

"Entrusted With Life"

Sometimes the right thing, the best thing, the smart thing is not the *first* thing you think of. Reality is sometimes counterintuitive. Sometimes it is not the thing you naturally would assume.

I read some interesting examples in the field of Psychology. Somethings that might sound good are not. A fairly recent study of people struggling with low self-esteem revealed that self-help words of affirmation did more harm than good. People who tried to counter their low self-esteem by saying things like, "I'm a lovable person" didn't feel better afterwards. In fact, they felt worse. Two possible reasons are one, the statement itself automatically triggered contradictory thoughts in them or, they felt bad that they were the kind of person who tried to prop themselves up with words of affirmation. *So I'm not doing that anymore.* Another was that trying to let your anger out by hitting a punching bag and imagining the person you are angry at actually just makes you angrier. *So I'm not doing that anymore.* But seriously, I'm not trying to give psychological advice, anger can be a complicated issue, but the idea that it is *always* better to just get it out is flawed.

One of the most interesting findings was that while many well-meaning writers, media personalities, and parents talk about the importance of being happy the counterintuitive reality is that making happiness your primary goal actually leads to less happiness and less satisfaction. The studies found that a greater sense of wellness, wholeness, and satisfaction came not from the pursuit of happiness but from a sense of purpose and of meaning and even calling. In this message, the first in a New Year, I'd like you to consider a truth that may seem counterintuitive. It's the truth that you get the most from life when you stop focusing on what you want from life and dwell instead on what God wants from you. In fact, it is the recognition that your life itself does not ultimately even belong to you. It belongs to God, and he has entrusted it to you so that you can live it for him. ***The way to respond to God's mercy is to hand your life over to God.***¹

Now, there is no way we can begin to understand this unless we begin as the Scripture does with the mercy of God.

I. THE CHRISTIAN LIFE IS BUILT ON THE REALITY OF THE MERCY OF GOD.

Romans 12:1 says, *I appeal to you, therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.* In this particularly vivid passage about handing your whole life over to God, it talks about everything being based on God's mercy.

From the earliest pages of the Bible we're taught that

A. God is Merciful.

The mercy of God is deep compassion. The Hebrew word for mercy is derived from the word for a woman's womb. The Hebrews identified mercy with the feeling a mother has for her infant child. She has a bond to that child, sees it's as helpless and in need and feels compassion. God choose this word to reveal his heart to us.

The mercy of God assures us God cares for us in our weakness. I heard someone ask this question: *Do you look at the world with the eyes of a judge or with the eyes of a doctor?* They said the eyes of a judge see the wrongs that need to be punished, but the eyes of the doctor see the hurts that need to heal. So what is God like? God is both but with a twist. God *is* like a judge who sees the wrongs that need to be punished. But God in his grace, through the death of Jesus makes a sacrifice to take our punishment so that he can give us forgiveness and declare us righteous. At the same time God is *also* like a compassionate doctor. He sees with the eyes of a healer, the hurts that call for mercy. He sees the bitterness at life, the failure in relationships, the insecurity that overcompensates, the unwillingness to face the need to change. He sees the addictions, and the shame along with the sin. Without excusing what is wrong, God shows us mercy. He comes after us in countless ways we don't even know and cares for us.

The mercy of God often goes unnoticed. If a policeman pulls you over for rolling through a stop sign or driving too fast, sees you are having a bad day and lets you off with a warning instead of \$200,00 ticket you *know* you've been given mercy and you are thankful. The book of **Lamentations 3:22-23** famously reminds us that God's mercies never cease. They are new every morning. And we often do not even notice the mercy that surrounds us. We don't notice or give thanks but He *is* full of mercy. When the Bible appeals to us on the basis of God's mercy it is not just saying we are indebted to him, so we need to be grateful and do the right thing. It is telling us we can trust in him because he deeply cares for us. We need to do the smart thing.

B. God is Rich in Mercy

Paul uses those words in **Ephesians 2**. He talks about how we were all lost. He ends **verse 3** by a humbling leveling of the ground when he says, *Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath. 4 But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, 5 made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.* What does it mean to be "rich in mercy"? It means God has a lot of mercy to give and share with everyone. It is mercy that sent Jesus to die for our sins and rise from the dead as our Savior. It is mercy that sends the Holy Spirit to awaken your need for Christ and draw you to him. In all of the human choices we make in coming to Christ God is acting mercifully for us and in us.

If you believe that God is God and He is rich in mercy than how do you respond to him? How should you respond to a merciful God? The answer is challenging but life-giving...

II. THE BEST WAY TO RESPOND TO THE MERCY OF GOD IS TO HAND YOUR WHOLE LIFE OVER TO HIM.

Romans 12:1 *I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice....* This is a very important, paradoxical *and* counterintuitive statement.

A. We have to die to truly live.

It's paradoxical because the word "*sacrifice*" is the word for a killing. He's saying God is merciful so you should kill yourself. Not literally of course but in a very real way and yet is a way that allows you to go on living. It is counter-intuitive because we treasure and protect our freedom, the right to do what we want and to be who we want. We think that's best. This says if you believe in the mercy of God you should put to death the idea that you belong to yourself and you know what is best and you get to choose for yourself and present yourself to God a living sacrifice. You put to death your pride to live humbly. You put to death your convenience to serve others. You put to death your insistence on fairness to show kindness and forgiveness. You put to death your laziness to learn and grow. You put to death the right to live as you feel so you can do what God says.

B. We have to see that our lives are not our own to live.

This is what is at the heart of this series titled "Entrusted." This is a frequent theme in the Bible. A few chapters later in **Romans 14:7** Paul writes: *For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the*

Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. Look at that phrase. "We are the Lord's." This is talking about a sort of stewardship of life. Stewardship is the management of resources belonging to another to achieve the owner's goals. C.S. Lewis wrote, "Every faculty you have, your power of thinking or of moving your limbs from moment to moment is given you by God. If you devoted every moment of your whole life exclusively to His service, you could not give Him anything that was not in a sense His own already."

I'm embarrassingly rough with my cars. I just see them as tools to get me where I need to be. But many years ago, early in the days of our church I had to take a trip to Asheville North Carolina for a conference. I didn't trust my car to make the trip but an elderly lady offered me her pristine Volvo and entrusted me with her car to use for that conference. I drove so carefully. I checked all the fluids, made sure it was clean. I took good care of that car because it wasn't mine to mess up. How would it change the way you live if you thought your life does not ultimately belong to you but it has been entrusted to you?

1 Corinthians 6:19-20 *Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own. ²⁰ for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body. **So when the Bible says that the best way to respond to the mercy of God is to hand your life over to him.** it's talking about recognizing that your life is a gift entrusted to you by God to be managed by you for Him.*

C. We have to choose this path because of God's mercy.

In **verse 1** Paul could have said I command you but here it says I *appeal* to you. God wants your willing devotion in response to mercy.

I read once where the taser gun industry claims a 95% compliance rate when tasers are used on people to get them to comply with commands. Hit a person with enough electricity and you can get them to do most things you ask of them. What if God set midnight as the deadline for getting what he wants from you and using a taser to compel obedience? What if he gave you a half-second zap for a sketchy thought and five full seconds for sins of commission. What would be the result? A church full of twitchy people who obey God like cowering dogs? That's not the goal. God wants you to gladly hand your life over to him because you see and believe that **the best way to respond to his mercy is to hand your life over to him.**

Here's the last thing we're going to look at in this message...

III. WHEN WE TURN OUR LIVES OVER TO GOD, WE BEGIN A LIFE OF GROWTH IN GOD.

Verse 2 follows the call to present yourself as a living sacrifice with this: *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.*

A. Growth in God begins when we refuse to conform to the world.

When the Bible uses the phrase “this world” like this it’s talking about a pattern of priorities, values, and behavior. The pattern of this world is a mess of unwise motivations, and inexhaustible self-deception. It's the insecurity that makes us anxious, angry, bitter, cynical, and judgmental. It's the lie that we can fix, medicate or amuse ourselves out of our emptiness or boredom. It's the arrogance that pushes others out of our minds so we can chase whatever we think will fill our lives. It's the demand that others pay attention to and appreciate us. It's not just outward actions but also the underlying attitudes that spring from the lies we believe and the truths we resist. Yes, God accepts us as we are and shows you lavish mercy daily but that doesn't mean he wants you to live a life conformed to the pattern of this present world. He wants us to refuse to be formed by them or conformed to them.

B. Growth in God requires the renewal of our minds.

Verse 2 says, *Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind.*

Studies of brain neurology reveal the choices you make form pathways in the nerve cells or neurons in the brain. Everytime you think and choose what you are going to do or believe or order your life you are building a pathway and strengthening a pattern in your life. You need to take that seriously. What habits or pathways are you forming in the interior structures of your soul? Where is that going to take you in five years? Every time –there is a battle in you over what's good and bad, truth and falsehood, and you choose to go one way the side that won is stronger and that is deep in your brain. That's scary and serious, but the good news is it is not ultimate or unchangeable. You can identify those things. You can see it for what it is. It is not you – your soul -at the deepest level. It is a pattern that can be changed. Studies show you are not powerless to reshape or renew your mind. ²

If a human being made in the image of God can change deep patterns of thinking and feeling and overcome addictions and compulsions and long-standing habits how much more can God's children, empowered by his mercy, enlightened by his Word and his Spirit, renew their minds for him.

Fight the fight for your thought-life. Flood your heart and mind with God's light and truth. Growth in God requires the renewal of our minds and...

C. Growth in God results in discovering the goodness of God's will.

Look at how **verses 2** ends. It says: *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.* That phrase, *by testing you will discern*, is a little awkward but what it means is you will discover by practical experience. What do you discover? You discover that the will of God is good. It really is good. It is acceptable. That word is weak. The idea is it is pleasing. And it is perfect. There is no fault or imperfection in it. *That's why, it's worth fighting for your thought life. It's worth fighting the pattern of this world and renewing your mind in God's truth. And that's why, as counter intuitive as it may seem, to give up the right to just live life your way, to see your life as entrusted to you by God and to hand your life over to God is the best way to respond to His mercy.*

Conclusion

Jesus handed his life over for you. You can trust him because of his majesty and his mercy. Jesus gave his life over to judgment for you so that you can hand your life over to mercy through him. He is the only master who, when you give yourself to him doesn't just use you he fills you. The altar on which you give your life to him, is the only altar that gives you life and renews your mind.

Jack Miller was a pastor and author Connie and I had an opportunity to meet and share a meal once. He once spoke at a luncheon for church leaders one time on the topic of how deeply believing in the mercy of God has tremendous power to transform our lives. When he finished a man came up to him who said that he was a committed Christian but he was an angry man and found his heart was very condemning of others and frustrated. He said: *"I believe everything you have said but it doesn't change me. Why?"* Jack Miller prayed and asked him questions and then said: *"The reason it doesn't change you is because*

you do not receive it as a little child.” The man became still. He later said “*those words ‘you do not receive it as a child’ shocked me awake.*” Could it really be that simple? Sometimes we overlook the very things that are most powerful and profound.

Amen.

¹ <https://digest.bps.org.uk/2014/12/01/10-of-the-most-counter-intuitive-psychology-findings-ever-published/>

https://www.huffingtonpost.com/todd-kashdan/whats-wrong-with-happines_b_740518.html

<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/12/opinion/sunday/david-brooks-the-moral-bucket-list.html>

Emily Esfahani Smith, "There's More to Life than Being Happy," The Atlantic (1-9-13)

Christine B. Whelan, "Seek Your Purpose Before Your Paycheck," Acculturated blog (5-23-16)

² <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/use-your-mind-change-your-brain/201106/you-are-not-your-brain>