

Coach House Church BEACONS

THINKING SOBERLY

15TH JUNE 2020

Sober thoughts are difficult to come by. They are the thoughts you have when you are seeing reality clearly, uninterrupted by outside influences whether it's (literally) one drink too many or late night thoughts about getting your life together that evaporate when the morning comes.

A couple of years ago I made it my goal, slightly arbitrarily, to learn to teach English as a foreign language. One reason was because I could imagine, and picture myself doing it, so it seemed plausible to bite the bullet and do an intensive course so that I could become qualified. As I did so, my dreams ran up against reality. I confirmed that I had an ingrained hatred of planning. I remembered that I was a perfectionist, so I kept swapping out lesson plans to try and formulate a better one. I realised I was a slow worker, and took ages to think things through, so I was working 16hrs a day at its peak. Perhaps to your surprise, I completed the course successfully in the end after a gruelling month of work.

Since that time, I've had various offers to take up teaching in exotic locations which I'd love to experience. So once again, my imagination runs wild, and I think 'maybe, just maybe I could make it work' and my mind fixates on the things I'd enjoy... rather than the prospect of planning with minimal resources in 35 degree heat. However, since I did the course, I have had an experience of the reality which I can now bring to bear on these dreams. Each time, it is a challenge to do so, especially when the offer is so promising. Interestingly, none of this means that I shouldn't teach in that kind of context, but if I do, I must first soberly weigh up the difficulties and the joys in light of reality so that I am prepared to face what comes my way.

Romans 12:2-3 has this to say: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and

perfect. For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned."

In verse 2 we are told not to be conformed to this world (or age). This doesn't just mean practices that occurred in the ancient world, but to the way of thinking that characterises people that do not know God. Simply put, if you do not believe in God or you've not known him for long, then your mind will be shaped by the world and context around you.

Later in verse 2 we are told to be transformed by the renewal of our minds. When we come to know God, our way of thinking should begin to change. If we take our faith seriously, the things we believe about God will affect the way that we live. For example, we can begin to live with hope for the future when we realise that God says he will never leave or forsake us. So what part do we play in this transformation?

Colossians 3:2 says "Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things".

God transforms us as we set our minds on him and approach him with an attitude of humility. Reality begins to look different when we realise God is at the centre of it.

At the end of verse 2 it tells us the outcome of our minds being changed: "by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect." As we come to know God more, our minds are better equipped to understand what is good because we know him, the source and standard of all goodness. The less we know him, the more our minds will judge what is 'good' according to the standards around us in the world and our own personal preferences. As our minds are renewed and we are able to discern what is good, we begin to think of ourselves rightly in relation to God and other people.

So Paul says:

"For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober

judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned."

Earlier in chapter 11, Paul encouraged the believers to see their new and restored relationship with God as an act of mercy. Both Jews and non-Jews have had their relationship with God fixed purely because of the mercy of God. Neither group has earned it, and neither group can (or should) boast against the other.

As believers, when we think soberly we realise that all we have has come to us as a gift of God. Sober thinking takes into account the fact that we are not 'self-made' people, but our innate gifts and talents are something we haven't earned, but have come to us as a gift from God.

In chapter 12:4-8, Paul describes Christians like the different parts of the same body, with different contributions to make. When we focus on God, we can think more soberly, and see how best we can contribute with our gifts and talents to this 'body' of believers around us (of which we are a part). Our gifts are not to elevate us above others with dreams of grandiosity, but God's mercy and love towards us equips us with the humility to serve others with our gifts.

Many of our dreams about ourselves are driven by the hope that we can stand out from the crowd and become something 'more' than what we are. My dreams about teaching, and to be honest, many other things, work to that effect. We all want to be thought well of by ourselves and others, and believe that we are unique and valuable, and we often use our gifts as a means to achieve this feeling. 'People will think I'm amazing if I can do this or that' or 'I will think so much more of myself if I can achieve this goal'. As we learn just how much God loves us, not because of any talent we have or impressive little thing we've done, and in fact, in spite of all the many wrong things we have done, and even further than that, the fact that he is committed to loving us as his children forever, despite any circumstances that come our way – we can freely and joyfully use our gifts to serve others.

I crammed a lot into that last sentence, and part of the reason is that there is a lot in my mind that needs renewing – it's a lifelong process. I'd encourage you to read the letter to the Romans which I've quoted here because it outlines in much greater detail our relationship with God and all that it means for our lives – Romans 8:28-39 is particularly useful to focus on.

It should be clear that this is not a 'cold, hard reality speech'. Reality is not just cold and hard if we know God. The beauty of our relationship with God is that through suffering, confronting ourselves soberly, and being transformed by the renewal of our minds – we will find our best contribution and gifting. It may be humbling at first, it may also stop us thinking too little of ourselves – but with God there is a guarantee that he will lead us into paths that are truly good for us.



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