

Thinling as a Christian

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[0:00] Here is our beautiful world. A beautiful world, but a damaged world, sin-damaged, God-judged world.

! This is the word of the Lord.! In 2 Peter 3, verses 10 and 11. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar.

The elements will be destroyed by fire. And the earth and everything in it will be laid bare or burned up. Since everything will be destroyed in this way. What kind of people ought you to be?

What kind of people ought you to be? Imagine that you don't know the next sentence. If you have a Bible with you, actually put your finger over the next sentence.

And those words in the Bible on the screen here, what kind of reaction, what kind of response does that create in us? You notice that the Bible asks a question.

[1:21] It asks a question here. And the Bible is actually full of questions. Sometimes they're very open questions. Sometimes they aren't actually set down as a question, but they leave a question mark.

God is so kind to us because he gives us the dignity of asking us questions. We are not treated like robots.

We're made in God's image, so he asks us a question. So here's that question.

And if your finger's still over that next sentence, you might say, if I read that, perhaps I don't even believe that it's true. Perhaps I don't even believe that there's going to be a time when this world is going to disappear with a roar.

Everything's going to be destroyed in that way. Burned up. Perhaps you just find this, a very apocalyptic, frightening thought.

[2:35] This Holocaust. Perhaps you think, well, that's a very striking thing.

If this was true, can I find out more about this? Or perhaps you just, your mind's gone blank. But if you were to take your finger off the page now and to look at what the Bible says and what Peter, the apostle, says to the Christian people he is addressing here, he says, you ought, you ought, there's an obligation, there's a rightness, to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming.

It's really quite striking how the apostle Peter is not talking to them in terms of their reactions, in terms of their emotional responses, but he's saying, okay, something dramatic is about to happen and there is something that you should do, all of you should do.

All Christian people should behave and respond in this way. God has asked us a question. And the answer is given here.

You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed is coming.

Now, it's quite interesting if you begin to look in the Bible through this sort of prism, through this sort of approach, because you will find again and again God asks those questions and he prompts his people to respond in certain kinds of ways.

[4:27] And we are going to have four messages on the subject of what kind of people ought you to be or, put it another way, how should we live?

How should we live? this is not a trivial matter.

And I hope that over these four Sundays that we will ask ourselves questions about how we live, why we live the way we do live, what sort of people we are, and how we will test this against what God's word says.

Apologies that actually the church diary has sort of out of sync with what I'm about to do, so you can't really follow the yellow sheet. Nothing to do with who prepared the yellow sheet down to me.

I just felt we needed four passages to go through and four messages to give. And I have a sense that as we go through these messages, they will get closer and closer to the bone and become more and more challenging.

[5:54] And let's pray for God's grace to be able to receive what he wants to say to us. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, Father, as we come to your word now, please open our hearts to what you have for each one of us.

Speak to us your word deeply. By the power of your spirit, open our ears, make our hearts soft and responsive. And please help me that I may say those things that you want me to say and not say the things you don't want me to say.

And that the agenda will be yours. We ask in Jesus' name. Amen. So Christian, why do you live the way you do?

Is it something you picked up from someone else? Not necessarily a bad thing, but it's good for us to recognize why we might live the way we do.

Or is it the way you just grew up? Or maybe it's a church tradition. I would suggest that every time has been a difficult time for Christian people to live.

[7:12] It was not easy for those who lived in the first century, who were a minority, who were living in a totalitarian regime situation.

It was not easy for them. It's never been easy for God's people. But I do think that there are particular challenges, particular risks, that face Christians today, in this country, in this year.

As our country has slipped away from whatever Christian moorings it had, we're now at sea, and we cannot trust the behaviors around us as a safe way for us to live.

Now, bear in mind, that 97% of the population of this country has no personal allegiance to Jesus Christ.

That means, if you're here today, and you do have personal allegiance to Jesus Christ, you are a minority. We are few. And that means that the culture which is around us is controlled, is molded by the 97%.

[8:29] If we take the cue for our living from the 97%, I think we will be in trouble.

We'll be in trouble on the basis of what God's word says, and we'll be in trouble in terms of our faithfulness to that word. And even over the last 30 years, I will just give you two examples of the massive change that has taken place in this land.

Sexual ethics has dramatically changed. Dramatically so. You only need to see the opinion polls on people's attitude to matters which 30 years ago would have been much more aligned to a Bible position.

To see that the mood has changed. We are faithful to the Bible in a minority. And the second example I will give you is the fact that whereas 30, 40 years ago a Christian position would have been kind of like the default.

A Christian tradition would have been the default in many ways. But now there is active opposition against the teachings of Jesus Christ in the Bible.

[10:17] There's active opposition from the unique claims of Jesus Christ. And we find that quite startling and difficult to comprehend.

you might still be thinking that sort of opposition is only coming from a few. Open your eyes.

It's going to come from many. It is currently unsaid by many but it is present. We are on the wrong side of most of the debates in this country.

We are on the wrong side of most of the progress of legislation in this country. we are on the wrong side of judgments that are made in courts of law. So this is a very pertinent question.

How should we live? How should we live? Our passage, our text today is Romans 12 verses 1 and 2.

[11:25] Please have your Bibles open at Romans 12 1 and 2. Here is the context. The Apostle Paul is writing to a church group like ourselves.

He is writing to a church group of all ages, both genders, all backgrounds, all types, all professions. There were slaves in the church of Rome, there were people who had money in the church of Rome, and Paul is writing to these people, and I like to think it would be in a similar sort of setting to ourselves, that the church was gathered, and he writes this letter.

It's a big letter, isn't it? Sixteen chapters as we've split them up. And in chapters 1 to 11, the Apostle Paul unravels, unfolds, in probably a greater depth and intensity than anywhere else in the New Testament, the nature of the plight of man and the power of God, the nature of the terrible predicament that mankind is in, whether Jew or Gentile, all of us find ourselves under God's judgment, and there's no escape in that.

And then the Apostle unfolds in the most glorious way how God has sent his own son, Jesus Christ, to be the remedy, to be the solution, where he can both be just in his righteousness and the justifier of sinful people.

[13:24] Makes it very plain, this is a work of God's grace, this was not something we deserved, not something that we sought, not something that we could ever earn, this was something that God gave, he gave his son.

While we were still sinners, Christ died for us, there is therefore no room for boasting, no room for us, any of us to be saying, God is pleased with me because of something I have done.

No, no, God is pleased with his son because of something that Jesus did by his life and death, and vindicated manifestly by his rising from the dead, God saying, well done, good and faithful servant. And Paul delves into the mysteries, the mysteries of how it can be that we could both be responsible, yet God is sovereign. God chose a people, he chose us.

If we are here today and find ourselves under the reign and the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, it is because God from all eternity has set his love upon us.

[14:51] there was no point in that process where we kind of intervened and we made the vital difference. We are responding to the grace of God that's been revealed to us.

Our eyes have been opened. Our spiritual death has been changed into life. And so he spends chapters 1 to 11 sort of exploring that theme and he comes to that grand doxology that we find in chapter 11 verse 33.

Oh the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God, how unsearchable his judgment and his paths beyond tracing out. This is Paul, a saved sinner.

And he pours out his heart in adoration, in personal adoration. And he's almost saying to that Roman church, come with me, give thanks to this great God, say it together, oh the depth and the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God, how unsearchable are his ways.

It's a wonderful thing that God has done. Now we come to Romans 12 verses 1 and 2 and this is the pivot point, this is the turning moment moment in this particular book where Paul, having laid out in a sort of most lavish and detailed manner the nature of the grace of God that has been revealed to us in Jesus Christ, says what is your response?

[16:39] And he suggests that there is an absolutely logical and necessary response that has to be made and I read it out to you. 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'll be able to test and approve what God's will is, his good, pleasing and perfect will.

Now, I would like to suggest to you today that these two verses are one of the most important verses in the whole of the Bible.

In terms of understanding how saved creatures like us should be responding to God. Packed very, very tightly in these two verses are all the ingredients that we need to understand in order for us to make a righteous and godly response to the grace that we've received.

I don't want to unpack this a little bit this morning. There's a connection. The word therefore occurs there. There is a connection between what has happened in those first 11 chapters.

[18:04] He's saying to those Romans, you've heard all that now, so what do you do? What do you think? This book does not end at chapter 11, last verse. There has to be a response.

Firstly, and interestingly, the first thing to say and to consider is not the practice of living but the practice of thinking. Christians are to think.

Verse 2 of Romans 12, be transformed by the renewing of your mind. The renewing of your mind.

This is about the thinking process, the reasoning process, the rational process. You could say, well that's a very easy and obvious point.

But it's not an easy and obvious point. This idea that before we start to live as Christians, we need to think as Christians, is actually contrary to many forms of religious and spiritual practice.

[19:42] When you see the proliferation meditation, meditation, mantra chanting, other consciousness type religious activity, there you see a bypassing of the mind.

This emphasis of the apostle Paul on the mind is in contrast to a spirituality which exalts experience and denigrates the mind.

So we are not now talking necessarily about monks in Tibet, but we are talking about potentially evangelical churches in the United Kingdom, where we can be so persuaded by the prevailing understanding of what spirituality is, that we should exalt experience over the mind.

Let me immediately say that a felt experience of God is surely exactly what the Bible reports and encourages. That is why I wanted to make sure we read Romans 11, 33 to 36.

if ever there was somebody who had an experience of God and was expressing that experience and was like on seventh heaven, it has to be Paul at that moment, where he puts his pen down as it were, and he just rattles off this praise to God at that moment.

[21:26] Because he doesn't want to carry on talking about this, he just wants to stop and worship. And may God grant that when we meet together in this place that there will be moments like that.

That we will want to stop and we will want to worship as it were. The experience will be that strong. The sense of the presence and the nearness and the greatness of God.

It is a felt experience. So nothing that I'm saying this morning in any way should detract from that. But feeling, even feeling from God, is not a sufficient basis to live day to day life.

For the very simple reason that feelings come and go, that life has to be lived 24 7. And I think it is pitiful if we get into a habit and a way whereby we think we come together in order to have such an experience of God that we go up on a high but find ourselves in a low on Monday morning.

And the reason why that happens is because whatever we receive on a Sunday as an experience will not be sufficient to take you through an awkward interview with your boss at 9.30 on Monday morning.

[22:54] you need something more. No, the Bible encourages us to be people who use our God-given minds to have God-given thoughts which lead to God-honoring lives.

And it's the content of God's word that is to direct and fill our thoughts. That's what Paul says.

Therefore, in view of God's mercy, I've just given you 11 chapters.

Right. Think about that. Think about what I've just said. Think about what I've just said. Let me, as a slight digression, just suggest to you that, therefore, it remains, it is incredibly important for us to be regular readers of the Bible.

Because it is there that God speaks to us truth. The world speaks a different message. Our hearts often speak a different message.

But here we have the truth, unchanged and unchangeable. people. And this, I think, is what Christian meditation is about, is about taking God's word and allowing it to influence our thinking, to null it over in our thoughts.

[24:36] So my first point is this, that we must think as Christians. Christians. Secondly, we need to think differently. Christians are to think differently. Look again at verse 2.

Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed. The world that we are born into and live our lives to the point of our new birth in Christ operates in a full and detailed way that deliberately excludes the true and living God.

Can I say that again? The world that we are born into and live our lives to the point of our new birth in Christ operates in a full and detailed way that deliberately excludes the true and living God.

Life is resolved by looking at the world as if there is no God. life is and over centuries it has been possible for every aspect of life to be so developed and understood, specifically excluding the true and living God.

That is the way my business runs. That's the way your employment situation works. That is the way family counselling is undertaken.

[26:10] That is the way politics is put into practice. That is the way the law is framed. There are millions of words, millions of speeches, millions of books out there that are based upon this single exclusion that people.

That there is no true and living God. Our children are taught in schools where there is that presumption.

We mix and mingle with very nice neighbours but they have that presumption. The world makes its decisions upon the premise that there is no true and living God.

There is no God to whom we are accountable. there is no God to whom we have to give a report at the end of our lives. He's not there. It's a myth.

Now that won't do for a Christian.

[27:22] It won't do for a Christian. We need to be prepared to challenge all the presuppositions around us because we know that those presuppositions are based upon a fundamental blasphemous error.

There is no God. It is not therefore surprising that the way in which the world lives is actually fundamentally contrary to the ways and will of God.

We have to think differently and this is very hard but it's necessary and Paul commands us to do it. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world. the way that it operates will be transformed.

And here he is speaking on this point to the church in Corinth, a cosmopolitan church in a cosmopolitan city, saying this in 2 Corinthians 10 verse 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.

I love that boldness. Do you see what he's saying there? He's saying this is the nature of our ministry. This is what we're about. We're not just interested in getting converts, but there's something more important at stake here.

[28:59] We're wanting to see transformed lives. And the only way lives are going to be transformed is by attacking the mind.

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

It's almost like he's in a church meeting and someone says, yeah, well, of course, I went and did that. And he says, hang on, hang on, hang on, why did you do that? Just give me a reason why you did it.

He takes captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ. He challenges the thought process in himself and no doubt in a church setting as well.

Christians are to think personally. Romans 1-11 is for each one of us and the reading of Romans 1-11 leaves each of us with a responsibility.

[30:08] I like to think of that church in Rome. And just to remember, they're not 21st century people, but they were given that letter. And Paul was not putting them through some sort of sieve and saying, have you gone to the University of Rome?

Have you gone on some sort of course? He was giving them that letter and saying, this is for you. All of you. And I think that puts us all under a responsibility.

Something to think about and then something to do. How shall I live? And then I think we need to remember very carefully that Christians are to think as a church.

We are called to think personally but we're not called to think individualistically. There's a difference. not in isolation. Think of the context of the gathered community of believers.

Actually, most of the rest of the book of Romans is to do with church behavior. It is not to do with personal decisions about your life. It's to do with church behavior.

[31:11] And that really is a very fruitful context for us to work out the way to live. We live together.

How shall we live? That's a very good question. It's a challenging question. I'm really looking forward in the coming days, months, us having conversations about how we operate as church.

Why we do things the way we do. And we ought to all engage in such a conversation. I want to move on to a second point here, which is living deliberately.

I've been talking about thinking, but living deliberately. And here's the process, and Paul spells it out. In view of God's mercy, I read the Bible truth, I think about it, I recognize the implications, and then I make a response.

And he says, I urge you. And we need to be urged because there's still much of the old person about us. We get lazy, we get bored, we get tempted by the old ways, so we need to be encouraged.

[32:27] And that's what we do when we're together. That's the prime way in which we encourage is by being together and encouraging each other. By hearing testimony, by sharing in prayer, by opening up our lives and becoming vulnerable to an extent, even possibly confessing our faults to one another.

So that if we've had a bad week and we've stumbled, that we can be encouraged together. And together, we are aiming high.

We're aiming high. We don't come here to be dragged down to a bottom level. We come here to lift one another up into closeness to Jesus Christ. Isn't that fantastic?

Isn't that a great ambition? This is what Sunday is about. And there's a result. And there's a result. Every Christian is called to this. Offer your bodies as living sacrifices. Offer your bodies as living sacrifices. You see it there in verse one. I urge you brothers in view of God's mercy to offer your bodies as living sacrifices holy and pleasing to God.

[33:36] Of course he's thinking about the Old Testament practices. They'd be familiar with that idea. Not just in Jewish culture but the idea of sacrifice.

And there's this beautiful picture this stunning picture really. You're saying well you know about the sacrifice you know about the lamb and so forth. Now you are the sacrifice. You go on the altar you're a living sacrifice not a dead one.

And that's what you do. That's what you're called to do. Some people have queried what does it mean by offer your bodies as living sacrifices. What about the rest of you?

I don't have a comprehensive answer to that but I would say it seems to me that this reminds us that the body which I mean goes with me. Wherever I am there's the body.

And it means that in the 24-7 of my life whether I'm asleep or eating or working or whatever I'm doing there what is my calling to offer myself as a sacrifice?

[34:42] to offer myself to God as a sacrifice in the earthy the everyday of life. Whatever you are and whatever you're doing a living sacrifice.

And secondly not only should we have that deliberate and thoughtful response but it's a deliberate rather than a reactive way of life. Deliberate means it's planned it's focused it's prioritised it looks ahead.

Reactive means I'm responding to present possibilities. Our world increasingly favours a reactive instinctive present tense way of living.

I want to address younger people especially on this point. Our world increasingly favours a reactive instinctive present tense way of living.

Think of the advertising. What does the advertising say to you? Does it say to you if you're interested in this pop along to our shop sometime have a think about this?

[35:59] No you need it now. You need everything now don't you? It's a sales technique isn't it? Always. I'll close the deal with you 10% off today.

Now we live in the present. The future is death to advertising. It's death to salesmanship. But it's lifeblood for the Christian.

communication. Communication is incredibly instant isn't it? I don't need to say that. It's so obvious as to not even bear saying.

But think how it was 30 years ago and you'll see that we're living in a different world. When was the last time you wrote a letter in writing?

Put it in an envelope and put a stamp on it and it took a day or two to get to its required destination? I remember reading the life story of the dear missionary who went to India.

[37:10] Henry Martin. Henry Martin. Right. He was deeply in love with somebody who was living in Cornwall at the time. And they had to correspond by letters. And it took seven months.

Seven months for a single letter to get from Cornwall to where he was in India. Do you love me? You know?

It's certainly gave him time to think. And time to worry. And all the rest.

Well we don't have the luxury of that anymore do we? Because it's all instant. It's all instant. And we've all been guilty of pressing our buttons and expecting people to be on the case immediately and responding to us.

That's the way the world works. There's this expectation that communication will be so instant. So it's now. Not tomorrow.

[38:08] Now. Opportunities. Most opportunities are given to you now. It's a bit like the flash mob world isn't it?

Let's do something now. You go out of that door. You get a text message from a friend you haven't seen for a while. Tell you what. Let's meet down at the level. Can you do it in ten minutes?

Oh yeah. Why not? Why not? I might have to adjust a few things but that seems more attractive and appealing than whatever else I might have had on my agenda.

And availability. because everything's available now isn't it? In our 24-7 culture. So how easy it is when I have gone through my Haste trimmer last week through the cord.

I think oh now I'll have to go down to home base. No, no, no. I'll go on Amazon. Three pound forty. Plug. It comes the next day. Isn't that convenient? It all works so quickly.

[39:20] whatever we're experiencing of this now we're just going to get more and more of the same in the future. And I say this is a reactive culture.

A reactive culture. And we need to be very, very careful about that as Christians. I'm serious. We need to be very, very careful that our lives do not become reactive lives.

just going here or there according to every opportunity that comes our way. Again, please don't get me wrong. The Bible talks about the man who is on his way to make a sacrifice and he sees his neighbor's ox in the ditch, gets it out of the way.

If you come to church on a Sunday and you're seeing someone knocked over on a bicycle, I hope you would stop the car and help. The Lord Jesus Christ was doing something and then somebody interrupts him and he finds a way to meld the two together.

These things happen. That's life, isn't it? But it's different. What I'm saying is rather different to that. What I'm saying is that we need to set our stall out and to say I will not be defined as a reactive person.

[40:36] That will not be my character. I'm going to set my stall out and say these are my priorities, these are the things that I count of first importance and this is what I will regularly do.

I will say no to some things because I know what my priorities are. I will have plans. I will look forward. It seems to me that's entirely biblical and necessary way of living and it's exactly mirrored by those we should honor and take example from.

The Lord Jesus Christ when he came from heaven to earth. He knew what his mission was. One day he was going to die upon a cross. It says most poignantly in the gospel of Luke as the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven.

Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem. If Jesus had been reactive like us, he would have got delayed in Galilee.

He would have just responded to the nearest opportunity in a way. But he had a plan and that plan was to go to a cross. The apostle Paul says of himself, but one thing I do.

[42:05] One thing I do. Single minded. Well, that's lovely. Lovely for Christian people to be single minded like that. Not diverted, single minded.

Single there's a beautiful outcome to this way of living.

The beautiful outcome really is given in the final section here where it says, if you live like this, then you'll be able to test and approve what God's will is, his good, pleasing and perfect will.

I think this is such a blessing and encouragement for every single one of us who are uncertain about our lives and where they're heading and what decisions we should be making. making in our lives. And you can pick up books that says, how do I get guidance from God?

How do I know what is the right thing to do? Is there a particular verse in the Bible that will help me in some fashion? Do I have to close my eyes and hope that God will give me a Bible verse perhaps to help me with the matter of guidance?

[43:09] I think this is about this territory. But what it's saying is this, if you set your stall out and give you life in a way which is a living sacrifice to God every day in all that you're doing, if your mind is transformed so it has a Christ mindset to it, that as you go through life you will keep bumping into God's good will.

You will just keep encountering God's good will. You will have the sensitivity in your heart by the power of the Holy Spirit to see if a door is closing or the door is open.

there will be issues but I think there's a promise here and it's saying that then you'll be able to test and approve.

Approve means the picture is of gold. Is it really gold or not? Is this God's will or not? That's the picture here.

If you're living in that sort of way, you are wide open, good territory to understand the will of God for you. And to say, it is the will of God, not just my thoughts, it's him.

[44:23] It's him, I can see his stamp upon this pattern, this bit of my life. So I leave you with these thoughts, some questions.

Why do I, why do we live the way I or we do? How much Bible thinking underpins my, our priorities and decisions? Thirdly, what is the result of God's mercy in my or our life?

Heavenly Father, we pray that the truth of your word would be