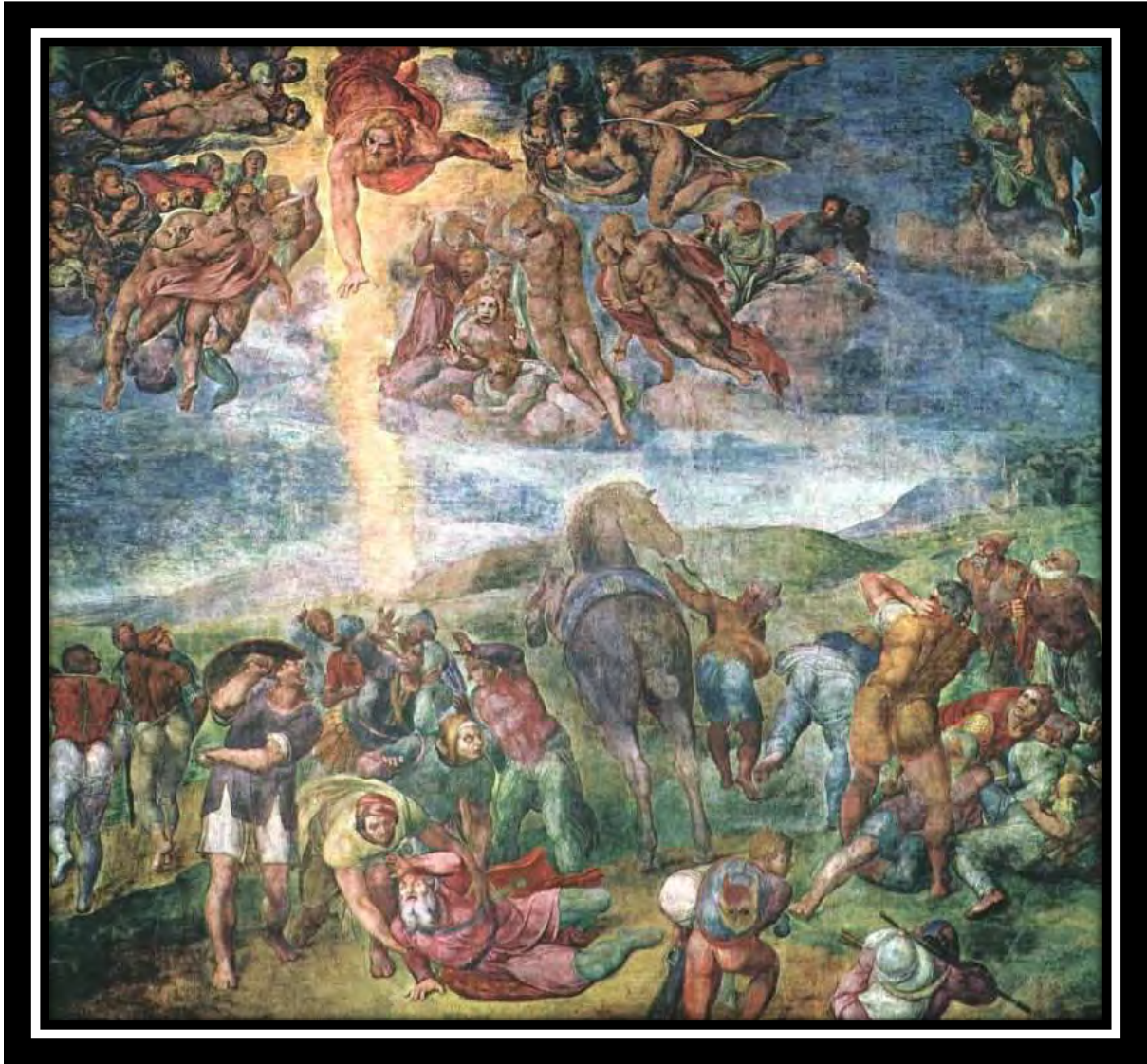


ROMANS—WEEK 11

THE SPIRIT LED LIFE



F. Michael Slay
A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The cover image is the Conversion of Saul by Michelangelo Buonarroti

Paul wraps up his praise of God with a proof style poem of praise. He then shifts to application, describing a total level of commitment, which must be transformation oriented.

Each one of us is to apply our gifts as the spirit enables—in love and *not lagging behind in diligence*.

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1 Romans 11:33–36 (NKJV)

Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out!

*“For who has known the mind of the LORD?
Or who has become His counselor?”
“Or who has first given to Him
And it shall be repaid to him?”*

For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to whom be glory forever. Amen.

This feels like the chorus to go with the previous verses. Paul has revealed unfathomable mysteries; now he sings God’s praises. Drawing from Isaiah 40, Jeremiah 23, and Job 41, Paul takes an interesting tack.

Who has directed the Spirit of the LORD, or as His counselor has taught Him? With whom did He take counsel, and who instructed Him, and taught Him in the path of justice? — Isaiah 40:13 (NKJV)

For who has stood in the counsel of the LORD, and has perceived and heard His word? Who has marked His word and heard it? — Jeremiah 23:18 (NKJV)

Who has preceded Me, that I should pay him? Everything under heaven is Mine. — Job 41:11 (NKJV)

These verses don’t just praise God; they challenge us to praise Him. Rather than say how wonderful God is, they ask, “*Who has done this?*” They make the case for God’s greatness. So, where is Paul going with this? Might Paul’s legalistic background as a Pharisee be bubbling to the surface?

No, this is a normal and beautiful form of praise.

Suppose you wanted to praise someone’s work in a technical field. What’s the best way to do it? Should you use lots of flowery words, like “brilliant” and “elegant?”

Or is it more powerful to note how many times their work is cited in the literature?

But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you. — 1 Peter 3:15 (NKJV)

Knowing why you believe what you believe makes everything you do for the Lord more solid. This glorifies the Lord constantly, often in unintended ways.

In the 1750s, the Reverend Thomas Bayes wrote down an argument for the historicity of the resurrection of Christ. That argument used a mathematical technique that went on to become the foundation of modern probability theory. Google “Bayesian statistics” and you’ll get millions of hits.

That’s a lot of citations.

2 Romans 12:1–2 (ESV)

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. 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.

After his beautiful treatise on the incomprehensible nature of God, Paul tells us what we should do about it—and what he says is chilling.

Therefore, present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Let's not kid ourselves about what this means. Paul wrote this to people living under the thumb of a Rome. "*Presenting your bodies as a living sacrifice*" isn't meant to be taken lightly.

If God really is this amazing, incomprehensible Lord of everything, with an agenda totally beyond our grasp, then total sacrifice is the only right response. That's real *spiritual worship*. And with people like Nero running the government, *living sacrifice* can get pretty literal. Yeeesh.

Then Paul explains how this works. Since we can't possibly understand what God is up to, the best we can hope for is to figure out what He wants us to do.

But even that isn't easy. Nothing short of a total transformation will do.

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.

Note that not conforming to this world but being transformed by the renewing of our minds isn't the whole instruction. There's something else—testing.

Testing? Testing what?

Testing our guesses about God's will. Being *transformed by the renewal of your mind* isn't some one-time event where we suddenly can know God's will. If conversion did all that then Paul wouldn't need to give this instruction. No, Paul is describing the learning process that's the essence of walking with Christ.

Being a Christian means making lots of mistakes, while always seeking God's will. God honors this and gives us clues and eye-openers (even painful ones) in response. With the help of the Holy Spirit, we're open to these lessons. Thus, we're transformed over and over by the renewing of our minds.

That's sanctification.

Don't get discouraged by your failures. Frustration with failures is part of the system. Remember the lesson about humility in Chapter 11? This is part of that.

God is determined to transform us into His likeness. He pursues that agenda at all cost—even the cross.

3 Romans 12:2a (ESV)

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind,

Imagine this. You go to the doctors because you have a strange tingling in your fingers. The doctors start investigating and pretty soon they aren't looking at your fingers at all. They're interested in your spine or your brain or something else seemingly unrelated to your hands. What's up with that?

What's up is that they know what they're doing. The tingling is just a clue. Now they're trying to fix the real problem. Any doctor who just gave you a pill to reduce the tingling in your fingers would be incompetent.

This concept is central to understanding how Christianity works. Christianity isn't about making people feel better; it's about transforming them. We see our sins as the problem. That misses the point. Our specific sins are just clues. The real problem is sin itself, and only the Holy Spirit can cure that.

The transformation that Romans 12:2 talks about is not just about conversion to Christianity. Paul is writing to people who are already Christians. We are to be transformed again and again.

The enemy of all this is legalism. Legalism emphasizes the individual sins that people commit and pressures them to stop those sins. It works. They stop.

Well, at least it looks like it works. Folks hesitate to admit their sins. Some sinful practices may even be reduced.

But it's a disaster. The honesty and openness that the gospel encourages is crushed. The law is back! The life of pretending to be perfect is restored. Deep fellowship is lost, and everyone's sanctification freezes.

The right approach is the gospel of grace. One of the reasons that the gospel works so well in a prison is that "pretending to be perfect" isn't as much the norm with prisoners. That pretending makes most people so phony that even their profession of faith can be insincere.

And the sad thing is that the pretending is so deeply ingrained that no one knows that they're doing it.

This is why we preach and teach the gospel of grace constantly. Legalism is the antithesis of Christianity.

But legalism is so natural that it dominates how we think. The society we live in is legalistic. In one sense, it has to be. We must have a legal system of laws for our society to function.

But this leads to people not being genuine about their sinfulness. Frankly, being totally honest can be too much information. So, phoniness is the norm.

I wonder if being genuine is even possible in our culture.

It sure would take a lot of practice.

4 Romans 12:3–8 (NIV)

For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you. For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.

I follow this just fine when Paul says, “*Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment,*” but then he adds, “*in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you.*” What does that mean?

I understand that faith is *distributed to each of you*. Our faith comes from God.

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. — Ephesians 2:8–9 (NIV)

But how can my judgment of myself be *in accordance with my faith*?

The rest of this passage explains it. Notice that Paul makes the faith connection again in verse 6. *If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith.*

That one’s easier to understand. Any prophesy is by faith. It isn’t something you figured out; it’s illumination from God. So, when Paul says, “*prophesy in accordance with your faith,*” he’s saying your prophesying must be strictly what God gave you and not something clever you ginned up on your own. “Faith” here includes illumination.

That concept explains the first instance too. In this passage, “faith” means more than just belief; Paul is using it to refer to the whole package we received when we were saved.

And not everyone gets the same package. *We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us.* Thus, you shouldn’t *think of yourself more highly than you ought*. You need to *think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you.*

You’re on a team and the team needs you do the job your package enables you to do.

Our sinful nature gives us way too much self-focus. We’re prone to hot-dogging and showing off. That often gets in the way of the team goals.

Don’t get caught up in thinking how great your gifts are. Paul is commanding us to think soberly about our gifts so we can be valuable team members.

5 Romans 12:9–13 (NASB)

Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor; not lagging behind in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; rejoicing in hope, persevering in tribulation, devoted to prayer, contributing to the needs of the saints, practicing hospitality.

I like the NASB translation here because it leaves the Greek word hypocrisy intact, instead of translating the first sentence more loosely with something like, “*Let love be genuine.*” The Greek word hypocrite literally means a stage actor (someone who wears a mask). Paul is saying that if you’re going to care about someone, lose the mask.

This passage is all about throwing ourselves wholeheartedly into Christianity. Every sentence is a superlative command. Don’t just avoid evil and do good. *Abhor what is evil; cling to what is good.* Don’t just help one another. *Be devoted to one another in brotherly love.* Don’t just honor one another, *give preference to one another in honor.*

This is strong stuff that we really need to pay attention to. Many modern Christians have a big seriousness problem. The classic example of this is C & E Christians—people who only go to church on Christmas and Easter. And, make no mistake, they think of themselves as practicing Christians. They may say something like, “I really should go to church more often,” but they’re not serious.

So, if the power of self-delusion is so strong, how do we know that we’re all that different from C & E Christians? Are we doing what Paul commands in this passage? Are we even coming close? How do we compare to the first century Christians that Paul wrote this to?

We don’t know how well we measure up, but don’t forget that Paul wrote this to those first century Christians. That means they needed to hear it. They weren’t perfect either.

Paul’s challenging them to up their game just as he’s challenging us.

But that doesn’t mean we only need to up our game a little bit. Every one of us desperately needs to get serious—*fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; rejoicing in hope, persevering in tribulation, devoted to prayer, contributing to the needs of the saints, practicing hospitality.* OK, but how?

Much of that last section is specific to the first century. Back then, *the needs of the saints* were severe, and they often needed lodging. That’s what *practicing hospitality* is about. Also, we don’t suffer serious persecution here, so our need for *persevering in tribulation* is limited.

But the rest of that passage gives the keys to spiritual growth—*fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; rejoicing in hope, devoted to prayer.* That’s more about attitude and focus than about actions. Being *devoted to prayer* doesn’t mean praying all the time; it means your heart’s in it.

That means losing the mask.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. What's your favorite way to praise God?
2. Have you ever gotten a clear "test result" about God's will?
3. What's the key to separating seriousness from legalism?
4. What church jobs are you especially qualified to do?
5. What are the masks we wear?

Items for prayer: