

# Thinking Straight

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 27 September 2009

Preacher: David MacPherson

[ 0 : 00 ]    What are you thinking?

That's a serious question. What are you thinking right now? Maybe you're thinking, what am I doing here? Maybe some of you are thinking, will this be over by 12?

Well, dream on, because it won't. But very soon after 12. Maybe you're thinking about something that happened last week.

Maybe you're thinking about what's going to happen in this week that has begun. We all do a lot of thinking. And the course our life takes hinges in great measure on the kind of thinking we do.

Most decisions we make are preceded by some thinking. Often not enough thinking, but there is some thinking that accompanies, I would imagine, just about every decision we take.

[ 1 : 09 ]    We seldom make what we could call a literally thoughtless decision. There's always some thought that accompanies the decisions that we make.

But what kind of thinking do you do? What's your speciality when it comes to thinking? Are you a confused thinker? Are you a precipitous thinker?

Are you good at creative thinking? Do you think with your heart rather than your head? Of course, bad thinking can have disastrous consequences.

Bad thinking leading to bad decisions can destroy precious and valued relationships. It can land you with an overdraft of monstrous proportions.

It can take your life in a direction that will ultimately do you great harm, and indeed great harm to others. It's important to think straight.

[ 2 : 15 ]    It's important to think well. And for that, your mind needs to work well. You need to have a mind that is in good shape. We often think of our bodies as being in shape or out of shape.

And great effort is made by some, and it's not a bad thing, to keep their bodies in shape in order that our bodies can work better. When they're in shape, they operate better.

They work better. But that is equally true of our minds. We can have minds that are out of shape and so don't work well. Or we can have minds that are in shape and that work well and will help us to think well and to make good decisions and with all the consequences of that in our lives.

To use the language of the Bible to describe the importance of having minds that are in shape, we need to have renewed minds.

Let's read in the Bible in Paul's letter to the Romans and chapter 12. It's on page 1139.

[ 3 : 32 ]    Romans chapter 12 on page 1139. And we'll read the first two verses of this chapter. We're going to be thinking about the second verse.

But we'll read the first two verses and there you will be able to notice how Paul speaks of the importance of our minds being renewed, of having renewed minds, minds that are in good shape.

So let's read Romans chapter 12, verses 1 and 2. Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God.

This is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is, His good, pleasing, and perfect will. The Word of God.

[ 4 : 41 ] Here we read of being transformed by the renewing of our minds. And it's to this matter that we want to turn our attention this morning.

And what we'll do is simply take the verse before us, verse 2, and think of it as it really naturally sets itself out before us in three parts.

We notice it begins with this exhortation, Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world. So we want to think about what that means. The verse continues, But rather, be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

And we want to think about what that means and what that involves. And then we are presented with a consequence, if you wish, of these things. Then, as a consequence, then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is, His good, pleasing, and perfect will.

And we'll consider this final part of the verse in turn. But before considering each of these statements, these three statements, let's just note very briefly the contents of this exhortation that is delivered to the Christians in Rome and by extension to ourselves this morning.

[ 6 : 04 ] Paul, in this letter, in the first 11 chapters, has presented a magisterial, an eloquent, a thorough exposition of God's redeeming work in the person of Jesus.

And the first 11 chapters, beginning by describing man's condition and great need, and then presenting God's answer to that need, we have in these chapters this presentation.

And now, in chapter 12, and what follows, Paul turns to what we might call the necessary implications of this for those who have experienced God's saving mercy.

And for that reason, the chapter begins, Therefore, in light of all that I have said, therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy. And there, Paul explicitly setting the foundation for the ethical demands that he will make to the Christians in Rome.

The reason I ask you to live in this way, the reason I ask you to do these things, is in view of God's mercy. It's in view of what God has done for you. It's in view of His great love that has been demonstrated in Jesus.

[ 7 : 24 ] In view of God's mercy. What I ask of you, though it may seem a big ask, as we describe it today, it's not really a big ask when you think of all that God has done for you, when you think of His mercy towards you.

So this is what Paul is doing. He is bringing these demands to the Christians in light of all that God has done.

And the demand, in essence, is that our very lives be offered up to God as an act of worship.

That is what verse 1 says. Offer your bodies, offer your lives as living sacrifices. This is your spiritual or reasonable act of worship.

And in verse 2, he goes on to develop what that handing over of our lives will involve. And that is our concern this morning, to see how this handing over of our lives involves, in addition to other things, what Paul mentions here in verse 2.

[ 8 : 40 ] How is it that our lives, the lives that we offer, will be fitting lives and pleasing lives to Him? Well, let's turn then to the three statements that we find there in verse 2.

And consider them each in turn. First of all, we're told, do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world. Romans chapter 12, verse 2, do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world.

We are being forbidden something. But it's not altogether clear what it is we're being forbidden from doing. And we'll only understand, as we understand in the first place, what is meant by the pattern of this world.

Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world. What does that mean? What is Paul referring to when he speaks of the pattern of this world, as it's translated for us here in the Bible that we are following?

Well, the Greek word behind this phrase, in English it's translated as a phrase, the pattern of this world. But the Greek word behind it is one single word that literally means age.

[ 9 : 56 ] This age. Do not be conformed to this age would be a correct literal translation. Now that doesn't take us that much further because then we say, well, what does that mean?

To what does he refer by speaking of this age? What perhaps will help us to have a greater insight as to what he is speaking about would be to notice two other occasions when this same word is used.

It's used on many occasions. But limit ourselves to two other occasions. And as we read the two verses that I'm going to mention in a moment, I think that will help us to have a better understanding of what Paul is speaking about when he speaks about the pattern of this world or this age that we are not to conform to.

The first occasion I want to highlight is in 1 Corinthians chapter 1. So it's really just three or four pages on in the Bible. 1 Corinthians chapter 1 and verse 20.

If you just turn three pages, you'll find that text. 1 Corinthians chapter 1 and verse 20. And there we read, Where is the wise man?

[ 11 : 08 ] These are rhetorical questions that are being presented. Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? There we have the same word.

The word that in our passage in Romans is translated as the pattern of this world. Here it is given its literal meaning. Where is the philosopher of this age?

And then, Paul goes on to say, Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? So here, the wisdom of this age, the scholar of this age, is presented in distinction to the wisdom of God.

And so, what is being said is that the wisdom of this age, the pattern of this world, is that way of thinking that is different to, that is opposed to, the wisdom of God.

It's not saying that all thinking in this world is bad and opposed to God. It is saying that thinking that is opposed to God, that is contrary to what He has revealed as His wisdom, is the pattern of this world.

[ 12 : 19 ] It's the wisdom of this world. It's the wisdom of this age. And Paul says to the Romans, Don't be conformed to that way of thinking.

Don't be conformed to that wisdom that is surrounding you, that is presented as the received wisdom, as the conventional wisdom, as what everybody believes. Or so we are told.

So we are pressurized. Paul says, No, don't be conformed to that wisdom. There is one other verse that I want to just note to help us understand better what Paul is saying in our text, in Romans, in Galatians chapter 1 and verses 3 and 4.

If you got to Corinthians, then you simply have to continue through to the second letter of Corinthians and then you'll find Galatians chapter 1 and verses 3 and 4.

And if you don't have it in front of you, don't worry, you can just listen as I read it. Galatians chapter 1, verses 3 and 4. Paul is writing again on this occasion to the Christians in Galatia and in his address, his greeting, he expresses himself in this way, Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age according to the will of our God and Father to whom be glory forever and ever.

[ 13 : 47 ] Even in this address, he makes mention of this age. Again, it's the same word that we have in Romans. But here, an adjective is attached to it.

This present evil age. So, this age, the wisdom of this age, the pattern of this world is identified as being that which is evil. That which is contrary to God and to His law and to His wisdom.

The wisdom of this age to repeat and to hopefully clarify, is presented in distinction to the wisdom of God and by implication, it is that wisdom that is false.

The passage in Galatians describes this present age as evil. Indeed, it describes it as an age or a world that we need to be rescued from. So, this age or the pattern of this world as we have it in our text, so translated in chapter 12 of Romans, refers to ways of thinking and consequently acting because our acting will be a function of how we think.

It refers to ways of thinking that are in opposition to God and His wisdom. Be that opposition conscious or unconscious. For many, it is unconscious.

[ 15 : 11 ] It's unthinking, if I can use that word, opposition. Let's just give some examples to illustrate how the wisdom of this world, the pattern of this age or of this world is in contradiction to God's revealed wisdom.

And, as I say, I'm just going to give two or three examples and the examples could be multiplying. If we think of the whole area of sexual behavior, of sexual ethics, in this area, we see this clear distinction.

God states, in His Word, in the Bible, that sexual intimacy is to be enjoyed solely within an exclusive and permanent union between a man and a woman.

That is His wisdom. That is something that He presents to us and reveals to us in very clear terms. But the pattern of the world or the wisdom of this age rejects that.

It says, no, that is antiquated, that is restrictive, that is intolerant, that is repressive, that is not the way to go. So you have the wisdom of God and you have the wisdom of this age in direct contradiction.

[ 16 : 30 ] And Paul says, do not conform to the pattern of this world. Don't be molded by what the world thinks. Don't go with the flow just because everybody thinks that way or so it would seem.

We can think of another example. This day that we are enjoying. The Lord's day. God's wisdom dictates from the very creation as part of the creation order.

Not as some subsequent law that He gave. No, as part of the very creation order, God dictates that we are to separate one day in seven as a day of rest.

A day in which we can set aside the legitimate activities of the rest of the week and focus our attention on the worship of God and indeed the enjoyment of one another.

That is God's wisdom. That is what God has established. The pattern of this world ridicules this notion as antiquated and repressive. He says, no, that's a piece of nonsense.

[ 17 : 31 ] You don't need to do that. That's the pattern of this world. That is what the world believes. It is in contradiction to what God's wisdom has established.

One final example. Now, as I say, we could multiply them. But one more. God's wisdom informs us in the words of Jesus that a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.

We find that recorded for us in Luke's Gospel in chapter 12. A man's life, your life, my life, does not consist in the abundance of our possessions.

But the pattern of the world, the wisdom of the age, declares a very different message. You are what you drive. You are what you earn. You are defined by the job you have and the salary you command.

Or as one has rather humorously phrased it, he who dies with the most toys wins. That is the wisdom of this age. That is what this world says.

[ 18 : 34 ] And God says, no, that is not so. That is false. God says, again, the examples could be multiplied. But the point to stress is that we, as Christians, are not to be conformed to this pattern, to this age, to this way of thinking and consequently behaving.

The picture is of being molded by the society we are part of, adopting its values, living by its rules, swimming with the current. And Paul says to the Christians in Rome that they are to live revolutionary lives, going against the grain, swimming against the current, refusing to conform to the wisdom of the society they are part of.

And to you this morning, God brings the same message. Don't be one of the crowd. It's always difficult to stand apart from the crowd.

And it's, I think, particularly difficult when we are young and when we perhaps have come to a new city for the first time and we want to integrate and to be part of the crowd.

And yet, here we are given a word of warning. Don't just be one of the crowd. Don't unthinkingly merge into the mass.

[ 20 : 00 ] Don't go with the flow because it's the path of least resistance. Don't be a conformist. Dare to be different. Know what you believe and stand up for what you believe.

Even if what you believe is in direct opposition and contradiction to the wisdom of this world. To what your classmates think. To what your professors teach you.

To those around you hold to be true. Notice also that in this first statement of the verse, do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world.

We have this revealing little phrase, any longer. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world. The implication of that phrase, as it's directed to the audience, is that the default mode of all of us is to conform.

That is what we do naturally. That is what we do, if you wish, unthinkingly. And so, when we're told do not any longer conform, we are being challenged to consciously examine ourselves and identify in what way our thinking and behaving is according to the pattern of this world.

[ 21 : 17 ] And as we recognize that it is to consciously decide to resist, to no longer conform, to no longer go with the flow, to no longer live as others live because that's the easiest way to go.

No longer conform to the pattern of this world. Of course, it's not easy to stop thinking and indeed behaving in a given way.

It's a thankless and possibly impossible stance to simply oppose wrong thinking. See, so far in the verse we're told what we shouldn't do. Don't be conformed.

Don't think in that way. Don't behave in that way. But it's very difficult to live our lives purely on the basis of not doing something. God knows that and through Paul presents us with what we might call a necessary parallel activity to not conforming.

We're not simply told don't do this, don't conform. Rather, in parallel, tied in with, we then go on to see, and this is the second statement that we want to consider, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

[ 22 : 39 ] Be transformed by the renewing of your mind. What does that mean? What we're being asked to do is perhaps more than a parallel activity as I've just described it.

In actual fact, without this being transformed by the renewing of your mind, we are incapable of not conforming. It will be impossible for us not to conform unless we are being transformed by the renewing of our minds.

Well, what does that involve? What does that mean? Be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Well, the first verb that we have is the verb to transform.

Be transformed. And what is required, and what this verse shouts out to us, what is required is nothing less than a radical root and branches transformation.

To be a Christian is not to get religion. It's not to be some kind of weird, repressed, Jesus freak. It is to be the object of a complete transformation in our lives.

[ 23 : 47 ] And here, the Greek word is a word that we're familiar with. It's the word metamorphosis. This word that is translated be transformed. Metamorphosis. And if we could make up a verb, we are to be, and this will be a tricky one to say, we are to be metamorphosized.

I managed to just about get it out. Metamorphosized. That was even better. Practice makes perfect. That is what is to happen to us. We are to be metamorphosized. I'm beginning to enjoy it.

And when I think of the word metamorphosis, I don't know what that brings to your mind, but in my mind it brings the picture of a butterfly. We all, I think, know that wonderful process of metamorphosis in which the larvae becomes a caterpillar and then emerges as this beautiful butterfly.

And we might, taking that picture and hopefully a vivid picture and a memorable one, we could say, God wants you to be a butterfly and not a caterpillar. No disregard, disrespect for caterpillars, I should add.

God wants you to be beautiful. Beautiful. And maybe what this involves, and this is best understood as we note another occasion when the same verb from which we have this, our word metamorphosis, the same verb is used in connection with the Christian.

[ 25 : 08 ] We've actually already read the passage, but we'll just note it again in 2 Corinthians chapter 3. This was our reading earlier on in the service. 2 Corinthians chapter 3 and verses 17 and 18.

This same verb translated, be transformed, we find here in 2 Corinthians chapter 3 and verses 17 and 18.

And what do we read? Now the Lord is the Spirit and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And then we read, and we who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, we who are Christians, are being transformed into His likeness, are being metamorphosized into His likeness, are being transformed into the likeness of Jesus.

So when Paul says, be transformed, he's saying, be like Jesus. Become like Jesus. This process of transformation will convert you into one who is like Jesus.

Be transformed. Be like Jesus. Be beautiful. Be a butterfly. Free and beautiful. Be transformed. But how are we to be transformed?

[ 26 : 25 ] Well, we're given the answer. By the renewing of your mind. Be transformed by the renewing of your mind. The mind is not to be understood as simply a reference to the intellectual, but it includes the moral dimension of who we are and of the decisions we make.

We might describe it as the center of consciousness. Or more practically, the faculty by which we think and make decisions. And the mind, our minds need to be renewed.

That is how we will be transformed. The verb is presented to us in the present tense. It is a permanent, constant process. It's not something that just happens when we become a Christian, for example.

No, constantly, our mind needs to be being renewed. Now, in the light of the verse that we've noted in 2 Corinthians chapter 3, we will not be surprised to discover that this daily renewal of our minds will result in a mind, your mind, ever more like the mind of Jesus.

On another occasion, when Paul is writing to the church in Philippi, he actually, specifically, precisely, asks that of them.

[ 27 : 47 ] That their thinking would be like the thinking of Jesus. In Philippians chapter 2 and verse 5, in our version of the Bible, it speaks, let your attitude be like that of Christ Jesus.

In the older versions, it says, let your mind be like Christ Jesus. Let your thinking be. Think like Jesus. Paul says to the Philippians, well, that will only happen if our minds are being renewed after His likeness, after His image.

It's ironic that as a Christian, and especially those of you who are perhaps in higher education and as students, although this is not only the case for you, but perhaps particularly for you, it's ironic that as a Christian, many will accuse you of being unthinking, of switching off your intellect in order to believe, of abandoning so-called rational thinking and espousing fairy tales and superstition.

Nothing could be further from the truth and don't be bullied by those who would accuse you in that way. To be a Christian is to enjoy a renewed mind. A renewed mind.

Characterized by vitality and freshness and vigor and straight thinking. A mind like Jesus. A mind that will help you to make good decisions.

[ 29 : 12 ] That will be a blessing to you and to those around you. Be transformed by the renewing of your mind. How does this happen? Are you, are we entirely passive?

Is this something God does in us and we simply wait and hope that it will happen? Well, this work of renewal is a work of God. It is a work of His Holy Spirit.

But it is a work in which we participate actively. We do so by the study and submission. Study of and submission to the wisdom of God as revealed in the Scriptures.

As we study the Word of God, as we meditate on the Word of God, as we listen to what God says to us in His Word. So we cooperate with the Holy Spirit as He would apply these truths to us and so renew our minds that our minds might be like that of Jesus that we would think like Him.

But finally, and very briefly just to note that this verse, verse 2, not only tells us do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world that we've considered.

[ 30 : 24 ] It not only tells us that rather we should be transformed by the renewing of our minds, but then we're given a consequence, if you wish, of these things. Then, in consequence, then you will be able, if you don't conform, if rather you are transformed by the renewing of your mind, then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is, His good, pleasing, and perfect will.

A renewed mind will enable the Christian to approve, to test and approve what God's will is. Again, the verb that is used here that is translated to test and approve is one verb in the original and it has the idea, certainly, of testing and approving, but with a view to doing.

This is not entirely an intellectual exercise that you say, well, yeah, that looks right, that's the way I should go, or that seems to be true. It's testing and approving with a view to doing.

Another pair of verbs we could use here as an alternative could be to discover and do. Then you will discover and do what God's will is.

That also illustrates what Paul is saying here. And to think of what we are being asked to do is to discover and do, or rather, as we do not conform to this world and as we are renewed so we will be able to discover and do, that has the merit of highlighting that Paul's ultimate concern here is about the way we live.

[ 32 : 10 ] And that as we refuse to be conformed, and as we cooperate with the Spirit of God in our minds being renewed, so we will live in a manner that is fitting. We will live in a manner that is good, pleasing, and perfect as it is described here in this verse.

One question remains, well maybe many questions remain, but one that I want to just notice. when it speaks here of being able to test and approve what God's will is.

The age-old question of what is being said here, is this telling us that we will discover what God's will is for our lives, for my life?

We often struggle with the question of guidance. How does God guide me? What I should do? What decision I should take? Are we being told here that we will be able to do that better? I think rather of what is being said here is that we're being told that a renewed mind will allow us to discover that which is good, pleasing, and perfect as revealed in the Word of God.

Where these words, good, pleasing, and perfect, are not to be understood as they are in the translation we have as adjectives describing God's will, but rather what we're being told is that a renewed mind will help us, will enable us to identify that which is good, that which is pleasing, and that which is perfect.

[ 33 : 51 ] Maybe to explain that a little better, because I don't think I've done so yet, would be to read an alternative translation from the English Standard Version, which gets across this alternative way of understanding what's being said.

Listen to what the translation we have in the English Standard Version is for this verse. We'll read for the whole of the verse. Do not be conformed to this world, that's very similar to what we've already noticed, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind.

That's exactly the same. And then it says that by testing you may discern what the will of God is, what is good and acceptable and perfect. What is good, what is acceptable, what is perfect, that is the will of God.

And you, with a renewed mind, will be able to identify that. And you will be able to do that. So it's not talking about, do I marry Mary or do I marry Jane? It's not talking about, do I take this job or that job? It's talking about identifying those things that are good, those things that are acceptable to God, pleasing to God, those things that are perfect and doing those things.

That is the will of God for you. Now this is no small matter. To be able to identify that which is good and acceptable and perfect.

[ 35 : 08 ] In an age of moral confusion and ethical chaos, the Christian whose mind is the object of constant renewal is granted the capacity to know what is good, what is pleasing to God, to know what is perfect.

This is a tremendous thing to have that discernment. As we close, we live in an age characterized by crooked thinking.

Very many clever people, including those of you who are students, maybe many of your classmates and professors and lecturers, perhaps some of them, perhaps many of them much cleverer than you are.

But they have great difficulty thinking straight. They are often clueless as to what is good, to what is pleasing, to what is acceptable to God, what is perfect.

On these matters, they are ignorant, though very clever. You see, you can't know these things in the absence of a renewed mind.



[ 36 : 15 ] And you have a responsibility not only to yourself, but for others to think straight, to get your mind into shape. And that you will do in the measure that you refuse to conform to the wisdom of this world, to the pattern of this world.

That you will do in the measure that you are transformed by the renewing of your mind, that your mind may be a mind that thinks like Jesus, and consequently your life, a life that is lived like Jesus lived.

What will you choose? What will you do? Will you be a conformist? Will you be a coward? Will you be a caterpillar hemmed in and shaped by the dead shell that is our anti-God society and the wisdom of this world?

And so, hiding your true colors, hemmed in, not allowed to live the life that God would have you live, because you conform to what everybody thinks and what everybody believes.

Or will you rise up on the wings of a butterfly, and fly, living a life that is good, that is pleasing to God, that is perfect, a beautiful life.

[ 37 : 37 ] Live to the full. That is your calling. That is what you must choose. Let us pray. We believe in you.