

## **"Holy Erosion"**

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Romans 11:33-12:3

September 16, 2012

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There was a pastor a few years ago in New Jersey who preached a sermon one Sunday on a particular passage. The next Sunday he preached basically the same message on the exact same reading. And then the following week he did the same thing for a third time. This time the elders came to the pastor and said, "pastor, you've preached basically the same message on the same Scripture passage three times in a row. When are you going to preach on something else?" The pastor replied, "I haven't seen any change from this message yet. When we finally get this one we'll move on to the next."

Some of you, I'm sure, have noticed that today's reading sounds very familiar. That's because we read part of today's passage last week also. So as soon as I see some evidence that it's changed your life we can move on to the next topic. I'm only kidding. The truth is that there is so much in this passage that it would be impossible to cover it all in one message. Besides, as we'll see shortly, there is an advantage to repeating some of it. So here we go.

The human brain is truly an amazing and extremely complex organ. Think about how much information your brain processes every moment of every day, whether you're awake or asleep. For example, the eye can detect and distinguish between *millions* of different colors and it transmits that information to the brain for processing. In addition to colors, the brain takes the information from all five of your senses, determines what's

important, and filters out the rest.

At the same time, your brain keeps you breathing and your heart beating, making adjustments to meet the needs of your body, all without you having to think about it. Your brain keeps your body at a very precise temperature, usually fluctuating within a few tenths of a degree. On top of all this, your brain gives you the ability to think and to decode language and you have an amazing ability to store things in memory.

Science is really only beginning to understand how any of this works, but what we now know is that the brain operates with a complex network brain cells called *neurons* that send information throughout the brain. There are about 100 billion neurons in your brain, sending and receiving information to each other through what are called *synapses*. Each neuron is capable of sending an electrical charge carrying the information through the synapse to as many as 10,000 other neurons. When the charge is received the receiving neuron then produces a chemical that affects the brain and sometimes the rest of the body. An interesting fact here is that the human brain produces somewhere around 20 watts of electricity.

As scientists study the brain they are discovering that your brain is capable of adapting in amazing ways to the input it receives. This is becoming especially important in the area of Alzheimer's research. The more neural connections you develop in your brain, the less likely you are to develop Alzheimer's disease. But this is also

important in the area of addictions. Since the 1950s, addictions have been considered a disease and as techniques for imaging the brain have been developed researchers have discovered that the brains of people with addictions is wired differently than others.

But recently they've also discovered that the brain is constantly producing new connections to respond to outside input. We all know that when you do something over and over again it becomes a habit. We now know that it actually wires your brain to continue doing it. In other words, it's possible to rewire your brain and change your patterns of thinking. The more you do something, the stronger the connections in your brain become that will cause you to want to do it again, especially those things that release chemicals in our brain that make us feel good.

So what does this have to do with this letter written to a church in Rome nearly 2000 years ago? The Apostle Paul, inspired by the Holy Spirit, wrote, "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."

Be transformed by the renewal of your mind. As Christians, God has given us brains and He expects us to use them. We don't accept a "blind" faith, we have a faith that makes sense, that we can understand and that also requires us to think. But we also know that our minds are able to cause us to sin. As pastor and author John Piper puts it, the mind refines the powers of sin. Our mind is an important part of who we are and so it's important what we do with our mind.

As we dig into this passage, the first thing we need to notice

is that it says "be transformed." In the original Greek the word is *metamorphos*. It's where we get the English word metamorphosis. This word is only used in a couple of other places in the New Testament. Matthew 17:1-2 says, "after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James, and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. And he was transfigured (or transformed) before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light."

When we think of metamorphosis we naturally think of a caterpillar turning into a butterfly. This is a good image for us. The Bible says, "be transformed." It doesn't say, "transform be transformed into a butterfly. He is simply transformed. It's the same for us. There is nothing that we can do to make transformation happen, it's a work of the Holy Spirit. Paul talks about this in 2 Corinthians 3: "Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another."

But I don't want us to think that we don't have any responsibility here. Verse 2 says, "be transformed by the renewal of your mind." Even though this is a work of the Holy Spirit, we have the responsibility to make sure that we are in a position that God can renew our minds. We have to do our part as well.

This is where it helps to understand how the brain works. As the brain makes and reinforces those connections between neurons, they become stronger. It becomes a well-worn path in the brain. Here's another analogy. The Grand Canyon is one of the

most spectacular natural wonders in the whole world. The canyon is 277 miles long, up to 18 miles wide and as much as 6000 feet deep. And it was carved by erosion. The water of the Colorado River slowly washed away the sediment, digging deeper and deeper. Today, it would be impossible for the river to change course within the Grand Canyon. The path for the water is too deep.

But unlike the Grand Canyon, our brain *is* able to change. Patterns of sin and desire are able to be transformed. Our mind is able to be renewed. The key to renewing your mind, then, is to do those things that will create new pathways in the brain that allow God to do the work of transformation. The Reformers called those things the "Ordinary Means of Grace," which are the Word of God, the Sacraments and prayer.

That's not to say that God is not capable of transforming you instantly without any outside influence. But that's not how he normally does it. Our minds are renewed and we are transformed into the image of Christ a little at a time over our entire life as we read and study his Word, as we worship together and participate in the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper, and as we pray.

In order to be transformed, we each need to make those things a regular habit. You should be reading your Bible every single day, even if you can only read a small portion. There are plans available that give you readings every day so that you will read the whole Bible in a year, there are some that take three years. You could try reading one chapter a day. This kind of reading is not really reading for knowledge. In this case you want to read devotionally. Ask yourself, "how does this apply to my life

today?" When you read devotionally you should also pause and pray as you read so that reading and praying are intertwined together. It's been said that the Bible is the only book you'll ever read where the author is present every time you read it.

Participating in the sacraments means coming to worship. In this congregation we celebrate the Lord's Supper about once a month. The great theologian John Calvin called the sacraments a "visible word." He went on to say that the sacraments use other senses to apply the Word of God to our lives.

The third "means of grace" is prayer. Too often we underestimate the power of prayer to change things. When we pray, alone or together, God is able to speak to us directly and to direct our thoughts. In prayer, worship and Scripture reading, we all come in contact with

Jesus. Those are the ordinary ways we do that and those are the things that will change our brain and renew our mind.

Alcoholics Anonymous pioneered the idea of the 12-step program to help people break addictions and the foundation of the program is to recognize that God is the one who has the power to heal. But a big part of the process is changing other habits that make it easy to slip back into old behaviors. If your problem is with alcohol, you simply must avoid the places where alcohol is served, at least for a while.

In the same way the Bible is telling us to change our behaviors so that the Holy Spirit can change us from the inside. Do not be conformed to this world. Present your selves to God as a living sacrifice as your worship. Instead of watching an extra hour of television, spend time reading your Bible. Instead of staring at your computer surfing the internet, spend that time in prayer. You will probably have to physically move so that the television or computer are not a temptation. Do whatever it takes to get rid of those things that get in the way of faith and begin doing those things that strengthen your faith. Start small and add to what you do. And finally, surround yourself with people who will help you to be transformed. Over time, your mind will be renewed and you will become like Christ.

*Amen*