Ultimate Questions 1 – Who Do You Think You Are?

Pride vs. Wisdom:

How we should treat one-another

Who am I? Why am I here? Where am I going?

Scott Souza – June 2009

***INTRODUCTION***

 The central thought of Romans 12 is captured in verse 3:

 *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.* (Romans 12:3, ESV)

 **Paraphrased it says**: “Don’t ‘*over-estimate*’ yourself; ‘*sober-estimate*’ yourself.”

 In some ways this reminds me of lines from the song “*Crazy*” from the Gnarls Barkley duo.\* The words go like this …

Come on now; who do you, who do you, who do you think you are,

Ha ha ha, bless your soul,

You really think you're in control!

Well,

I think you're crazy...

I think you're crazy...

I think you're crazy...

Just like me.

 – Gnarls Barkley, “*Crazy*” \*

 **Performers**: multi-instrumentalist and producer Brian Joseph ‘*Danger Mouse*’ Burton and vocalist Thomas Decarlo ‘*Cee-Lo Green*’ Callaway

 **Songwriters**: Brian Joseph Burton; Thomas Decarlo Callaway; Gian Piero Reverberi; Gianfranco Reverberi

 Yeah, we do get a little crazy sometimes, don’t we – thinking we are in control of others, or of ourselves, or of circumstances – thinking we can mock, put down, neglect, or even hurt others because they are inferior to us in some way. The delusion can persist a long-time. On the other hand, though, maybe you’re like me; I got it together a long time ago, I just forgot where I put it.

***BODY***

 The text tells us not to over-estimate ourselves. And most of us who read those words probably think that we don’t. But maybe we do. Maybe on some deep level we do, but we don’t quite realize it. The way to find out one way or another is to test ourselves by the standards which Paul lays before us. That will take the guess work out of it.

 Notice, in this regard, that the remedy is “*sober-estimation*,” not humility. Humility is one factor in the process, but it is not enough to thoroughly sort ourselves out. We need to think through the qualities listed in this chapter (and for that matter in chapters 13 through 15:7). That’s for you to do later in your secret chamber. Today, I’m just going to get you started in that direction.

 Here’s a starter thought: “If you feel better than others, you are not soberly-estimating yourself; but, if you feel worthless and inferior to others, that also is not a sober-estimation of yourself. You have God-given graces and abilities that make you valuable to the body; (that’s your dignity). Those graces and abilities make you obligated to the body to be the servant of the body as a whole and of each member individually (that’s your humility).

 But that’s where we should end up. Let’s see how we get there.

**1. The Roots of Sober-Estimation (Reorientation)**

 **A.** **Motivation: Recognize the Mercy of God (Romans 11:30 – 12:1 a)**

 ***~ I call you near, accordingly, womb-companions, by God’s pity (1 a)***

 Like a plant with 3 roots, ‘*Sober-Estimation*’ is nourished by three sources: Motivation, Dedication, and Application.

 Romans 12:1-a, gives us our **Motivation** (God’s Mercy): “*I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God*.” God’s mercy has been a key focus in chapters 1 – 11. The Gentiles sinned and came short of the glory of God, and so did the Jews (3:23). But instead of condemning one or both groups, God had mercy on both of them and gave them the undeserved gift of salvation (3:24). In chapters 9 and 11 Paul refers to this mercy under the synonym of “*compassion*.” Here, in 12:1 he calls it by an even more intense synonym, “*pity*.”

 The whole book up to this point centers around this loving grace which God has toward us. As Charles Hodge puts it, “All the doctrines of justification, grace, election, and final salvation, taught in the preceding part of the epistle, are made the foundation for the practical duties enjoined in this, ver. 1.”

 Hodge also points out that God designed not only the gift of salvation but even the world itself to be a blessing. He says, “There are no devices in nature for the promotion of pain for its own sake; whereas the manifestations of design for the production of happiness are beyond computation.” If we really want to be like God we need to create a social environment around us, particularly in our families and in our church, that promotes happiness.

 And notice the deep warmth of Paul’s words. He does not command or demand, rather, he “*appeals*” to them as “*brothers*.” Literally, he “*calls them near*,” not with a finger in the face or a fist waving in the air, but with an arm around the shoulder. And he calls them brothers, quite literally “*womb-companions*,” as if he and they had grown together in the same womb or at least had come from the same womb at various times. And what womb is he talking about – (?) – the womb of God’s mercy – God’s compassion, God’s pity – all undeserved.

 **B.** **Dedication: Dedicate Yourself to God as a Living Sacrifice (Romans 12:1 b)**

 ***~ That you stand beside [present] your bodies as a living sacrifice,***

 ***holy (separate), well-pleasing unto God, your rational (logical) ministration (1 b)***

 And, as a response to this *Motivation* of God’s mercy, Paul asks us for **Dedication** (12:1-b) – dedication to God. That is the second root of ‘Sober-Estimation.’ He asks us to become a “*living sacrifice*” to God. He says that this sacrifice is not only to be “living,” but also “holy,” and “well-pleasing” to God. So the warmth of the first half of the verse is elevated, in the second half of the verse, into the sacred, (lest we think of it in merely sentimental terms). Moreover, this dedication is a very appropriate response to God; it is “*logical*,” or “*rational*.” In other words, the greatness of our response (becoming a *living sacrifice*) is duly proportional to the greatness of God’s mercy – particularly the ***central mercy*** – the self-sacrifice of Christ for us: “*For when we were yet without strength* [literally, “*strengthless*,” or “*helpless*”], *in due time Christ died for the ungodly*” (Romans 5:6).

 The concept of a living sacrifice is somewhat unusual, but Scripture presents several comparisons and contrasts to help us understand. The most obvious contrast is with the “Whole Burnt Offering” which was entirely consumed by flames upon the altar (Exodus 29:18; Leviticus 6:23). The Old Testament also gives us several interesting comparisons. For instance, one commentator says that “Since the altar [in Exodus] was a ‘sanctuary’, a miniature ‘city of refuge,’ the suppliant would grasp these horns in his hands, making himself a living sacrifice, devoted to YHWH, and so under His protection. (A Cole Ex. p 196; OLB, Eclectic Notes).” And there are other, more common comparisons. First Fruits, and tithes, and the fourth-year’s production of fruit trees were offered entirely to God (Numbers 18:12-13; Deuteronomy 18:4; Leviticus 19:24). A closer comparison can be made with the Levites who were set aside entirely for the service of the LORD and his temple (Numbers 3:6-16). Another close similarity is the Nazarite (Numbers 6:1-21). This was someone who made a special vow of service to the Lord. During the time of his consecration he had to keep himself clean and holy. He or she could be from any walk of life; they did not have to be Levites. Some were Nazarites all of their lives – such as Samson, Samuel, the whole family of the Rechabites, and John the Baptist (Judges 13:5; Judges 13:7; Judges 16:17 / 1 Samuel 1:11 / Jeremiah 35 / Matthew 11:18; Luke 1:15; Luke 7:33).

 **C.** **Application: Test and Approve God’s Will (Romans 12:2)**

 ***~*** ***And [be] not fashioned with this age, but be transformed (metamorphosed) by the***

 ***renewing (again-renovating) of your mind (understanding), that you may test***

 ***what is that good (beneficial), and well-pleasing, and perfect (completed)***

 ***will (purpose) of God***

 So then, with God’s mercy through Christ as our *Motivation*, we present ourselves, in *Dedication* to God, as a living sacrifice. With this enriched mindset as our foundation we then are spiritually ready to make **Application** of our powers to testing and approving God’s will (verse 2), and that is the third root of ‘Sober-Estimation.’ As Romans 12:2 (ESV) 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.*”

 It is the world’s spirit, and mind-set, and character, and desires that we must particularly avoid. The Coffman New Testament commentary says this: “The Christian must adopt an utterly different set of value-judgments, based upon an utterly new and higher concept of life, and thus encompassing a view of the eternal things, rather than merely those of earth and time … Whatever it is that rules man's spirit, that essential center of human control, is the seat of all authority over human thought and behavior.” So, this new mindset is against all the sinful tendencies of men in heart and deed.

 To obey this command, then, we must avoid something and we must embrace something. We must avoid conformity to the world, and we must embrace transformation by God. The contrast is between outward conformity and inward transformation. “Conformity to the world” means far more than conformity to the grosser sins of the flesh. It especially means conformity to the attitudes of the world.

 Matthew Henry puts it this way: “Conversion and sanctification are the renewing of the mind, a change not of the substance, but of the qualities of the soul. It is the same with making a new heart and a new spirit - new dispositions and inclinations, new sympathies and antipathies; the understanding enlightened, the conscience softened, the thoughts rectified; the will bowed to the will of God, and the affections made spiritual and heavenly: so that the man is not what he was - old things are passed away, all things are become new; he acts from new principles, by new rules, with new designs. The mind is the acting ruling part of us; so that the renewing of the mind is the renewing of the whole man, for out of it are the *issues of life*, Proverbs 4:23.”

 Matthew Poole says this, “He annexeth three adjuncts to the will or word of God: it is good; revealed only for our benefit. It is acceptable; i.e. by obedience thereunto we shall be accepted. It is perfect, and the observance thereof will make us so too, 2 Timothy 3:17.”

 So there we have the 3 roots of ‘Sober-Estimation’ – **Motivation** (by God’s mercy), **Dedication** (of ourselves to God), and **Application** (of our energy to obedience). These are roughly equivalent to changing your feelings, changing your purposes, and changing your actions. These three changes are the essence of what the Bible teaches about repentance. And the end result of this repentance, this thorough change, is that you come to understand who you are and live out of that new and wholesome reality.

 Let me give you some examples of some people I knew or knew about whose attitudes conformed to the world and not to Christ. I’ll tie them together with a common thread – anger, or aggression. I’ll call the first one ‘AB.’ He was a guy I went to seminary with. I didn’t know him well, and I’m glad I didn’t. Occasionally I heard ‘AB’ carry on a normal conversation with his wife, but often I heard them lapse into tense words and escalate into outright anger. ‘AB’ didn’t seem to be able to avoid it even when others were around to hear, and many times I and others would drift away from them while this fog of anger gathered around them. Mainly we wanted to avoid embarrassing his wife. Some people said things to him, but it didn’t do much more than elicit excuses from ‘AB.’ One day I saw him lean toward his wife who was at least a foot shorter than he was and say, in his Texas drawl, “If you don’t do ‘so-and-so’ I’m goin’ to ‘peench’ you!” I wonder what happened to them, but I think you and I know where they were headed. ‘AB’ was the kind of guy who was conformed to the world in his ideas about “headship” in the home. To reduce him to a stereotype, he’s the kind of guy who says, “I’m the boss, applesauce! Understand, rubber band? When I tell you to do something you do it. You don’t backtalk, you don’t question me, and you don’t disobey.”

 All I can say to that is, “Well, dipsy-do, mister ‘who do you’ think you are. If you like people who listen, how about becoming a listener yourself and listen to James: ‘*But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then* ***peaceable****,* ***gentle****, and* ***easy to be intreated****, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy* (James 3:17).’ Moreover, ***gentleness*** is one of the fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22); so why was it that this carnal habit had not been transformed into the spirit of gentleness within ‘AB’?”

 Here’s another person I knew. I’ll call her ‘CD.’ She was very energetic, very outgoing, and very confident in her ability to win a fight or to “get-over” if she was bucking someone in authority. Maybe you’ve heard about the kind of person who says, “I don’t get mad; I get even!” Well, she got mad, and she got even. She reminded me in some ways of a poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow:

There was a little girl,

 Who had a little curl,

Right in the middle of her forehead.

 When she was good,

 She was very good indeed,

But when she was bad she was horrid.

 -- Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

 ‘CD’ had the same carnal aggression, the same conformity to the world that ‘AB’ had, but in a different form. After she came to Christ she felt a conflict between the ***new*** nature that Christ put within her and the natural tendencies she still had; and they were strong. I and several of my seminary friends and their wives began to work with her to help her learn new, godly patterns of thought and behavior in these and other areas of her life. One of the things that helped her was that we kept assuring her that the new nature which Christ gave her could overcome anything; and she knew we were right because she could feel a hunger and thirst for righteousness that challenged every nasty thing within her. We pointed out to her that the new nature was her ***real*** nature. And we told her that one of the main strengths of her old nature was habit, and those could be broken. And I (or more importantly, God’s Word) is telling you the same thing: ‘with God’s help you can break your habits and be metamorphosed.’ And we watched her be transformed. She developed a godly strength, a patient spirit, and a forbearing manner of life. She had a new nature, and it blossomed.

 Let me expand that a little bit and show you how the graces listed in chapter 12 impacted her as she applied them. Look at your hand-out sheet. Look at # **2. B. Renewal**. When ‘CD’ began to obey her new, God-given instincts she began to be ‘**Loving**’ (# 8, v. 9 a, 10 a) – able to be self-giving without hypocrisy because she genuinely, lovingly cherished her brothers and sisters and became less and less absorbed with herself. She became far less ‘horrid’ and far more consistently ‘**Good**,’ (# 10, v. 9 c) because she stuck like glue to beneficial things. She became ‘**Respectful**” (# 11, v. 10 b) because she learned to genuinely value others as much as she valued herself. She set aside her hot temper and became ‘**Fervent in Spirit**’ for God (# 13, v. 11 b). She became ‘**Joyful**’ (# 15, v. 12 a) because she had something (or rather someone) to hope in other than herself and her ability to ‘get over’ and ‘get even.’ She became ‘**Friendly**’ (# 23, v. 16 b) instead of being competitive, and catty, and treating others like dirt. She was filled with the greatness of what God had done for her and within her, so she no longer needed to feel good by trying to find all the ways she was better than others and all the ways they were inferior to her. She became ‘**Gentle**’ (# 25, v. 17 a, 19-20) because she had an inward sense that God was protecting her and helping her, even when troubles hung around. She learned to wait on the LORD and set aside vindictiveness, paybacks, revenge, and wrath. That’s some of what God did for her.

 And then there’s the little guy I’ll call ‘EF,’ or more appropriately, ‘E-Yi-Yi-Yi-Yi.’ He was a “mean widdle kid.” You know the kind I’m talking about. I don’t know him personally; but I saw him in a Wal-Mart not too long ago. His mom made the mistake of taking him near the toy section. The first thing I heard out of his mouth was a gruff, demanding announcement, “I want a toy!” His mom quietly said, “no, we are not getting a toy right now.” The boy repeated himself: “I want a toy!” “Not now.” “Yes!” “No.” “Yes!” “No.” “Yes!” “No.” “Yes! yes! yes!”

 “What was this,” I wondered, “a ping-pong match?” Here was a kid with his carnality so deeply embedded that he **and** his mother would have to undergo a metamorphosis to root it out.

 Any Christian man, woman, or child who will submit to the process of developing the graces mentioned in the latter part of Romans 12 (and many other places in Scripture) will be changed into a deeply wholesome and very satisfied person and will avoid the frustration and even torment of being trapped in conformity to the world. You will be able to test God’s will for yourself and find that it is good (beneficial), and well-pleasing, and perfect (complete, or lacking nothing). So “taste and see that the LORD is good: blessed is the man that trusts in him” (Psalm 34:8).

 **D. Re-estimation**: **(Romans 12:3)**

 ***~*** ***For I say through the grace having been given to me to all the [ones] being***

 ***in (among) you, not to over-esteem [yourselves] but to think {into the}***

 ***sober-thinking, each as the God distributed a measure of faith.***

 But before you can be persuaded to “*re-do*” yourself, you have to be persuaded to “**Re-estimate**” yourself. In the words of Romans 12:3, “*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 other words, “Don’t ‘*over-estimate*’ yourself; ‘*sober-estimate*’ yourself.”

 I’ve just told you about a man, a woman, and a child whose besetting sin was aggression and the anger which lies beneath it. I could have chosen many other sins to comment on, but my purpose is not to give you a catalogue of problems, my purpose is to make you aware that you have spiritual power at your disposal to solve any inner problem – even problems that you consider part of your unchangeable, core character. I’ve known people – many people – who were changed and delivered by mind-renewing grace as they wrestled through their character flaws – flaws of every description. They too experienced the same change through the same grace.

 That kind of mind-renewing, life-renewing change is available to you also, if you will do whatever it takes to cooperate with God. Mind-renewal is not some mystical event that bypasses your brain and seizes you with overwhelming holiness. It is marvelous, but not mystical. It is supernatural, but not unnatural. It is God, but it is also you, not as you are naturally, but as you have been re-created supernaturally. Paul puts it like this in Philippians 2:12-13 (James Murdock New Testament): “*12 Therefore, my beloved, as ye have at all times obeyed, not only when I was near to you, but now when I am far from you, prosecute the work of your life, more abundantly, with fear and with trembling. 13 For God is operating in you, both to purpose, and also to perform that which ye desire.*” Literally, “the willing and the doing” are both from God.

 It is this kind of thinking which Paul calls “sober-mindedness.” He asks us to acknowledge the various graces God gave us and to live in accord with them instead of living in accord with the world. When we acknowledge these graces and apply them to ourselves and others it is ***then*** that our mind is renewed (v. 2); it is then that we, ourselves, are metamorphosed (transformed). It is ***this*** that turns us into a living sacrifice.

***CONCLUSION***

 I don’t know how this has struck you today. Maybe you think I’m picking on you. Maybe you think God is picking on you. Underneath it all we have a tendency to want to pull away from God and just avoid stuff that looks hard, or scary, or unrealistic. Maybe when you hear Scripture calling you to change, all you can hear is somebody putting you down, criticizing you, “yelling” at you. Well, that is not my intention, nor is it the intention of God. I’ve spoken to you in love, just as God has. I’m cut from the same cloth as you with the same doubts that I could change and the same fear of trying. Sometimes, even though God was speaking lovingly and tenderly to me, all I ever heard was yelling. I know how you may feel.

 So in case you feel yelled at, let me close with a story about a kid that I really did yell at. Through it I hope that you will understand what God is really saying to you.

 The kid’s name was Matthew. A few years ago I was visiting his parents, Kent and Joanne, in Colorado. Joanne and I are part of a group called “Ad Lib Christian Arts.” We have retreat week-ends for Christians in all branches of the creative arts – literary, performing, and visual. I came a few days early for one of those conferences so that Joanne and I could go hunting for a property that our group might be able to buy and use as a permanent headquarters. We took a whole day for the project and brought Matthew (age 7) and his brother Joel (age 6) along so that they could also have an outing. We were planning on being back early enough to have dinner with Kent. Joanne drove, and I sat in the back seat with the boys and told jokes, and made noises, and made silly faces, and all the things that boys like us find amusing. We stopped for lunch at a roadside pull-over, and after lunch the boys had a chance to play while Joanne and I discussed the properties we had looked at. Soon it was time to go and she called the boys to the car. But Matthew was not done playing, so he took off running in the opposite direction. Joanne called for him to come back, but Matthew looked back at her, laughed hysterically, and kept running. She called again and he did the same thing. She called again with the same result. So I took off after him. I ran in front of him, squatted down to his eye-level, jabbed my finger toward him, and yelled, “STOP!” He stopped dead in his tracks, his mouth fell open, and he began to shake and to cry. The ride home was pretty quiet. The next day he told me, “I don’t like you.” And the day after that, when I was going to leave for the Ad Lib Conference, his mother could not persuade him to give me a hug and say goodbye even though his brother gave me a hug and said goodbye. The fun Matthew and I had during the outing and during the other days of my stay was gone. I yelled at him; and he didn’t see me the same way any more.

 Now, here, as Paul Harvey used to say, is “The Rest of the Story.” On the other end of the picnic area where we stopped was a drop-off. There was no guard-rail, no wall, not even brush – just a flat, rocky cliff with a 3 or 4 hundred foot drop-off down to solid rock, and Matthew was running right toward it. By the time I got to him he had less than 50 feet before the edge, and he was running full-speed. Matthew was just having fun, and just wanted to be left alone. And I scared him to death. His mother started out after him, but she couldn’t make it in time. I caught him first.

 Maybe all you heard today is the same old boring stuff you’ve always heard. Maybe you’ve heard somebody yelling at you when all you are doing is having fun. But if you’re moving away from God maybe you are 50 feet from something and running hard. If your foot lurches forward into the air you may fall 4 feet or 400, but you’re going to hit rock just as I and some of my friends have.

 So, please, while I can say it quietly and gently, “Stop.” God is calling you.