intellectual period of Western civilization. Notice, I did not say anti-academic or anti-technological or anti-scholarly. I said anti-intellectual. There is a strong current of antipathy to the function of the mind in the Christian life” (*Knowing Scripture*, 32).

While the intensity of this antipathy may have reached an apex in our times, the ambivalence to the proper use of the mind is not unique to our era. In fact, it has been a dominant challenge from the very beginning of the church. The Apostle Paul—writing to the Roman church in AD 55—identified this challenge in two forms: (1) the grave danger of the Christian’s conformity to the world (Rom 12:2a); and (2) the great need of the Christian to recognize the will of God (12:2c). In response, Paul prescribed a lifestyle that would neutralize the danger and provide for the need: **“be transformed by the renewing of your mind”** (12:2b). This short but profound command summarizes the duty of Christian life. It focuses our attention on the renewal of *our minds* as the basis for spiritual growth and vitality.

Defining the Mind

But how are we to understand “the mind” that Paul refers to Romans 12:2? Indeed, the term “mind” (νοῦς, *nous*) is a profound concept that defies a simple definition. It can be used in slightly different ways in different context. Although we will define it in greater detail throughout this series as we look at specific texts and look at other synonyms for this term, an introductory definition is necessary. To begin with, it is incorrect to understand “the mind” as a reference to *the brain*—that complex organ that is responsible for motor skills, memory, sensory perception, etc. Moreover, “the mind” is also not a synonym for what we call *intelligence quotient* (IQ)—that number that is assigned to individuals that expresses the apparent intelligence of a person when measured according to different fields of study.

Instead, it is best to understand the mind as a *disposition*—a pattern of making judgments about fundamental issues in life, of truth vs. error, right vs. wrong, beauty vs. ugliness, and reality vs. myth. The mind is what we use to *perceive and make sense of* ourselves, the world around us, and God. The mind is the domain of *convictions, values, desires, judgments, attitudes, affections, and faith*. The mind is fundamentally *religious* in nature. When a man *worships*, whether he worships the one true God or a false god, it is the mind that worships.

To help us understand God, the Bible describes Him as having a *mind* and as having *thoughts*, though His are infinitely greater, higher, and truer than ours (Rom 11:34; 1 Cor 2:16; Isa 55:8). When God created man in His image (Gen 1:26–27), He created man *to think* as a reflection of God’s own majesty. Indeed, man could never think just as God thinks, but he could do so analogously and in response to God’s self-revelation in creation and in His words. Thus, as James E. White states, “To be fully human is to *think*. To this day we call ourselves a race of *Homo sapiens*, which means ‘thinking beings.’ This is not simply a scientific classification; it is a *spiritual* one. We were made in God’s image, and one of the most precious and noble dynamics within that is the ability to think” (*A Mind for God*, 15).

The entrance of sin (Gen 3) corrupted man’s mind first and foremost, rendering it futile, corrupt, blind, and unwaveringly biased against God’s revelation (Gen 6:5; Rom 1:28; 1 Cor 2:14; 2 Cor 4:4; Eph 4:18). Apart from

supernatural regeneration, even a man’s best thoughts will always distort the interpretation of God’s self-revelation in His works and His words. The unregenerate mind is both incapable and unwilling to worship God in spirit and truth.

But through the miracle of regeneration, God transforms the sinner’s mind by making it come alive to Him (1 Cor 2:14–16; 2 Cor 3:14–18; 4:6; Eph 4:23). Through this work of recreation, God restores to man the capacity to think rightly about truth—to think truly about the thoughts God Himself has revealed—to *think God’s thoughts after Him*. For the Christian, the mind is that precious instrument by which he experiences and enjoys fellowship with his Creator and Redeemer: “This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent” (John 17:3).

However, this act of regeneration does not settle the issue of man’s mind completely. As the Apostle Paul stated, even the regenerate believer must continue on life’s path conforming every thread of his thinking to the standard of God’s own thinking, taking every thought captive and making it obedience to Christ (Rom 12:2; 2 Cor 10:3–5; Col 3:16).

You’ve Lost Your Mind

This brings us back to the alarm raised by Sproul: “There is a strong current of antipathy to the function of the mind in the Christian life.” As great a gift as the mind is to the believer and as necessary an instrument it is to the believer’s life and fellowship with God, it is often not “renewed” as it ought to be. Many others in addition to Sproul have raised this concern. All the way back in 1963 Harry Blamires (*The Christian Mind*, 3) wrote,

The Christian mind has succumbed to the secular drift with a degree of weakness and nervelessness unmatched in Christian history. It is difficult to do justice in words to describe the complete loss of intellectual morale in the twentieth century church. One cannot characterize it without having to recourse to language which will sound hysterical and melodramatic. There is no longer a Christian mind. There is still, of course, a Christian ethic, a Christian practice, and a Christian spirituality. . . . But as a thinking being, the modern Christian has succumbed to secularism.

Os Guinness echoed this alarm: “Failing to think Christianly, evangelicals have been forced into the role of cultural imitators and adapters rather than originators. In biblical terms, it is to be worldly and conformist, not decisively Christian” (*Fit Bodies, Fat Minds*, 14). James E. White concurred, “The peril of our day is that when a Christian mind is most needed, Christians express little need for the mind, and as a result, even less resolve to develop it” (*A Mind for God*, 24).

Not Thinking Christianly Has Consequences

This antipathy toward the use of the mind has real ramifications for the Christian life. As John Stott stated, mindlessness is both “a misery” and “a menace” (*Your Mind Matters*, 17). At least seven consequences deserve mention.

1. **Compromise.** Failure to think *Christianly*—to think in line with and according to God’s thoughts—necessarily means thinking according to a standard that is *not* comprised of God’s self-revelation. Paul identifies this very consequence when he warns the believers in Rome, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind . . .” (Rom 12:2).

As a human being, you are a *thinking* being (hence even the categorization, *Homo sapiens*). You cannot avoid thought life. But in that thought life there is no such thing as *neutrality*. The use of the mind is always an issue of *conformity* to a standard.

2. **Enslavement.** Failure to think *Christianly*—according to God’s revelation—enables patterns of thinking to take root that will increasingly enslave the mind. Writing to the believers in Colossae, the Apostle Paul warns, “See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the

tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ.” Elsewhere he warns the Corinthian church that Satan appears not in his vile ugliness but “as an angel of light” (2 Cor 11:14) seeking to lure Christians to error. As one writer once said, “There is much in our world that is clever yet is not true.”

The world, the flesh, and Satan actively seek to attract Christians to patterns of thinking that will rob them of the purity, holiness, freedom, and joy of the gospel. What a Christian takes into his mind (sermons, speeches, political commentary, books, blogs, discussions, music, art, entertainment) will always have some kind of impact on his thinking—whether for good or for evil. Surrendering to lies always leads to tyranny—to those very lies themselves and to those who propagate them.

3. **Cowardice.** Failure to think according to God’s thoughts creates a deficiency of the courage needed to defend and promote truth in the face of opposition. Those who don’t think Christianly fold like cheap suits in the face of anti-Christian hostility.

This failure in thought-life leads Christians to think their calling is to be “nice” and “non-offensive” even in the face of outright error and immorality. Their great motto becomes, “Whatever you say, don’t offend!” Blamires (*The Christian Mind*, 39) describes this sentiment well when he writes,

An important contributory factor to the loss of mental morale by the Church has been a misguided conception of Christian charity. It has been assumed that the charitable man suppresses his views in the same way that he subordinates personal interest. A wild fancy has taken hold of many Christians. They have come to imagine that just as the unselfish man restrains himself from snatching another piece of cake, so too he restrains himself from putting forward his point of view.

The response of the Apostle Paul in Galatians 2:11–14 to Peter’s cowardice—a cowardice brought on by Peter’s own thoughtlessness—is a much needed corrective to the lack of courage rampant among men in our day. If you have come to know the truth, you cannot be silent when it is maligned.

4. **Downfall.** Failure to think *Christianly* leaves the mind open and vulnerable to the onslaught of temptation. Notice James’ warning: “But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death” (James 1:14–15). If “lust” (sinful desire) is not being mortified by the right kind of thinking, it will not remain docile but will adulterate the Christian’s thinking and leave him weakened to its fancies.

Ultimately, the fall into any sin begins in the mind. Great moral failure is always preceded by private, immoral or untruthful thoughts. These thoughts that begin in secret are allowed to gestate. Though it may take a long time, they eventually come to full term. Disaster results. Conversely, a mind that is disciplined with thoughts that are wrestled into obedience to Christ will produce virtue. Speaking of this kind of discipline, Puritan William Bridge wrote, “As it is a heartwarming work, so it is that which will keep your hearts and souls from sinful thoughts. When the vessel is full [of truth] you can put in no more” (“The Sweetness and Profitableness of Divine Meditation,” 131).

5. **Fear.** Failure to think according to God’s thoughts makes one susceptible to ungodly fear, and this *ungodly fear* is the exact opposite of *intelligent faith*.

Fear is first and foremost a matter of the mind. In fact, fear is not necessarily wrong. After all, the “fear of the LORD” is the beginning of wisdom (Prov 1:7; 9:10), and when we fear God and reverently conform our thoughts to His word, we will not fear anything else. This truth is expressed well in Psalm 46, “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change and though the mountains slip into the heart of the sea; though its waters roar *and* foam, though the mountains quake at its swelling pride” (vv. 1–3). Right thinking leaves no room for fear. But when we do not reverently fear God and submit to His revelation, we are left to fear something else—people, circumstances, tomorrow, the unseen, death.

6. **Sentimentalism.** Failure to think *Christianly*—that is, according to God’s thoughts—leaves one looking to feelings to define “truth.” R. C. Sproul calls these Christians “sensuous Christians”—Christians who have rejected the use of the mind and instead put all their eggs in the basket of the *senses* or *feelings*. He writes, “Many of us have become sensuous Christians, living by our feelings rather than through our understanding of the Word of God. Sensuous Christians cannot be moved to service, prayer, or study unless they ‘feel like it.’ . . . Their ‘inner feelings’ become the ultimate test of truth” (*Knowing Scripture*, 31).

This *sensuousness* characterizes vast swaths of professing Christians today. In fact, scholars have identified this kind of mindless faith as “moralistic therapeutic deism”—a kind of faith marked by these five qualities (see Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*):

- a) A god exists who created and ordered the world and watches over human life.
- b) God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other.
- c) The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
- d) God does not need to be involved in one’s life except when He is needed to resolve a problem.
- e) Good people go to heaven when they die.

This stands antithetical to Jesus’ revelation of the Christian faith: “Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth” (John 17:17). Biblical faith addresses the mind and is expressed by the mind.

7. **Desecration.** Failure to think according to God’s thoughts dishonors the One whose image we reflect and distorts the worship due Him. Regardless of the sincerity of the worshiper, there can be no true worship, no God-pleasing life, apart from truth (John 4:24; Col 3:16). To abandon the mind, or to use it contrary to God’s intent, is to render the person like a “beast” (Ps 32:8–9; 73:22). On the other hand, to fill the mind with truth and to conform its thinking to God’s kind of thinking achieves the very highest form of worship attainable. As Kelly Kapic states, “The goal of the Christian life is not external conformity or mindless action, but a passionate love for God informed by the mind and embraced by the will” (“Introduction,” *Overcoming Sin and Temptation*, 28).

For Further Study

1. Memorize Romans 12:1–2.
2. Provide a biblical definition of “the mind.”
3. Describe the state of a man’s mind as an *unregenerate sinner*. Refer to the biblical texts that describe this state. Describe the state of a man’s mind as a *regenerated believer* and list the biblical texts that describe this state.
4. Review each of the seven “consequences” of not thinking Christianly as listed above and read the texts mentioned in each of these categories. Be able to explain each of these consequences in your own words and come up with some practical illustrations of where you see this occurring in life.
5. As you review these seven “consequences,” prayerfully examine your own life. How do your current circumstances reflect the consequences of the way you have rightly or wrongly used your mind over the past five years?
6. What do you think will be most helpful in this upcoming study on “the Christian mind”? What questions do you hope it will answer?
7. A good hymn to sing as we begin this series is “May the Mind of Christ My Savior” (*Hymns of Grace*, 377). Sing through this hymn several times over the coming week and let its words guide you in prayer.

Audio, Video, and handouts for this session: gracechurch.org/motw

Next meeting: September 15, 7pm – “The Great Commandment”

Have a question? Write to menoftheword@gracechurch.org