

Lesson 29: The Worshipper's Response to Grace: Life as a Living Sacrifice

Romans 12:1-2

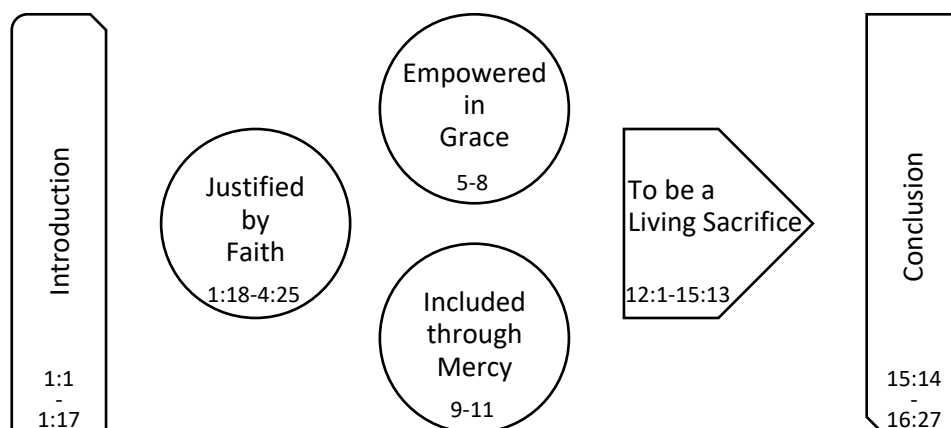
¹ Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God,

(1) to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God,
which is your spiritual service of worship.

(2) ² 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.

NASB

Introduction



We have finished Paul's argument for the gospel. We have looked deeply at these three proclamations: (1) God has justified us by faith; (2) empowered us in grace; and (3) included us through mercy. This is why Paul shouts boldly, "I am not ashamed of the gospel of Jesus Christ! The gospel of Jesus Christ is the power of God to save everyone who believes, because in the gospel God has revealed his righteousness!" The gospel answers the first question of covenant, "How can I, a sinful man, be allowed into relationship with God?" The gospel proclaims, "By grace! 100% by grace, received through faith!" We also began in chapters 5-8 to answer the second question of covenant, "Now that I am safely brought into relationship with God, how then should I live?" We say to Paul, "We hear you saying that the rules of the covenant of law have been set aside for the new covenant of grace. What are the rules of this new covenant Paul? What do we do? How do we live?"

"What does our gathered worship look like? What does our interaction with people in society look like? How do we relate to government? What are our obligations to each other? How do we party? What do we do when we disagree about these things? We no longer live by Mosaic Law, how then do we live?"

Paul is finally ready to address that question with concrete specifics. He had to work hard to help us understand the gospel of grace. We don't do grace like we did law. Whatever living for Jesus looks like, it must be done in line with grace. It is a new wineskin. We can't just take the old and repeat that pattern in the new. Sunday is not simply the new Saturday. We have received a new invitation to live out grace as adult children of the king and it is going to look different.

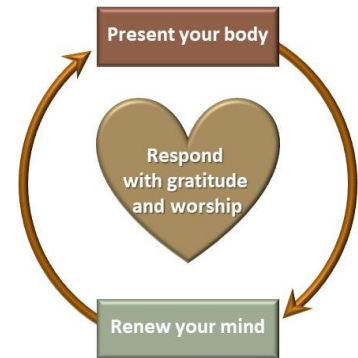
We are about to get into some very good material on the practical stipulations of the new covenant. 12:3-15:13 is full of practical instruction. God is still Father, Lord and King. He still commands us, and we still obey. But before we get to those specifics, Paul starts with a model for Christian living. How then should we live? Here you go. Apply this model to everything. This will be a great start for you. Romans 12:1-2. This is your model. Respond from the heart. Present your body. And renew your mind. Respond. Present. Renew. Let's read the text.

The Model of Romans 12:1-2

[Read Romans 12:1-2]

The model breaks down into three parts. Respond, Present, Renew. Imagine a circle with the word present at the top, on the top arc of the circle. And imagine the word renew at the bottom arc of the circle. Then draw some arrows on the circle going around clockwise, so you have a continuing cycle from present to renew back to present back to renew. And then in the center of the circle is a heart with the word respond. Present and renew both flow out of a response of the heart.

This is the model: respond from your heart, present your body, renew your mind. Let's consider each element of the model separately, starting with the heart response in the first part of verse 1.



Respond from your heart (12:1a).

The mercies of God

"Therefore I urge you brethren, by the mercies of God..."

We have a therefore, so we have to ask what is the therefore there for? The therefore indicates a logical connection to something Paul said previously. The placement of this therefore right after the end of the whole argument, forces us to wonder how far back we should consider. Is it therefore in light of Paul's doxology in the previous 3 verses where he rejoices in the glory of God? Or is it therefore in light of Paul's teaching on who are the people of God in chapters 9-11? Or is it therefore in light of Paul's whole three-part presentation of the gospel starting in 1:18 and going all the way through the end of chapter 11?

As it turns out, we do not have to decide. The text works fine if we just say all three. I think it is the whole big argument. Paul could call us to action in light of God's wisdom and knowledge and power and sovereignty praised in the doxology in 11:33-36. Maybe it makes more sense to recognize the call of action coming from chapters 9-11. In light of God's merciful inclusion of all peoples by faith into his kingdom, in light of this great grace shown to Gentile and Jew alike, we should present ourselves to God as an act of worship. But as chapters 9-11 is grounded in the larger gospel presentation, it makes sense to expand even further out. In light of the power of God for salvation revealed in Jesus Christ and this gospel of grace, we should present ourselves fully and completely in service to God (1:18-11:36).

Paul exhorts us to respond. Therefore brethren, in light of these things, "I urge you." It is not a typical religious action. It is not live this way or you will be excluded. It is a call of response to grace. Paul envisions a clear move from our beliefs to our action, so he exhorts us to action. Live in line with what you believe. And he sums up what we believe in the very brief phrase, "by the mercies of God." "Therefore, I urge you brethren, by the mercies of God." We look at the glory of the doxology. There is a right response of obedience in awe of who God is. Paul is calling us not only to the glory of God but to the mercies or compassion of God. He is calling us to consider what God has done for us in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

In English, it appears that this phrase connects directly back to chapters 9-11. As faith was a key word for chapters 1-4 and grace a key word for 5-8, you may remember that mercy was a key word for 9-11. The link is not so clear though in the Greek. The Greek word for mercies in 12:1 is different than the Greek word translated mercy used through chapters 9-11. They are two different words. The word used for mercies in 12:1 is similar, almost synonymous to the earlier word used for mercy, but it is not the same word. In verse 9:15 the word for mercies is translated as compassion and it is used alongside the standard word for mercy. So verse 9:15 reads, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." That word compassion is our word in 12:1, "I urge you brethren in view of God's compassion."

Those two words, the one being translated for compassion and the one for mercy are the first two words used in the Greek translation of a crucial Old Testament text where God reveals his name, his character, to Moses. Our English usually uses the word gracious for mercy, but I will leave in mercy to stay consistent with the Greek in Romans 9-12. Here is God's name revealed to Moses, "The Lord, the Lord God, **compassionate** and **merciful**, slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness and truth (Exodus 34:6)." David employs the same two words in his Psalm 51 confession, as he lays himself into the arms of God. "Be **merciful** to me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness; according to the greatness of Your **compassion** blot out my transgressions (Psalm 51:1)." This is the glory of God. He is just. He is also compassionate and merciful.

Paul draws out this truth revealed in the gospel as that which should motivate from the heart a response to obedience. We are unrighteous and without hope. But God has made a way for us. God offers us grace. When we really get that, when we really see that we have fallen into a pit like David, when we really see that we are hopelessly, hopelessly unable to live consistently for God like Israel, when we see that God himself chose to die for us, when we see that he has made a way for us to be safe, to be secure, protected by the love of Christ, when we see that he has made a way for us to live, to experience abundance, when we see with the eyes of saving faith, what then ought our response be?

"Here I am God. I am yours. I have nothing else to give." The Christian life is a life of humble gratitude. The Christian life is a life of worshipful response. That is the motive of grace. We see God, and we see his grace, and we give ourselves. It is not to get something, the motive of legalism. It is a response to what has been given, the motive of grace. "Therefore, I urge you brethren in view of God's mercy" his great compassion.

Notice how this is different from legalism. We are not trying to pay God back. We are not trying to earn forgiveness or make ourselves righteous. That is the normal human impulse. That is the root of all religion. We want to clear our debt. We want to prove ourselves. We want to establish our place. We want to ensure God's blessing to us based on the work we have done to earn that place.

I have noticed that when my wife makes someone a plate of cookies in Croatia, that plate never comes back empty. In fact, it usually comes back with more on it. It's a pretty good deal. But it is not easy to help a neighbor without that neighbor feeling the need to return the favor, to clear the debt. It's not necessarily bad to want to keep clean accounts with your neighbor. But you do not get the gospel until you get the fact that it is impossible to keep a clean account with God. To try and pay back the death of Jesus Christ on the cross is to belittle the death of Jesus Christ on the cross. How can we imagine that any paltry service we might render God would do anything to remove even the least tiny amount of debt we owe? I owe millions God, and I am trying to pay it back with pennies. That makes no sense. That's an insult.

That's why Jesus told the story about the two servants who were forgiven their debt. In the context a woman had come into the home of a pharisee. And she knelt before Jesus and she wept and she washed his feet with her tears and her hair. She knew that she must get to Jesus. Something about Jesus drew her, reassured her, made her willing to go into a place where she was sure to be judged by men, but she was also equally sure she would be received by Jesus. And she was right. He did receive her. And he said, to the pharisee, "one owed 500 denarii and the other 50. Both were forgiven, which loved more?" The Pharisee got the answer right even though he did not get Jesus. The one forgiven more loves more. The woman loved most because she saw how large, how insurmountable was her debt. The Pharisee did not love because he did not consider himself to be in debt (Luke 7:36-50). He considered his account clean through his religious ritual and moral living.

The right response to grace is gratitude. It is not at all the same thing as paying back or clearing your debt or earning your righteousness. It might look similar in the outward action. We would do some of the same things. But it is completely different heart motive. The gospel calls us to a response of gratitude. It's what happened to Zacchaeus when Jesus entered his house. He did not try to pay Jesus off. He responded spontaneously to the grace and forgiveness he had received. If you do not want to

be legalistic, then understand the depth of your sin and recognize the greatness of his mercy, then live out of humble gratitude for his love and grace to you. "I urge you brethren in view of God's mercies..."

Your spiritual service of worship

Notice also that Paul describes this heart response is a response of worship. We catch this in the rest of verse 1. This is going to overlap with the next element of our model. We will get to the word present in a minute. Notice for now the word service at the end of verse 1. "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."

There are two words in that last phrase that present slight difficulty in translation. The first word can mean logical or reasonable or spiritual. It is the adjective describing service. The second word means service and is usually used in the context of serving God or the gods in ritual worship. In the Old Testament the Greek Septuagint uses the word for service when God tells Moses to bring Israel out to Mount Sinai where they will serve him or worship him (Exodus 3:12). It is also the word Moses used when telling Pharaoh to let the people go into the desert to serve the Lord (Exodus 7:16). And it is the word Moses used to tell Israel not to "turn away and serve other gods and worship them (Deuteronomy 11:16)."

So, we see the word used alongside with worship in the context of a spiritual ceremony, where the priest or worshiper is said to be serving God. And though the word is used in a specific ceremonial context of worship, Moses can use the word more broadly. He exhorted Israel, saying, "Now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require from you, but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all His ways and love Him, and to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul (Deuteronomy 10:12)." Serve here does not imply service in ceremonial worship but service in the conduct of life. This is your worship, your service.

English translations typically add the word worship to bring out the meaning of this particular word. It's not just any kind of service. It's a "service of worship," and that is a good translation. Considering the adjective Paul used, we translate the phrase either as "reasonable service of worship" or "spiritual service of worship." Both words could work in the context. If reasonable is the right word, it would mean that your reasonable service of worship in light of all that God has done for you is to give your whole self to him. If spiritual is the right word then it is probably emphasizing that this service of worship is not merely something you do in the temple or in a ceremony, but it is the broader idea of service Moses used in Deuteronomy 10, not just ceremonial worship, but life worship. It is to fear the Lord and walk in his ways and love him, serving him with all your heart and all your soul.

What we have here is Paul urging us to offer our whole selves as an act of worship. The heart response to grace is both gratitude and worship. You are not acting legalistically when your heart motive is a response of humble gratitude to the compassion and greatness of God.

Worship is integral to the second question of covenant, "How then shall I live?" You live by offering yourself as a sacrifice of worship. In the immediate context, Paul himself is given over to worship in the doxology of 11:33-36. Reflecting back on the truth of the gospel, he breaks out in praise to the glory of God. Then he tells us to offer ourselves as an act of spiritual worship. You know that is not a mistake. Paul worships and then he said, "Now worship with your lives."

There is also a connection in the whole, larger argument. If we go all the way back to the beginning to the very first point of Paul's argument in 1:18-32 we see that the problem humanity begins with is a turning away from true worship to false worship. Let's remember Paul's words in 1:21-25.

²¹ For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. ²² Professing to be wise, they became fools, ²³ and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form

of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures.²⁴ Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them.²⁵ For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and **worshiped and served** the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.

As a race, we turned from true worship of God. Turning our backs to his glory, we began to worship the shadow of his glory, the things he has made. We turned to the creation. We turned to other human beings to find identity, to find purpose, to find control, to find happiness. What we could ultimately, what we must ultimately, find in God we sought in the things God had made. We continue to seek these things in what God has made. We look to relationships and careers and entertainment and money and groups of people to find our identity, our purpose, control and happiness. What is most fundamentally fulfilled by God, we look for elsewhere. As Jeremiah put it,

For My people have committed two evils:
They have forsaken Me,
The fountain of living waters,
To hew for themselves cisterns,
Broken cisterns
That can hold no water (2:13).

We turned from the source of living water and made ourselves cisterns, broken cisterns that will never fill, never satisfy, never last.

Paul now tells us, “Turn around. Face your God. Glory in him. Do you want to know how to answer the second question of covenant? The answer is worship. The answer is love with all your heart and your mind and your soul. The answer is serve him with everything you have. Love your Father, serve your king, worship your God with a heart of overflowing gratitude.” The life of grace is a life of humble gratitude and worship.

The model for the Christian life in Romans 12:1-2 is a model of worship, a model of response. So, for our model we draw the circle, and we have a heart in the middle. If the Christian life is only one of mind and body, if it's only present and renew, we lose the soul. We do the Christian life by keeping our hearts fresh in humble gratitude and wonder of the one we worship. The life of grace is a heart response.

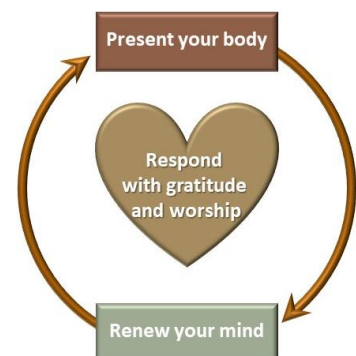
So we've got the heart in the middle and at the top of our circle is present. At the bottom is renew. Let's talk now about present.

Present your body (12:1b).

This is Paul's first command. “Present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship.” We are getting ready to move into a highly concentrated number of commands, starting in 12:3. Paul has put off the commands of the new covenant until solidly establishing us in our understanding of grace.

He did have a couple of commands in chapters 1-11, just two actually, and if you remember, they were back in chapter 6, consider and present. “Consider yourself dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus (6:11)” and “present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God (6:13).” Those two commands, consider and present or think and do, are the same commands we have here in 12:1-2, present and renew.

Paul puts the present into the metaphor of temple worship. He says, “present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God.” In Paul's text three adjectives follow the word sacrifice. First, it is a living sacrifice. That's a striking contradiction. Sacrifices are usually sacrificed. They are dead, not living. God is not asking us to die for him but to live for him. Going with Jesus' command to take up your cross, we can understand that living for God does require a kind of death to self. But it is a death to the old self or the self that would be independent of God. It's a death to the flesh. Living for



God is also a living out the new life we have in him. The main point here is that God is looking for ongoing worship as we give ourselves as a living sacrifice.

The second adjective is holy. We are to be a holy sacrifice. Holy means both pure and also set apart. God has cleansed us from the guilt of our sins. He has made us pure. We are called to embrace the reality of our holiness. We recognized in chapter 6 that faith in Christ opens our eyes to the reality of sin. Non-Christians hear grace as permission to sin. Christians hear grace as freedom from sin. Sin corrupts, damages, destroys, sucks away life. God has taken away the penalty of sin and declared us holy in Christ. We can still experience the effects of sin in the world, in our lives, in our families. To live for God is to pursue his glory and to pursue the life he offers. It makes no sense to serve God in hidden sin. We bring our sin to God, we confess it, we experience his forgiveness, and we live for him as a holy sacrifice. The second meaning of holy is set apart. We live for him by embracing the idea of holy. We see ourselves as made clean and set apart for his service.

The third adjective is pleasing. If we have offered our whole self as a living sacrifice. And we seek to be pure and clean in our offering, set apart for God, then we are a sacrifice well-pleasing to him. This is the response that God yearns for from his own heart as Father. The first two adjectives, living sacrifice and holy sacrifice, ensure the third, a well-pleasing sacrifice. Paul reminds us of our goal. If God is my Father and I love him with humble gratitude, the humble gratitude of a thankful and adoring child, then my goal is to please him. I do not want to please him in the legalistic sense of pleasing in order to manipulate or pleasing in order to get what I want. The loving child wants to be pleasing in order please. I want his heart to be happy with me, his fallible, yet growing child. I want my heavenly Father to smile at me. I want him to be well-pleased.

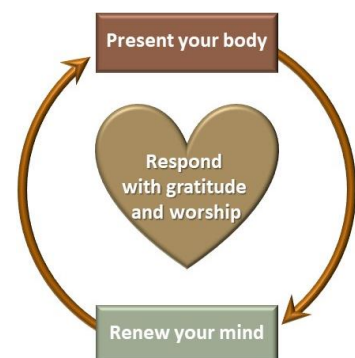
We have already recognized that Paul's sacrificial language puts the presentation of ourselves into the context of worship. This is the broad life worship, not the narrow context of a worship service. It is still right to use worship as a word applying to a church service or to believers gathered for singing and prayer. That's worship. And that worship is included in this broader worship. Part of my presenting is making worship at church a priority for me and my family. That is part of how I present my body as a living sacrifice. At the same time, my worship is more than church service. This is worship, the giving of your whole self to God. Every moment in life is meant to be a moment of worship. My work is worship when I do it in Christ to the glory of God. My play is worship when I do it in Christ to the glory of God. My art is worship when I do it in Christ to the glory of God. My rest is worship when I do it in Christ to the glory of God.

Paul envisions this worship as the offering of self into real concrete life experiences. Paul did not choose even to say offer yourself. He chose to say offer your body. The language is similar to chapter 6 where he said offer the members of your body. Body prevents us from over-spiritualizing our response of worship. Body brings our worship into the concrete world of taste and touch and smell. We worship in real life with our hands and our feet and our eyes and our mouth and our ears.

And know things might get complicated. They are going to get complicated. Its hard to know what to do with the stuff and the time and the talents God has given us. That is why we have to move on to verse 2. Our model of worship is a circle that has the heart at the center with the word respond; a box at the top of the circle with the word present; and one more box at the bottom with the word renew. Let's read Romans 12:2 and consider the command to renew our minds.

Renew your mind (12:2).

"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 (12:2)."



Paul indicates two opposing or competing processes. If one is not going on the other is. Either we are being conformed to the world or we are being transformed. The two different words here are probably synonymous. Paul used the word conform positively back in 8:29 when he said that God's intention for us is "to be conformed to the image of his Son." That's the process of renewal. We are either experiencing transformation into the image of Jesus Christ, or we are being conformed into the pattern of this world.

If we walk out into the middle of the stream of life and just lift up our feet, letting the current take us where it will, we will not end up living a life very glorifying to God. The current of society, the current of our ingrained thought patterns, the current of the old flesh tugs at our heart and our mind taking us places we do not want to go.

The simple truth is that we do not naturally think the thoughts of God. We have nature and nurture problems. By nature we are sinful fallen creatures. This is back to chapter 1 again. The original turning from God has resulted in degrading passions and a depraved mind. I cannot just go with my heart. That might turn out great, but it might turn out awful. I am part of the problem. In addition, I have a nurture problems. My family and my culture have conformed my mind to a particular view of the world. My experiences have reinforced patterns in my mind and in my heart that are not true or life-giving.

We cannot stay neutral. We are either being conformed or being transformed. Life is full of experiences, constant experiences that we process mentally and emotionally, rationally and subconsciously. Our personality, our sin nature, our social context, all work to create patterns in our brains and in our souls that affect how we understand ourselves, how we relate to members of the opposite sex, what motivates or demotivates, how we engage in conflict, how we understand religion, how we believe God views us, how we relate to authority, and so, and so on. So, much of our deeper values, helpful and unhelpful, were developed in us while we were very, very young. Keeping in mind that we start, not as neutral beings, but as sinful beings and keeping in mind that so many of our deep values and relationship patterns are molded at a very young age, it makes sense that Paul assumes we need transformation, we need renewal. We know that we are broken and wounded and off-track. We want to see things like God sees things. We want deeper change. We do not just want understanding, we want transformation at a heart level, at the core of our being. Our model of living in grace requires a heart change. Our model also requires a hands change of presenting ourselves in concrete life obedience. Now we have to address the mind change. Transformation is not accomplished only by changing the way we think. On the other hand, transformation does not happen without changing the way we think. We need both to think and to do, so we need renewal of the mind.

We see here in 12:2 that renewal of the mind involves both resistance to the pattern of this world and recognition of how God sees things. Renewal involves recognizing sinful, fleshly, wrong and unhelpful patterns or values. We need to identify the thought patterns and relationship patterns of society that do not match up with a biblical worldview. We also then need to do some hard thought about what are the wise, spiritual, helpful patterns and values that we should believe and live out.

So, we need to consider both the thought patterns already ingrained in us and the sources that are continually reinforcing or developing our thought patterns.

That means I need to think about the negative influences on me. What past influences have already conformed me to non-biblical patterns? And what current sources continue to press me into a mold not in line with truth. What am I getting negatively in my education, in my entertainment, in my political party, in my social media, in my Christian movement, in my news outlet, or in my family? What sources do I need to cut off? What sources do I need to filter more carefully? Where do I need to show greater discernment?

And then on the positive side, how am I seeking renewal of my mind? What are my sources of truth? Who is helping me think biblically and compassionately and truthfully. Paul gave the Philippians a list.

He said, "Brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, let your mind dwell on these things (Philippians 4:8)." What sources help me dwell on these things?

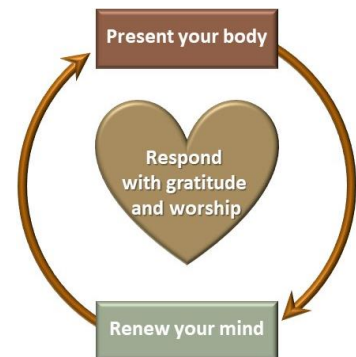
Renewal of the mind does not just happen. Bible study, alone and in group, is a necessary requirement to thinking like God. Without growing in God's word, you cannot grow in thinking like God. I have noticed that a lot of people give up on Bible study when they stop getting regular, positive feeling from the practice. It is as though the discipline of Bible study had only the goal of making one feel happy. If we only go to the Bible for the aha moments and shots of joy, then when those cease to happen often enough, then we stop going to the Book. Jen Wilkin's challenges believers to stop thinking of Bible study as a debit account that you go to regularly to make withdrawals. You know, I am just going to the Bible, and I am trying to get something out. This special moment of insight or this feeling of joy or whatever feeling I am looking for. Instead we should be looking at going to the Bible as a savings account where you put in deposits. Your study of Scripture changes how you view the world. And that moment, that day, you might not see an immediate impact. You are making deposits in your mind, renewing the way you think. Sometimes there will be aha moments. Sometimes there will be joyful heart moments. But all the time you are doing that you are making small deposits that build up over time. You are participating in your mind, so that you can see life the way God sees it.

So, what are your other sources? Who helps form your mind around God's truth? What Bible teachers or Christian commentators assist in your mind renewal, in understanding the world from a biblical perspective? Which Christian friends help you think about your job or your relationships? Has a Christian counselor helped? Would a Christian counselor help you think about the deeper patterns inside? What Christian music or movies or books challenge you to think Christianly?

We have our model of respond, present, renew. And now let's talk about the arrows on the circle.

The model is a process.

We have arrows moving around the circle to remind us the model is a process with the goal of worshiping and transformation. Both are going on at the same time. Our worship changes us. We saw that negatively in chapter 1. Turning away from God results in degrading passions and a depraved mind. The opposite is true as we worship God. We become more like the one we worship. Becoming like him has the double effect of both making us more fit to bring glory to him and more fit to experience life as he created it to be. So, glory to God and abundance of experience go hand in hand.



The goal of having our minds renewed is not simply that we see things right. Mental renewal leads to God honoring, life experiencing application. We renew our minds to present our bodies well.

Remember verse 2, "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."

We want to be renewed in our minds so that we know what the will of God is. We are asking, "How then should I live?" Well, present yourself with what you know, but also renew your mind so you can grow in your understanding of the will of God. And as you grow in the understanding of the will of God. Do it!

Present and renew is a continual process. We have to act. We cannot just wait around until we understand everything. With whatever opportunities that come our way, we pause and ask, "What is the wise thing to do?" And then with the best of our ability we do it. We present ourselves in our speech and conduct.

We carry with us then the life experience that comes out of presenting ourselves when we go back in to study Scripture. Presenting ourselves raises questions to which we then seek biblical answers. Why did she respond that way? Why did I feel that way? How do I understand the pain in this or the sin in this? How do I evaluate the success or the fruitfulness of this? How do I see God? How do I see me in this? How do I see the other person? What help do I need to see things from God's perspective?

This is a lifelong process. As soon as you get it figured out, life changes. You graduate high school. You graduate college. You move. Your job changes. You get married. You have kids. Your small group falls apart. Your kids leave. Your parents grow old. Your boss changes. You experience success. You experience failure. The river of life is constantly taking us through new experiences. We never get it all in balance and all figured out. We are constantly in the need of renewal. We are regularly facing situations we have never addressed before. So, the process of renew, present, present, renew just keeps on going.

And as we move through the stages of life, the process continues, and the challenge continues. And we are either being conformed to the pattern of this world, or we are being transformed into the image of Jesus.

The Role of the Holy Spirit in the Model.

I have one last thought to leave with you. I want to point out something missing from the model. And this surprised me at first. I have had to think it through. Paul has not mentioned here at all the role of the Holy Spirit in knowing the will of God. He talks about being able to prove what God's will is. He calls God's will good and acceptable and perfect. So, we are growing in understanding what is really the good? What is really acceptable, pleasing to God? What is perfect or complete in his sight? How do I really live for him? What is the wise way to go about life, the loving way, the moral way, the pure way?

There is a challenge in knowing how God would have us act in the multitude of contexts and environments and relationships that we will experience in our lives. We seek to know his will because we are convinced it is good, it is acceptable and perfect. And wouldn't it be nice if I would just say, "Lead me Holy Spirit" and the Holy Spirit would lead me every time into the good, the acceptable, the perfect will of God. But that is not the emphasis here. The emphasis here is that we engage in the renewing of our mind so that we might be able to identify what God's will is. There is an assumption that we need to mature, that we do not start with wisdom, that we have to grow into it. There is a process over time that enables us to better and better recognize what the will of God is.

There is a tension here we have to deal with. For people who want to make the process completely intellectual, I will simply point back to 7:6 where Paul said, "We serve in the newness of the Spirit and not in the oldness of the letter." And then I would quote 8:14, "All who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God." Paul may not refer to the Spirit here in 12:1-2, he assumes the work of the Spirit as part of the newness of grace. We are indwelt by and led by the Spirit of God. This is the model we have already received so far in Romans.

At the same time, to someone who makes significant life decisions based on a sense of the Spirit, without putting time into God's word or engaging in counsel with mature Christians or being willing to admit that maybe what they feel is not coming from the Spirit, to them I would point out that Paul does not focus on the Holy Spirit in these verses. He does focus on the renewal of our mind. We have been and are being conformed into patterns of this world, since our birth. We need transformation which doesn't just come from responding to the Spirit, kind of moment by moment, but from some hard, mental work of renewing the mind.

We do know the Spirit works in us subjectively (5:5; 8:15). We know the Spirit leads us (8:14). But we know too that we might be wrong in our interpretation of the Spirit in us. This is part of being human, part of our frailty, part of our dependence. We have to live in some ambiguity. We don't

always know how to unpack the move or the leading of the Spirit and our own emotions and thoughts. We are not always clear where our emotions are coming from. We know we do not always interpret ourselves right or God right or others right. We know that. We know that we need to grow in emotional and relational and mental maturity. It should not surprise us to say, "I can't always figure out if it's the leading of the Spirit or if it's a pattern ingrained in me."

This knowledge about our own frailty and dependence should lead us to humility in interpreting the leading of the Holy Spirit and should also lead us to invest in the renewal of our mind over time. There is a reason the Bible regularly equates grey hair and wisdom. Wisdom is developed over a long period of time as we walk with God and seek to know his Word.

Paul acknowledges elsewhere a connection between the leading of the Holy Spirit and the process of growth in wisdom. In Ephesians 5:18 he commanded his audience to be filled with the Spirit. This is right and this is good. In the verses leading up to that command, Paul also said, "Be careful how you walk, not as unwise men, but as wise, making the most of your time because the days are evil. So then do not be foolish but understand what the will of the Lord is." Being filled with the Holy Spirit does not replace renewing our mind to know God's will. Renewing our mind does not replace being filled with the Holy Spirit. Both realities are important elements of our walk with God and our growth in Christ.

If you would like to remind yourself of this, you could add to the heart, "Respond to God in the power of the Holy Spirit." You could add that in.

This is our model of the Christian life. How should I then live? Respond, present, renew.

Now we need to apply that model to a real, life context. That's what we will be doing in our next five lessons. Paul gives us a series of concrete application scenarios in 12:3-15:13. In each section, we will apply the model. We will consider in each case how God is calling us to renew our thinking and how God is calling us to present our bodies and what this looks like as a humble response of worship.

Reflection Questions

1. What stands out to you as important, confusing, interesting or strange in Romans 12:1-2?
2. Can you practice responding to God in gratitude or worship when you do not feel the emotions of gratitude or wonder? How do you understand the role of faith or the will in a response of grace?
3. What has been a good source for you in the process of renewing your mind over time as you walk with God? Who has helped you understand the Bible? Who has helped you think Christianly?
4. Describe an example of how you have experienced the process of Present and Renew leading to transformation.
 - a. Consider an area of life in which you tried to live out God's will, a relationship, a ministry activity, an experience at work or in your family, etc...
 - b. How did you try to present yourself as a sacrifice to God? What did you do?
 - c. What confused you or went wrong or turned out surprisingly in regard to your own behavior and emotion or in regard to someone else?
 - d. After reflecting biblically or Christianly on the experience how was your mind renewed in your understanding of yourself or God or the other person?
 - e. How did you then present yourself differently after experiencing renewal of the mind?
5. How do you understand the Holy Spirit's role in this model of Christians living: Respond, Present, Renew?