

“Tempted By Trivia”

Romans 12:1-8

September 30th, 2001 – Maryvale Drive Presbyterian Church, Philip Siddons

Besides providing the church at Rome with a wonderful review of Christian theology, Paul was also trying to encourage unity in their faith community. Paul had been a Jewish rabbi and that, in itself, was a bit of a problem in his trying to bring people together who were not originally from the Jewish faith.¹ The word “therefore,” beginning this chapter, is a strong link to the preceding arguments. Before this, he had been asking them to be in unity with one another. Now he is encouraging them to be a community which is characterized by self-denial and a thinking of others (whether Gentiles or Jews) as better than self.



Paul says “present your body as a living sacrifice” and the word “body” is a synonym for the whole person. Earlier in the letter Paul said: “Present yourself to God as one who is alive from the dead – an instrument of the righteousness of God.”² One of Paul’s most used metaphors about the Christian life was the comparison of life to death.

A Christian, he says, is someone who lives life as if they have come back from the deadness of living only according to this world’s standards. We are to be a “*living sacrifice*.” Our lives are to be alive, in an ongoing way, to the kingdom of God – even *holy*. As Paul said in his earlier letter to the Corinthian house church, we are to be living cathedrals in which God’s Spirit dwells. All this, he says, is our reasonable (from the Greek word *logic*) . . . which is our logical service.

Paul is characterizing the Christian life as our total life’s response to God. Do you see your life tomorrow morning as somehow lived out of a response of worship to God?



It only stands to reason, Paul is what we value the most – what we f

¹ Gentiles

² in 6:13



important in our personal lives – will be expressed in all that we do in our daily activities. That is why he next describes the Christian world view as not conforming to the prevailing values of our society. After all, what is there about what you believe that makes you any different from most people in your neighborhood?

The word Paul uses for *conformity*, in its root, means to change the outward, external part of oneself – to outwardly conform to one’s surroundings. People who are conforming to the values of our surrounding society are, in a sense, like chameleons – taking on the colors of their surroundings – taking on the values of our culture.



In our society there is strong pressure on all of us to conform to the standards presented to us every day in the predominant media. We feel that pressure in even relatively insignificant matters: the fashions in dress and appearance, the things we purchase and the ways we entertain ourselves. Most significantly, you and I feel the pressure to accept the materialistic values and goals of our surrounding culture.

There may be no greater weakness in the Christianity of our time than the fact that so many church members accept (without question) the dominant intellectual and social atmosphere of our time. Our culture is focused on trivia.

Compared to the horrors of massive terrorists’ attacks or world hunger, we might think that the gossip magazines about Hollywood stars or the personal lives of political leaders seems, . . . well, *trivial*. They wouldn’t be making the marital demise or drug or alcohol abuse of the stars into cover stories if we didn’t buy them to read that material. We are living in a culture that is fixated on meaninglessness: “The Weakest Link,” “Entertainment Tonight,” NFL statistics and all the magazines and books that keep us current on the latest developments in the world of irrelevance. Our time, attention and energy is diverted from more important issues and concerns.

The comedian Woody Allen once said, “People

are constantly creating these real unnecessary problems for themselves that keep them from dealing with more terrifying, unsolvable problems about the universe.”³ We see dozens of people writing Dear Abby or Ms. Manners, anguishing over things like whether or not it is rude for a son or daughter to address letters to their parents using their first names instead of the more formal “Mr. & Mrs. Smith.” *The Los Angeles Times* devoted pages to such globally insignificant topics as the eating disorder of the so-called “Spice Girl” Victoria Beckham or whether Princess Di was pregnant when she died. Some of you can remember back to the 1960s when our magazines chronicled every move Jackie Kennedy made from the time she woke up until she signed off for the night.



The real danger of trivia lies in its perceived innocence. Who, after all, would condemn stamp collecting or accumulation of Star Wars memorabilia? Our wrath is instead reserved for other obsessions such as alcohol abuse, materialism or promiscuity. We can fail to see that our trivial pursuits can be just as addicting, just as much of an escape, as drug abuse or a self-abusive anything-goes lifestyle.

In an interview, the Chicago Sun-Times sports columnist Mike Royko said he regretted all the hours he spent watching TV sports – time he now wishes he could have spent with his late wife. He said: “I think about the incredible amount of time you really waste and in so doing, you sacrifice so many important things. I didn’t realize this until it was too late and I can’t go back and redo my life.”



This is similar to Senator Paul Tsongas when he had decided not to run for reelection because he’d been diagnosed with cancer. He said, “No one ever said on their deathbed ‘I wish I had spent more time at the office.’”⁴

³ in the movie *Manhattan*

⁴ Quoted by Anna Quindlen, *A Short Guide to a Happy Life*, p4-7 ISBN 0-375-50647-0, (slightly edited to

But of course this brings us to the question of who decides what is or is not a waste of time. What hobbies are OK to have? What issues are worth getting worked up over? What films are worth seeing? But perhaps the issue is not what is or isn’t trivial. The problem resides within our attitude and focus of our life. What is it that we are doing with our lives?

Back to the text.

Instead of being *conformed* to the overwhelming shallowness of the culture in which we live, Paul suggests that our Christian faith should be transforming us. The word here is literally metamorphosis. Our inner and outer selves – our whole beings – are to undergo a metamorphosis – a transformation so that our focus is not on trivial pursuits but on a mindful and intentional pursuit of our spiritual path. But what is our spiritual path?

It is “all that is good, acceptable and perfect.” It is a lifelong growth process of trying to make our daily work and play be shaped by what God wants. It is about wrapping our lives around the life and teachings of Christ – growing in our understanding of Jesus’ teachings about the very nature of the kingdom of God. And as Paul puts it here, by the renewal of our minds. Are you in the active process of renewing your mind? Do you actually know more today about Jesus’ teaching about the kingdom of God than you did five years ago?

Being a good writer, Paul occasionally repeats themes for emphasis and clarity. Back in chapter 8, verse 6 he said, “To set the mind on the flesh is death, yet to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.” In other words, if all of our calculations, plans, and ambitions are determined by what we’re handed by the TV screen writers, ad producers or our fortune cookies, then we’re living as if we are only children of this age. Most people do – but how about you?



You might have read how an estimated one-third of the population suffers from insomnia. And you might also have read that most insomnia is a result of depression and anxiety. It is no wonder that

perpetuate inclusive language).

when people have conformed themselves to the trivia and shallowness of our society's values, they get depressed.



Renewing our minds is what it seems to be about. When was the last time you had your mind in for a tune up? This may practically mean that we must learn how to draw the line between interest and obsession, between entertainment and escape. Royko the sportscaster, for example, had shifted from being a sports fanatic to being a sports fan.

In a larger framework, as Christians we need to examine whether our interests and activities are not more superfluous than spiritual. Maybe we need to take an honest look at what kind of energy, time and money we're pouring into things which are ultimately of no consequence.

I occasionally enjoy watching a football game when I am familiar with some of the names of the players. Some of the acrobatic pass completions are fun to see – they're entertaining. But the next time our football team is on the 1 yard line, perhaps we could ask ourselves why we care so much whether or not they win. They get paid either way and our personal worth has nothing, at all, to do with whether our home team is in the Super Bowl.

How are we renewing our minds? To what extent, in this past week, have you intentionally brought something new into your life that caused you to reevaluate, reconsider and think through it so as to grow in what and how you think? Have you learned anything? Have you grown in your spiritual path this week? The first step of mental and spiritual renewal comes in taking charge of our own wills.



There is a marvelous play called *Bus Stop*⁵ that has been presented on television and in the theater. One of the central characters is a cowboy who has abducted a woman from a dance hall to marry her. The play deals with his bullheadedness and his

⁵ By William Inge, 1956

acute loneliness.

As the play develops his character, he slowly comes to terms with the fact that his macho dominance hasn't done anything to help his loneliness. He comes to see how he has been living unaware of the part of himself that has genuinely warm human traits.

Near the end, he finally summons up his *will power* enough to start the process of humbly respecting this woman as having worth – at least equal to that of his own. Somehow he is able to break the patterns he has been in and open himself to learning and risking – thus experiencing a renewal of his mind and soul.



Have you gotten hold of your *will power* and decided to discipline yourself for renewal? Are you taking responsibility for your own personal spiritual growth? How much do we *will* to learn about God, about ourselves and the world around us?



I'm primarily a teacher by profession. My job is to get people to think for themselves. Whether in my sermons, my writings or the classes I teach, I push students to think for themselves.

One thing I regularly do in classes is play a contemporary song (with the words printed out) or show a movie. I ask them to think and talk about what *they* believe the author is saying. I then ask them to express what *they* think and feel about the topic. It is my job to create a class environment where they feel safe enough to express what they think and feel – even in the situation where they may differ from what I think and feel. If they can't feel safe enough to exercise and express their thinking and feeling in the class, I'm not creating an intellectually credible learning dynamic.

My job and your job in the household is to train younger folks to think for themselves. Because if they don't learn to steer their own boat while they're in the harbor, with all of us around them, their intellectual lives, out on their own distant oceans, will be a shipwreck. One set of parents actually left this church, a few years ago, because they highly resented me encouraging their child to

learn to think for herself. They much preferred to TELL their teen exactly what to think.

Secondly and logically, as Paul says, our “reasonable service” or life-style should begin to show that we are in a spiritual growth process. One of my absolute greatest fears is that someday, someone would tell me that I will never change – that “you can’t tell me anything.”



How is it that you open yourself up for renewal? How is it that you are being transformed by the renewal of your mind?

You know, all of us, at various periods in our lives, experience dry spells where we are not being stimulated by growth-encouraging input. Sometimes this lasts a few weeks or months. Sometimes we wake up in the morning and realize we haven’t been engaged in a stimulating learning experience in *years*.

We may not currently be involved in a course in an academic institution but *are* we actively seeking out input for the renewal of our minds? What are we putting into our lives that will cause us mental, emotional and spiritual renewal? I like what is said in First Peter 1:13. “Therefore gird up (tighten up) your minds, be sober, set your hope fully upon the grace that is coming to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ.”

This is what I understand the Christian Church to be about – a community of renewal. We find renewal and growth from the work we do during the week and the sharing we do together as a church family. We grow from our interaction of our personal learning, reading and discussions. We are even surprised to find we have grown from working on a committee of the church or participating in a church social event.

If we stop to think about it, do we take responsibility for being willing to learn – intentionally *willing* ourselves to be open and mindful in keeping new things and experiences coming into our lives? Are we actively looking into the things that help us in our understanding about Jesus Christ so that we can grow and transform ourselves? Our call in life is to bring excellence in

what we do with our lives – and yet we are called to be different because we have different values than our culture. ☺

