

Overcoming Evil With Good



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Romans 12, 13.*

Memory Text: “Be not conformed to this world: but be ye tranformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God” (*Romans 12:2*).

However much Paul is seeking to disabuse the Romans of their false notions of the law, he also calls all Christians to a high standard of obedience. This obedience comes from an inward change in our heart and mind, a change that comes only through the power of God working in a person surrendered to Him.

Romans contains no hint that this obedience comes automatically. The Christian needs to be enlightened as to what the requirements are; he or she must desire to obey those requirements; and, finally, the Christian should seek the power without which that obedience is impossible.

What this means is that works are part of the Christian faith. Paul never meant to depreciate works; in chapters 13 to 15 he gives them strong emphasis. This is no denial of what he has said earlier about righteousness by faith. On the contrary, works are the true expression of what it means to live by faith. One could even argue that because of the added revelation after Jesus came, the New Testament requirements are more difficult than what was required in the Old. New Testament believers have been given an example of proper moral behavior in Jesus Christ. He, and no one else, shows the pattern we are to follow. “Let this mind be in you, which was also in [not Moses, not Daniel, not David, not Solomon, not Enoch, not Deborah, not Elijah] Christ Jesus” (*Phil. 2:5*).

The standard doesn't—*can't!*—get higher than that.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, December 23.

Your Reasonable Service

With chapter 11, the doctrinal part of the book of Romans ends. Chapters 12 through 16 present practical instruction and personal notes. Nevertheless, these concluding chapters are extremely important because they show how the life of faith is to be lived.

For starters, faith is *not* a substitute for obedience, as if faith somehow nullifies our obligation to obey the Lord. The moral precepts are still in force; they are explained, even amplified, in the New Testament. And no indication is given, either, that it will be easy for the Christian to regulate his or her life by these moral precepts. On the contrary, we're told that at times it could be difficult, for the battle with self and with sin is always hard (*1 Pet. 4:1*). Christians are promised divine power and given assurance that victory is possible, but we are still in the world of the enemy and will have to fight many battles against temptation. The good news is that if we fall, if we stumble, we are not cast away but have a High Priest who intercedes in our behalf (*Heb. 7:25*).

Read Romans 12:1. How does the analogy presented here reveal how we as Christians are to live? How does Romans 12:2 fit in with this?

In Romans 12:1, Paul is alluding to Old Testament sacrifices. As, anciently, animals were sacrificed to God, so now Christians ought to yield their bodies to God—not to be killed but as living sacrifices dedicated to His service.

In the time of ancient Israel, every offering brought as a sacrifice was examined carefully. If any defect was discovered in the animal, it was refused, for God had commanded that the offering be without blemish. So, Christians are bidden to present their bodies as “a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God.” In order to do this, all their powers must be preserved in the best possible condition. Although none of us are without blemish, the point is that we are to seek to live as spotlessly and as faithfully as we can.

“Be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind (Romans 12:2). In this way the Apostle describes (*Christian*) progress; for he addresses those who already are Christians. The Christian life does not mean to stand still, but to move from that which is good to that which is better.”—Martin Luther, *Commentary on Romans*, pp. 167, 168. What does it mean to move from good to better in the Christian life?

To Think Soberly

We have talked a great deal this quarter about the perpetuity of God’s moral law, and we have stressed again and again that Paul’s message in the book of Romans is not one that teaches that the Ten Commandments are done away with or somehow made void by faith.

Yet, it’s easy to get so caught up in the letter of the law that we forget the spirit behind it. And that spirit is love—love for God and love for one another. While anyone can profess love, revealing that love in everyday life can be a different matter entirely.

Read Romans 12:3–21. How are we to reveal love for others?

As in 1 Corinthians 12 and 13, Paul exalts love after dealing with the gifts of the Spirit. Love (Greek, *agape*) is the more excellent way. “God is love” (1 John 4:8). Therefore, love describes the character of God. To love is to act toward others as God acts and to treat them as God treats them.

Paul here shows how that love is to be expressed in a practical manner. One important principle comes through, and that is personal humility: a willingness of a person “not to think of himself more highly than he ought” (Rom. 12:3), a willingness to “give preference to one another in honor” (Rom. 12:10, NASB), and a willingness not to “be wise in your own opinion” (Rom. 12:16, NKJV). Christ’s words about Himself, “Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart” (Matt. 11:29), catch the essence of it.

Of all people, Christians should be the most humble. After all, look at how helpless we are. Look at how fallen we are. Look at how dependent we are, not only upon a righteousness outside of ourselves for salvation but also on a power working in us in order to change us in ways we never can change ourselves. What have we to brag of? What have we to boast of? What have we in and of ourselves to be proud about? Nothing at all. Working from the starting point of this personal humility—not only before God but before others—we are to live as Paul admonishes us to in these verses.

Read Romans 12:18. How well are you applying this admonition in your own life right now? Might you need some attitude adjustments in order to do what the Word tells us here?

The Christian and the State

Read Romans 13:1–7. What basic principles can we take from this passage about the ways in which we are to relate to the civil power of government?

What makes Paul’s words so interesting is that he wrote during a time when a pagan empire ruled the world—one that could be incredibly brutal, one that was at its core corrupt, and one that knew nothing about the true God and would, within a few years, start a massive persecution of those who wanted to worship that God. In fact, Paul was put to death by that government! Yet despite all this, Paul was advocating that Christians be good citizens. Even under a government like that?

Yes. And that’s because the idea of government itself is found throughout the Bible. The concept, the principle of government, is God-ordained. Human beings need to live in a community with rules and regulations and standards. Anarchy is not a biblical concept.

That being said, it doesn’t mean that God approves of all forms of government or how all governments are run. On the contrary. One doesn’t have to look too far, either in history or in the world today, to see some brutal regimes. Yet even in situations like these, Christians should, as much as possible, obey the laws of the land. Christians are to give loyal support to government so long as its claims do not conflict with the claims of God. One should consider very prayerfully and carefully—and with the counsel of others—before embarking on a path that puts him or her in conflict with the powers that be. We know from prophecy that one day all of God’s faithful followers will be pitted against the political powers in control of the world (*Revelation 13*). Until then, we should do all that we can, before God, to be good citizens in whichever country we live.

“We are to recognize human government as an ordinance of divine appointment, and teach obedience to it as a sacred duty, within its legitimate sphere. But when its claims conflict with the claims of God, we must obey God rather than men. God’s word must be recognized as above all human legislation. . . .

“We are not required to defy authorities. Our words, whether spoken or written, should be carefully considered, lest we place ourselves on record as uttering that which would make us appear antagonistic to law and order. We are not to say or do anything that would unnecessarily close up our way.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 69.

Love One Another

“Owe no man any thing, but to love one another: for he that loveth another hath fulfilled the law” (Rom. 13:8). How are we to understand this text? Does it mean that if we love, we have no obligation, then, to obey the law of God?

As Jesus did in the Sermon on the Mount, Paul here amplifies the precepts of the law, showing that love must be the motivating power behind all that we do. Because the law is a transcript of the character of God, and God is love, to love, therefore, is to fulfill the law. Yet, Paul is not substituting some vague standard of love for the precisely detailed precepts of the law, as some Christians claim. The moral law is still binding, because, again, it is what points out sin—and who is going to deny the reality of sin? However, the law truly can be kept only in the context of love. Remember, some of those who brought Christ to the cross then ran home to keep the law!

Which commandments did Paul cite as examples that illustrate the principle of love in law-keeping? Why these in particular? Rom. 13:9, 10.

Interestingly, the factor of love was not a newly introduced principle. By quoting Leviticus 19:18, “Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself,” Paul shows that the principle was an integral part of the Old Testament system. Again Paul appeals to the Old Testament to support his gospel preaching. Some argue from these texts that Paul is teaching that only the few commandments mentioned here are in effect. If so, does this mean, then, that Christians can dishonor their parents, worship idols, and have other gods before the Lord? Of course not.

Look at the context here. Paul is dealing with how we relate to one another. He is dealing with personal relationships, which is why he specifies the commandments that center on these relationships. His argument certainly shouldn’t be construed as nullifying the rest of the law. (See Acts 15:20, 1 Thess. 1:9, and 1 John 5:21.) Besides, as the New Testament writers point out, by showing love to others, we show our love to God (Matt. 25:40; 1 John 4:20, 21).

Think about your relationship with God and how it is reflected in your relationships with others. How big a factor is love in those relationships? How can you learn to love others the way God loves us? What stands in your way of doing just that?

Now Is Our Salvation

“And that, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep: for now is our salvation nearer than when we believed” (Rom. 13:11).

As we have stated all quarter, Paul had a very specific focus in this letter to the Romans, and that was to clarify for the church at Rome—especially the Jewish believers there—the role of faith and works in the New Covenant context. The issue was salvation and how a sinner is deemed righteous and holy before the Lord. To help those whose whole emphasis had been on law, Paul put the law in its proper role and context. Although, ideally, Judaism even in Old Testament times was a religion of grace, legalism arose and did a lot of damage. How careful we as a church need to be that we don’t make the same mistake.

Read Romans 13:11–14. What event is Paul talking about here, and how should we be acting in anticipation of that event?

How fascinating that Paul was talking here to the believers, telling them to wake up and get it together because Jesus was coming back. The fact that this was written almost two thousand years ago doesn’t matter. We must always live in anticipation of the nearness of Christ’s coming. As far as we all are concerned, as far as our own personal *experiences* go, the Second Coming is as near as the potential for our own deaths. Whether next week or in 40 years we close our eyes in death, and whether we sleep only 4 days or for 400 years—it makes no difference to us. The next thing we know is the second coming of Jesus. With death always potentially just around the corner for any of us, time is indeed short, and our salvation is nearer than when we first believed.

Although Paul doesn’t deal much in the book of Romans with the Second Coming, in the Thessalonian and the Corinthian letters he covers it in much more detail. After all, it’s a crucial theme in the Bible, especially in the New Testament. Without it and the hope it offers, our faith is really meaningless. After all, what does “justification by faith” mean without the Second Coming to bring that wonderful truth to complete fruition?

If you knew for certain that Jesus was coming next month, what would you change in your life, and why? If you believe you need to change these things a month before Jesus comes, why shouldn’t you change them now? What is the difference?

Further Thought: “In the Bible the will of God is revealed. The truths of the Word of God are the utterances of the Most High. He who makes these truths a part of his life becomes in every sense a new creature. He is not given new mental powers, but the darkness that through ignorance and sin has clouded the understanding is removed. The words, ‘A new heart also will I give you,’ mean, ‘A new mind will I give you.’ A change of heart is always attended by a clear conviction of Christian duty, an understanding of truth. He who gives the Scriptures close, prayerful attention will gain clear comprehension and sound judgment, as if in turning to God he had reached a higher plane of intelligence.”—Ellen G. White, *My Life Today*, p. 24.

“The Lord . . . is soon coming, and we must be ready and waiting for His appearing. Oh, how glorious it will be to see Him and be welcomed as His redeemed ones! Long have we waited, but our hope is not to grow dim. If we can but see the King in His beauty we shall be forever blessed. I feel as if I must cry aloud: ‘Homeward bound!’ We are nearing the time when Christ will come in power and great glory to take His ransomed ones to their eternal home.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 8, p. 253.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 In class, go over the question at the end of Thursday’s study. What were the answers that people gave, and how did they justify them?
- 2 The question of how we are to be good citizens and good Christians can be very complicated at times. If someone were to come to you seeking advice about standing for what he or she believed was God’s will—even though it would put him or her in conflict with the government—what would you say? What counsel would you give? What principles should you follow? Why is this something that we should proceed toward only with the utmost seriousness and prayerful consideration? (After all, not everyone thrown into the lions’ den emerges unscathed.)
- 3 What do you think is harder to do: to keep strict adherence to the letter of the law or to love God and love others unconditionally? Or could you argue that this question presents a false dichotomy? If so, why?
- 4 As we near the end of this quarter, talk about, in class, what you have learned from the book of Romans that helps us to understand why the Reformation was so important. What has Romans taught us about what we believe, and why we believe it?

Saved in the Sky: Part 1

***Editor's Note:** Pastor Nikolai Zhukaljuk has served the Seventh-day Adventist Church for more than 40 years as a pastor, writer, publisher, and former president of the Ukrainian Union Conference. In the story below, he shares a pivotal moment from his time in the Soviet military.*

My time for mandatory service in the Soviet army was nearly finished. One of my responsibilities was to serve as a journalist for the military newspaper. My superiors were pleased with my work and wanted me to continue as senior editor. They offered me an apartment in Leningrad, which was very difficult to obtain during that time. There was just one condition—I would have to become a Communist. During Soviet times, a person couldn't work in such positions without being a Communist.

In a few days, I was invited to meet with the general. He told me, "You can continue with military service. We'll give you officer rank, and you can stay with us. You will have business trips, travel to different places, and work with the military district. You can stay in the army and work here."

So now I had two proposals—to become a chief editor or a military officer. This was a great temptation—I was thinking of what it would mean to become an officer and of all the things I would get. On the other hand, to have an apartment in Leningrad was a dream for me! I seriously considered accepting one of these offers, even though it would mean renouncing my faith in God and becoming a Communist.

At that time, I also served as a military skydiver and had participated in about 80 jumps. One day, as we prepared for another jump, the chief commander told me, "I'll go first, and you will be the last one to jump. We will have 15 soldiers in between." The parachutes of all the soldiers ahead of me would open automatically, but I would need to open mine manually. I thought this would be fine; *I'm brave, I'm very experienced, I've done this many times before.*

I jumped last. After a brief free fall, I pulled the rip cord. Nothing happened. Trying not to panic, I reached for the emergency cord and pulled. Again, no parachute appeared. There was nothing but blue sky above and the ground coming up fast below. I understood that this was the end. The feeling that overwhelmed me at that point is something only someone who has been in the sky can fully understand.

To be continued in next week's Inside Story.

The Lesson in Brief

▶ **Key Text:** *Romans 12:2*

▶ **The Student Will:**

Know: Understand that the renewal of the mind is a reciprocal relationship between the believer and God.

Feel: Sense a growing awareness in his or her day-to-day life about ways to better follow the will of God.

Do: Identify how God is directing him or her to live and choose to act, based on that direction.

▶ **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: How God Renews the Believer's Mind

- Ⓐ Who is responsible for the renewal of the believer's mind?
- Ⓑ Is the renewal of the mind an active or passive process? Explain.
- Ⓒ What role does faith play in the renewal of the mind?

II. Feel: A Better Awareness of the Will of God

- Ⓐ When have you experienced a new spiritual understanding? Share what that understanding meant to you.
- Ⓑ Describe a time when you became convicted about a change you needed to make in your patterns of thinking and living.

III. Do: Identify God's Will and Act on It.

- Ⓐ What has God been convicting you about lately that is not in line with a pattern of godly living? How can you act on this conviction?
- Ⓑ Which spiritual gift do you identify with? How can you use this gift for God?

▶ **Summary:** This lesson will help students understand the reciprocal nature of renewing their minds as they progressively surrender them and their activities to God as living sacrifices. God will then empower them to think, feel, and act according to His will.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *Romans 12:2*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: We must fully surrender our lives as living sacrifices to God. It is only then that the Spirit will enable us to renew our minds and actions to reflect God’s will for our lives.

Just for Teachers: Help your class to realize that living according to the will of God, instead of the pattern of the world, requires an active surrender from us and the ongoing, interactive renewal of the Holy Spirit. Righteousness by faith is still a process of entire renewal, from first to last, until glorification. It cannot be emphasized too much that this amazing transformation of our minds and hearts will always be empowered by the Spirit of God.

Opening Discussion: The first two steps of the well-known “Twelve Step” process in addiction recovery can help us to understand what it means to be transformed by the renewing of our minds from the patterns of the world, empowering our lives to testify to the will of God.

The first step is to admit that you have a problem with the addiction you’re facing. The second step is to recognize that you need help from a higher power in order to overcome your addiction.

This recognition is a much more difficult process than we might realize. One might be willing to admit that he or she is sinful in general. But to be able to admit that we have a particular problem in our lives is much harder.

In college, Cory didn’t want to admit that his particular addiction was anything more than a “stress reliever.” God had to convict him otherwise. Once he was convicted and had fully admitted that he had a problem, Cory simply needed to take action to remove that addiction from his life. He needed strength from beyond himself to be able to do it. Cory has never taken a more difficult walk in his life than the Spirit-led march down the dorm hallway to his room to throw his substances into the nearby dumpster.

Physiologically we know that we form neuropathways or patterns in our minds for every action we take. These pathways are all the more enforced when tied to a chemical substance, even if it is just the chemicals in our own brains. We quite literally need to be transformed by the renewal of our minds.

Questions for Discussion:

- 1 Is there a class member who might be willing to share his or her

experience of overcoming or struggling with an addiction? If he or she is willing, invite this person to give his or her testimony.

② Tell about a time you were able to form a new positive habit in your life.

►STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: Encourage your class to think about the ways in which believers, as active participants in the salvation process, can surrender their lives to God.

Bible Commentary

Introduction: Do a brief overview of Romans 12 with your class. There are two commands in Romans 12:1, 2. The first is a command for believers to do something active—to present themselves “as living sacrifice[s].” The second command is for the believers to allow something to happen to them, to “be transformed by the renewing of [their] mind[s].” The rest of chapter 12 and the following chapters then give practical and ethical examples of how the new pattern of thinking will be lived out.

Consider This: Why is it that believers are often happy to do the intellectual thing but reluctant to take the logical, but practical, “next step”?

I. The Active Surrender of the Believer *(Review Romans 12:1, 2 with your class.)*

The first command in Romans 12:1 is for believers to do something active. They are to present themselves as living sacrifices to God. In this sentence, the verb “present” is in the imperative mood in the Greek, which is the command word form. In other words, Paul is not giving the believers an option here; they must surrender their lives as living sacrifices, as their spiritual act of worship. The description of the sacrifice as being “living” reveals the active nature of the verb. It underlines the fact that the believer is not a sacrificial animal that has been slain and passively placed upon the altar, but rather it is an active participant who lays down his or her own selfish agenda in order to follow the will of God.

Consider This:

1. What does it mean specifically for you to present yourself as a living sacrifice?
2. How can you actively surrender your life to the will of God?

II. The Action of God to Transform the Believer *(Review Romans 8:5–9 with your class.)*

The second command given by Paul in Romans 12 is found in verse 2: “be transformed” (*NKJV*). This command, however, is in the passive voice rather than in the active voice. This means that this command is something that is to be acted out upon the believer. Often in Scripture, when there is a passive verb without an antecedent doing the action, it is called a divine passive. Thus, the one who is doing the action is God. In this context, Romans 12:2 is clearly a case for the divine passive.

The believer is to “be transformed” by the renewing of his or her mind so that he or she no longer conforms to the patterns of the world. This renewal of the mind takes us back to Romans 8, in which we learn that the mind that is focused on the flesh results in death, but the mind that is focused on the Spirit produces life and hope. The renewal of the mind in chapter 12 is, therefore, a reference to the Holy Spirit’s work in the life of the believer. After we actively have surrendered our lives as living sacrifices to God, by choosing to dwell on the things of the Spirit, God then takes the active role of transforming us through the renewal of our minds. This results in a cooperative, friendly relationship with God.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ If we are the ones who choose what we think, how can God be the One to renew our minds?
- ❷ Describe an experience when the Holy Spirit reminded you of something from Scripture that helped you to change your pattern of thinking.

III. The Ethics of a Renewed Mind *(Review Romans 12:3–8 with your class.)*

After Paul gives the two commands at the beginning of Romans 12, he then goes on to describe, through ethical examples, how the pattern of the believer’s life is transformed. One example is for the believers not to think too highly of themselves but rather to recognize their corporate identity. This directive is seen in the metaphor of the body of believers who have been given a certain portion of grace, a spiritual gift, with which to serve the church and the mission of God through the church to the world. To emphasize the passive side of being transformed by God, it is clear that these gifts have been given by the Holy Spirit (*1 Cor. 12:4–11*), not earned; rather, they have been received by faith. Another example is to show love for others by being sincere because of a spiritual fervor (“fervent in spirit”) for serving the Lord (*Rom. 12:11, NKJV*). Being “fervent in spirit” is another reminder that it is God who is transforming us. Paul’s use of “spirit” as a modifier means this fervor is given or empowered by the Holy Spirit. In the same way, the “spirit” is the agent who creates a longing for adoption in the heart of every believer, as described in Romans 8:22, 23.

Consider This:

1. What other ethical examples of a transformed life do you see in Romans 12 and 13?
2. In what ways has your faith changed the way that you treat other people?

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: The active process of surrendering our lives as living sacrifices to God’s plans is a moment-by-moment process for the believer. Help your class to think about the everyday moments during which they can surrender their thoughts to the Holy Spirit’s renewal of their minds. Draw out specific examples from their own lives to which the application of the Spirit-inspired Scriptures can make a difference.

Application Questions:

- ❶ Can you describe a moment from your life last week when you chose (or could have chosen but didn’t) to surrender your thoughts to God and think in a renewed way?
- ❷ What direction from Scripture helped you (or could have helped you) to know how to think or what to do in that situation?
- ❸ What is your takeaway from today’s study? How can it specifically make a difference in your life?

►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: You will need a poster board or whiteboard and markers for this activity. It would also be helpful to print out a picture of a brain and glue it on the poster board or draw it on the whiteboard beforehand. (You could do this activity by drawing this illustration on the ground with chalk or a stick if you do not have access to the aforementioned supplies. Or, in the event that neither poster board or an area to draw on are available, proceed to the activities below and discuss them without visual aids.)

Activities:

- ❶ Brainstorm and write various examples of “sinful thoughts” on a poster board surrounding a picture of a brain.
- ❷ Brainstorm and write examples of renewed thoughts in a different color for each sinful thought written on the board.
- ❸ Add a verse from Scripture that supports each renewed thought.