

Be Transformed

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Have you ever been in a situation where someone is going through a difficult time, and you want to help but feel entirely out of your depth? Or even if you do say something you know your words are trite or cliched and you really think you have been of no help at all. You leave them by saying “I’ll pray for you” but in the back of your mind, you know you probably won’t.

This coming week we will be running the Living Well Counselling Conference which is an opportunity for you to gain some skills to help others going through a tough time. The counselling conference is not necessarily for high-power counsellors but is geared for ordinary people who have a heart to help others.

Romans 12:1

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.

At some point in our lives we have asked ourselves the question, why did that person do that; say that or act in the way they did. You stand back and wonder how people could damage their lives and the lives of their loved ones in actions that seem completely irrational – it just doesn’t make sense. You’re left confused as to the invisible forces that drive people to make wrong choices, but when we understand a little of what is going on, on the inside, we are better equipped to help them and don’t feel so utterly helpless. However, as we examine this well-known Scripture, we can ask how we, in fact, carry out this renewal of our minds in the context of our behaviour. We all understand the importance of renewing our minds, but possibly we need to put some “handles” on this phrase to fully grasp its significance. The book of Romans is considered to be the most doctrinal book in the Bible because it provides a systematic outline of the essentials of the Christian faith. The Apostle Paul, in writing the book of Romans, through the anointing and inspiration of the Holy Spirit draws a case where man’s wickedness has separated humanity from God, and consequently, judgment is imminent. However, because of God’s faithfulness through His Son Jesus Christ, there is a salvation plan through Jesus’ death on the cross so that through faith, we may be made righteous (right standing) before Him.

It is against this background that Paul makes the profound statement of putting all of this into a practical and workable application of renewing our minds, and that it is not about performance, behaviour and trying harder, but it is all about His grace. We also need to see what the Apostle Paul specifically meant by “mind.” If we need to renew our minds, then we need to know what we are talking about. Romans 12:2 Paul uses, in the original language, a word that means the intellect, cognitive thought, feeling, will or understanding. In other words the essential “me” or “you” – who we are. Understanding the mind is vastly complicated, and the best of psychologists and psychiatrists have only scratched the surface in this area.

We are all made up of a single entity but with three distinct aspects of body, soul and spirit. Let’s start with the body. As part of our makeup within our brains, according to medical science, there are about 50 complicated chemicals, known as neurotransmitters whose job is to connect the billions of nerve endings to make us function. Countless networks of extended cellular structures carry nerve impulses to nerve junctions where the neurotransmitters either excite or inhibit the impulse to complete the ‘circuit’. Billions of these impulses take place at lightning-fast speed simultaneously –

no wonder the Psalmist says, "I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well."

We all know that the brain is an incredibly complex organ with many unique components that have different functions. One part of the brain controls body temperature, another sight, another hearing, yet another memory and so on, and it could all become very complicated. However, to keep things simple, we need to remember only two main components of the brain:

Firstly, there is the survival part of the brain known as the limbic system and is situated deep within the lower central portion and of course, has many different components to it. The limbic system is responsible for memory and routine functions and handles automatic responses, such as fear, anger, and emotions. Then there is the front part of the brain, the prefrontal cortex, which is responsible for logical reasoning and thinking. The back part is the automatic and the front part the manual.

Out thought life and body, chemistry works in tandem either positively or negatively. When we have bad, negative thoughts they feed back into our body chemistry and negative emotions and feeling are aroused, but because we feel bad we have further bad thoughts which in turn feed back into our chemistry – and so a destructive cycle is formed. However, the opposite is true in that when we have God honouring positive thoughts; good chemicals are released producing good emotions and feeling which enhance further good thinking.

2 Corinthians 10

5 We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.

Philippians 4

8 And now, dear brothers and sisters, one final thing. Fix your thoughts on what is true, and honourable, and right, and pure, and lovely, and admirable. Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise.

Now here's where it gets fascinating. Whenever the limbic system is aroused, the prefrontal cortex shuts down. This means that when deeply emotional situations are encountered, one's logic and reasoning ability is dramatically reduced. The logic and cognitive thinking process that says, "this is not a good idea" is actually shut down when the emotional chemistry is overactive, and the brain goes into a type of melt-down situation. The emotional chemistry of the limbic system always dominates the logic, common-sense prefrontal cortex which means that the very part of the brain that is intended to protect against such things is attenuated.

This complicated combination of chemicals is critical not just for physiological functions to take place, but these chemicals are primarily responsible for our feelings and emotions. This is an essential aspect to understand because once we know how these chemicals affect us; we can then take control over those areas in our lives that we struggle with. We also need to understand that our physiology is designed and created by God. This is the way it is meant to be, however, because we live in a fallen world sometimes the balance of chemicals goes wrong resulting in issues such as depression, anxiety or other psychological disorders. If there is any doubt about the influence of biological chemistry on emotions and feelings, then certain drugs can be taken to change the nature of how the neurotransmitters function, resulting in dramatic changes in feelings and emotions.

We also need to understand that under normal conditions, the biological chemistry within us changes all the time. Our neurotransmitters can be somewhat unreliable. We have all experienced this – some mornings we wake up happy, alert and ready to face whatever challenges may come our

way but other mornings we are just plain grumpy for no apparent reason. Consequently, because of the unpredictable and unreliable nature of the chemistry within us, our emotions and feelings are also unpredictable and unreliable. Knowing this truth, rather than bringing despair, brings hope because we can now manage our lives far more effectively. An example of this may be that we read in Scripture that God loves us; however, we just don't feel God's love. We now have a choice; either we can believe what the Bible says, or we can believe the unstable and unpredictable emotions that we feel. Knowing this truth sets us free to be who we really are because the chemistry within us does not define who we are. Emotions are significant and are a gift from God – no-one wants to be a numb, cold, unfeeling robot, but as important as our biological chemistry is; our identity as individuals does not need to be held hostage by them.

The problem we are faced with is that medical science, for the most part, tells us that these neurons and neurotransmitters make up who we are – these chemicals are essentially our thinking, our character and personality. Today's philosophy tells us that the DNA and chemicals stamped into our makeup is predetermined over which we have no control. Their message is that I am no more than a complicated cocktail – "Shaken, not stirred."

But what is the Biblical response? What about my spirit or my soul? Is my soul comprised of nothing more than chemicals? Or is there something more?

There is also a part of us that make up character traits, rational thought, cognitive skills, logic, reasoning, judgment, and common sense. Many people get confused at this point because there is not a clear understanding of how the physiological, emotional influences the rational or cognitive aspects of who we are and vice versa. Then there is the spiritual side of who we are. In this area, we have the unseen, somewhat mysterious part of us and represent our ability to relate to God, a capacity to love, our hopes, our dreams, and an awareness of "spiritual issues."

Matthew 10:28 Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.

1Thessalonians 5:23 May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ

Included in our makeup is our worldview. A worldview is a way a person perceives the world around them. We all have a worldview whether we like it or not and our worldview develops over many years and is formed by our environment, childhood influences, society, the media (Cape Talk, News24, National Geographic, SpongeBob SquarePants) and culture. Our worldview determines the values we live by.

All human behaviour is driven from one or a combination of the needs within, feelings and values; however, it is what we believe that will determine the outcome of our behaviour. Our belief system is a filter to regulate the way we behave.

Two essential elements are extremely helpful in trying to understand why we do the things we do: Firstly, emotional chemistry is blind to the future or future consequences, but it is acutely focused on the here and now. Your emotional chemistry is entirely indifferent to what happens in the future, either good or bad – they just don't care, but don't be fooled; they are screaming out for immediate gratification where they demand instant indulgence – now. This explains why if someone wants to lose weight, they will struggle with diets. Their limbic body chemistry just does not care if they look like Shamu, the orca whale; it wants fried chicken now regardless of the future consequences.

Secondly, limbic body chemistry is indifferent to your relationships. As the logic, common-sense pre-frontal cortex is attenuated, the driving need for feeling-good indulgence will always over-ride the need to preserve those relationships close to you. Your loved ones who are so precious to you are not loved by your limbic neurotransmitters. Many relationships have been shattered due to the overriding power of immediate gratification of body chemistry.

The effect of our fallen, sinful nature also is a significant factor. Sin always attacks our belief system and in addition to this, is our fallen body limbic chemistry making demands for immediate gratification. The Serpent in the Garden of Eden attacked Eve's limbic belief system when he asked, "did God really say..." Even in Eve's pre-fallen state, there was no thought of future consequences or broken relationships.

Renewing the mind is not just a catchphrase that Paul threw out there; it's about establishing a deep ingrained worldview based firmly on the Word of God – a Biblical worldview. Without a strong Biblical foundation, we will always be battling with ourselves but for the most part, living in condemnation and defeat.

Romans 8

5 Those who live according to the flesh have their minds set on what the flesh desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. 6 The mind governed by the flesh is death, but the mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace. 7 The mind governed by the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. 8 Those who are in the realm of the flesh cannot please God.

Hear the emphasis is being controlled by one of two things; either we are controlled by the flesh (limbic system body chemistry), or we are controlled by the pre-frontal governed mind. Look carefully at the terminology used – "minds set" and "minds governed" – so clearly the mind dominated by neurotransmitters is hostile with God, but the mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace. This is a battle of the mind. If we put to death the misdeeds of the body (limbic emotional chemistry), we will live. Paul continues this thought in Ephesians 2 where he writes about the ways of the world gratifying the cravings of our flesh (limbic body chemistry) following its desires and thoughts.

Ephesians 2

1 As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, 2 in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. 3 All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath.

When we understand the power of minds governed by body chemistry, we can begin to understand why people seemingly make irrational decisions as the limbic system shuts down the logic, common sense reasoning of the pre-frontal cortex. We can see why someone would have an extra-marital affair with no regard for their family, loved ones and friends and with no concern about future consequences. This explains why people run up massive credit card debt buying things they don't really need but without thought of how it is to be paid back in the future, or the negative impact on family and relationships. We can see why a husband in a fit of rage would beat his wife or children without thought to the damage caused to his or his loved one's relationships or his or their future. The list of damage caused by minds governed by limbic body chemistry could go on forever; however, when we understand this principle we can make the changes to live God honouring; God surrendered lives of victory as we learn to have minds governed by the Spirit.

As important as the body chemistry is we also need to understand we are spiritual beings – we are a single entity made up of body, soul and spirit. An illustration could be a loaf of bread which is a single loaf but is made up of flour, water and yeast where each component is dependant on each other. If you take any one element of bread away, it ceases to be bread, and in the same way, humans are interdependent of the components of body, soul and spirit.

We often miss or underestimate the spiritual. If we are born-again the Spirit of God lives within us:

1 Corinthians 6:19a

Don't you realise that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who lives in you and was given to you by God?

There is also a spiritual realm that we need to be aware of. In Ephesians 6 Paul writes about a spiritual warfare and uses the illustration of putting on spiritual armour – we are all familiar with that chapter, but he explains the reason in verse 12:

Ephesians 6

12 For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

Here Paul explains that there are spirits who are rulers, have authority, have power and have spiritual force. This may all sound complicated, and we may wonder what this has to do with Romans 12, renewing our minds, so I want to keep it as simple as possible.

If we have surrendered our lives to Jesus and accepted Him as our Lord, then the Holy Spirit lives within us, and we become aware of His leading, and guidance. However, there are times when even as Christians we allow ourselves, sometimes inadvertently, to fall under an evil authority. Galatians 5:19 talks about the acts of the flesh – not renewing the mind, and giving into the limbic “flesh” which places us under a spiritual authority, namely:

Galatians 5:

19 The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; 20 idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions 21 and envy; drunkenness, orgies.

There is an authority of sexual immorality, an authority of impurity and debauchery. There is an authority of witchcraft, hate, discord, and jealousy. Do you sometimes wonder why people lose their temper over some minor issue that really doesn't make sense? The reason could well be they are under an authority of rage or anger. Or someone may have a level of hatred that is disproportionate to their circumstances even though they are born-again Christians, they could well be under an authority of dissensions.

You may have heard the term ‘deliverance’ used or sometimes ‘freedom prayer’ but what does that actually mean. There is often a misunderstanding with regards to deliverance, and some see it as a wild excess, writhing on the floor having watched too many TV shows. Deliverance is nothing like that but is a simple process of leading someone out from under a destructive spiritual authority to being under, and controlled by, the Holy Spirit.

Two things need to happen: Firstly they need to renew their minds – to take control of their unrestrained limbic emotions by engaging their thought life. Continuing with Galatians 5, the Fruit of the Spirit is a natural outworking of taking control of their thought life:

Galatians 5

22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.

Secondly, they need to repent from allowing that unclean spiritual power to take authority over their lives and then to place themselves under the authority of the Holy Spirit. At the Living Well conference, you will be taught how that process works.

Please to note this has nothing to do with being possessed by demons because, I believe that, as Christians with the Holy Spirit within it is impossible to be demon possessed – light and dark can't occupy the same space. However, Christians can sometimes fall under destructive authorities.

Deliverance always involves body, soul and spirit, renewing the mind and moving out from destructive spiritual authority. Deliverance is never a short-cut. Sometimes well-meaning people wanting to help their friends through a hard time sending them for deliverance, but without a fundamental change of heart, they remain firmly under that dark power and authority. Many people struggle with deliverance and say, "I tried that, but nothing changed!" but the reason nothing changed is that they assumed the deliverance would automatically change their uncontrolled and unrestrained limbic controlled thought life.

Ephesians 4 sums this well as taking off an old dirty shirt and putting on a new clean shirt:

Ephesians 4:22

You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; 23 to be made new in the attitude of your minds; 24 and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.

Deliverance must involve a change in the attitude of our minds.

Jeremiah 31:33

"This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time," declares the LORD. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.

As we become open and aware of the leading and prompting of the Holy Spirit, and allow the flow of His Spirit to flow into our thinking we become transformed, body, soul and spirit. When we cooperate with the Holy Spirit His Word is written into our minds and hearts so that being transformed by the renewing of our minds becomes something normal and natural producing abundant fruit of the Spirit.