

Sermon Title: Sober Judgment
Biblical Text: Romans 12:3
Teaching Series: Justified by Love
Preaching Date: November 6, 2022
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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.

Christians have new minds. The Scriptures make it plain that in Christ you are a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17). Paul says, *the old is gone and the new has come*. One of the new things about us, we discovered the past couple weeks, is our minds. Christians have new minds. Specifically we have the mind of Christ (1 Corinthians 2:16). And so Paul told his Roman readers to avoid being conformed by this world and instead to be transformed by the renewal of their mind (v.2). What that means is that when we become followers of Jesus we are empowered by his Spirit through this new mind to understand or discern God's will. We can know *what is good and acceptable and perfect*.

When we do God's will, we offer our lives to him as living sacrifices (v.1). We give ourselves to him. That's what the first two verses of chapter 12 have been about. Because of God's mercy we give ourselves to him in a kind of whole-life worship.

We give ourselves completely to him. One author sees this theme weaves itself through the next passage, Romans 12:3-8. In vv.4-5, we'll learn to give ourselves to our brothers and sisters. And then in vv.6-8, we'll learn to give ourselves to our calling or ministry. But before we are able to give ourselves to others, we need to understand ourselves appropriately. In a manner of speaking, we need to learn to give ourselves to ourselves. That's what v.3 is about. And that's what I'd like to talk about today.

Specifically I want to consider the famous Greek axiom, "*know thyself*." This was one of the three most prominent Delphic maxims (there are 150 or so said to have been given by the Greek god Apollo), along with "*nothing to excess*" and "*certainty brings insanity*." I'd like to think about this idea of self-knowledge through the lens of the gospel. *How do we know ourselves through the work of Christ?*

According to the Bible self-knowledge goes well beyond knowing your Eneagram number or spiritual gifts or even family history. Though, those things can be extremely helpful. Self-knowledge is about knowing grace. Paul tells us, ***Read 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.*** Grace enables us to think rightly about ourselves. Notice, the word *think* shows up three times in the ESV translations, and that word "judgment" comes from the same Greek root as *think*. It's a fantastic play on words. Christians have new minds,

minds which are controlled by grace. Grace changes the way we think about everything. Especially ourselves. Grace empowers us to not think too highly of ourselves, too low of ourselves, and through faith. And so that's how we organize our time today.

- Thinking *too high* of ourself.
- Thinking *too low* of ourself.
- Thinking *with faith* about ourself.

[Prayer]

Movement 1: Thinking Too High of Ourself (v.3a; 4, Hebrews 4:12, 1 John 1:8)

Paul begins by speaking about himself. He says, *Read Romans 12:3a ... For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you.* He saying a few things here.

First, through the transitional word "for" or "because" he connects everything he's just said with everything he's about to say. Specifically, all of the ways he's about to instruct our thinking is possible because our mind is being renewed. Second, Paul is basing his instruction on his apostleship. When he says "the grace given to me," that's code for his apostleship (see 1 Corinthians 15:9-10, Galatians 1:15-16, and Ephesians 3:7-8). As an apostle he's been commissioned by God to define and teach the gospel to the Church. Third, grace serves another purpose in this text. Grace holds this passage together. In light of everything he's just said and in light

of his apostleship ... he's telling something to everyone by grace. Grace holds this passage together.

There's the grace of the new mind. There's the grace of Paul's apostleship. And there's grace extended to all his readers. *Read Romans 12:3a ... 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.* Grace keeps us from thinking too highly of ourself. Paul cautions his readers to not think more highly than they should. And the reason they needed this clear instructions was because pride was a great temptations in their day. In a word, Paul is instructing his readers to be humble.

You see, in the ancient Greco-Roman world, honor was esteemed and humility was shamed. Humility was seen as weakness. Today humility is a social value.

Historians, like Australian John Dickson, think this shift over two thousand years of civilization is due to a singular event: the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. In his book, *Humilitas*, Dickson explains that the shift of humility's social esteem hinges on the story of a man from Nazareth who claimed to be God (the highest honor) and was crucified for the sake his people (the greatest humiliation). The death of Christ turned history upside down. It was the singular even of his death that unhitched humility from weakness in our social consciousness, to strength.

Humility is a deeply Christian virtue. When we look more closely at what Paul is saying, we not only see how countercultural it was at the time, but also we realize how necessary this virtue is for followers of Jesus. When Paul says, "more highly

than he ought to think," it's a bit misleading. It's not strong enough. It's more like "must think." Commentator Leon Morris explains that, "*Paul sees humility not merely as desirable but as necessary for the true Christian*" (*The Epistle to the Romans*, 437). Through the power of Jesus' death and resurrection, Romans 12:3 is undoing generations of social hubris. Setting humility not only as a noble endeavor but a necessary quality of Jesus' followers.

This is only possible because of grace. Why? Because, grace keeps us from thinking too highly of ourselves. *Have you ever noticed how much you think about yourself? Have you ever noticed how highly you think about yourself?* Scottish Bible teacher James Denney explained that, "*To himself, every man is in a sense the most important person in the world, and it always needs much grace to see what other people are, and to keep a sense of moral proportion.*" We think so highly of ourselves that we even need grace to see that we think so highly of ourselves. The closer we get to grace the more our prideful thoughts are exposed.

Grace exposes us.

- Grace exposes our dependency. We think too highly of ourselves if we think we can make it on our own. We'll look at Romans 12:4 next week and it's all about dependence upon one another, ***Read Romans 12:4 ... For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.*** Grace invites us into community.

- Grace exposes our creatureliness. We think too highly of ourselves think or act as if we weren't created. That we're first. That we're all-powerful. That we're above reproach. That we were not made to reflect another. **Read Genesis 1:27 ... *So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.*** Grace reminds us we were made by God.
- Grace exposes our motives. We think too highly of ourselves if we think we makes decisions without selfish intend and self-serving ways. Receiving grace sheds light on the truth which remains undetected. The writer of Hebrews says that, **Read Hebrews 4:12 ... *"For the word of God is living and active ... discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart."*** Grace reveals what's really going on in us.
- Grace exposes our sin. We think too highly of ourselves if we aren't confessing foolishness, evil desires, and sin regularly. John talks about this as walking in the light. When we walk in the light we have fellowship with one another and with God. He goes on, **Read 1 John 1:8 ... *"If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us."*** Grace reminds us of the sin within us.

By definition grace is unmerited love. The more familiar we are with the grace of God, the more unmerited we realize we are, the more undeserving. This protects us

from thinking too highly of ourselves. The mind of the Christian never thinks of self without thinking of sin or the fact that we are created beings. We are no longer bound by sin, nor are we defined by sin, but we are still haunted by sin everyday. Our existence is depended upon another ... it's beginning and continuance. And the person who forget their need for grace is a person who thinks too highly of themselves. Grace protects us from this.

Movement 2: Thinking Too Low of Ourselves (v.3b, Isaiah 43:1,4, 1 John 1:9, Zechariah 4:3-4)

What Paul is *not* telling us is perhaps just as important as what he is telling us. He is not saying, don't think about yourself at all. That's impossible. Nor is he saying, don't think highly of yourselves. That's not accurate. He says don't think *too* highly. In other words, we should be careful to think too highly but also too lowly of ourselves. Grace protects us from both. He explains this a bit more in the next movement of the verse, look at v.3b, ***Read Romans 12:3b ... think with sober judgment.*** More literally he says, *think with sober thoughts about yourself.* When we think soberly, we think accurately. When someone is drunk their wits are numbed, their ability to discern reality is skewed. Humility is not self-deprecation. Humility is not self-despisement. Humility is not shame. Humility is biblical self-love (which we spoke about a couple weeks ago through James 1). Biblical self-love is the rejection of shame, but not the replacement of God as central in our affections. More to the point, when grace is the lens through which we know self,

we will not despise ourselves but we will not esteem ourselves the most. Grace welds the power to protect us from thinking too low of ourselves.

Grace is unmerited love. While grace protects us from pride by reminding us we're undeserving, grace also protects us from shame by reminding us of God's affection for us. Grace keeps you from thinking too lowly of yourself.

- Grace reassures us of God's love. God's love is the core reality of who you are. In Christ, the truest thing about you is that you are loved. His love is your identity. By grace God tells us in Isaiah, *Read Isaiah 43:1,4 ... "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine ... Because you are precious in my eyes, and honored, and I love you."* That's who you are. You are loved. It's sober to think of yourselves as loved. That's accurate.
- Grace reassures us of God's forgiveness. Though we may know we are loved, and think about ourselves as loved, when we do sin or behave foolishly we often struggle to believe and trust his love. Grace reminds us we're forgiven, and the Heavenly Father is always ready to keep forgiving his children. After talking about walking in the light, the Apostle John says, *Read 1 John 1:9 ... "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."* God's forgiveness is based on his faithful and just character. Did you notice that? So his forgiveness is contingent upon him, not you. Receiving God's

forgiveness regularly is an appropriate view of self. You're forgiven. That's sober thinking.

- Grace reassures us of God's righteousness. When God loves and forgives us he is not ignoring our sin. He's not loving us in spite of us. Through Christ he is paying for our sin and covering us in his righteousness. Think about that. God doesn't love you in spite of you. God loves you because you're his. Out of love he makes and remakes you in his very image. He doesn't just forgive and forget, he restores us, clothing us in righteousness. Zechariah had a vision of the Joshua the High Priest. An angel says to him, ***Read Zechariah 4:3-4 ... "Remove the filthy garments from him ... Behold, I have taken your iniquity away from you, and I will clothe you with pure vestments."*** This is true of all who belong to the God of the Bible. He removes our filthy rags of sin and clothes us in pure vestments of righteousness. Knowing yourself as clean, healed, and righteous ... that's sober judgment.

Thinking about yourself as loved, forgiven, and righteous is not prideful it's accurate ... it's thinking about yourself with sober judgment ... it's seeing yourself as God sees you. It's all about grace. It protects you from thinking too highly of yourself. It protects you from thinking too low of yourself. Grace gives you a true assessment of yourself. In other words, if you are not seeing yourself through the lens of grace you are not seeing yourself rightly.

Movement 3: Thinking with Faith About Ourselves (v.3c)

This is hard though, *isn't it?* Seeing yourself through grace requires faith. Or we might say humility is born out of the Christian imagination ... conceiving of yourself through the gospel. That's how Paul finishes the verse. Paul concludes this verse by saying, *Read Romans 12:3c ... each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.* We see ourselves with sober judgment—not too high, not too low—when we see ourselves through the eyes of faith.

Seeing oneself accurately requires faith because it's contrary to the way prevailing culture tells us to see ourselves. Faith is about seeing through God's eyes. Faith is about seeing ourselves from his perspective. It's about cultivating that Christian imagination as God has assigned to each of us uniquely. Scholar Walter Brueggemann believes our collective imagination is in peril in our cultural moment. He says, "*The key pathology of our time, which seduces us all, is the reduction of the imagination, so that we are too numbed, satiated and co-opted to do serious imagination work*" (*Union with Christ*, 19). In other words, we don't think of ourselves as we should. We don't think with faith. Daily we are told to think about ourselves without faith. Daily we're invited to see the ourselves in two particular ways which are contrary to thinking with faith about ourselves.

- We're told to see ourselves through others. Whether we're dealing with pride or shame, we are routinely encouraged to see ourselves as other people see us. This is not simply a non-Christian way of cultivating self-knowledge. The evangelical church in America has regrettably perfected the art using

fear to modify people's behavior. Perhaps the most destructive way this has happened is what we've been taught about "our witness." We're encouraged to think about how non-Christian people might view us and act right as to not make Jesus look bad. I remember when a leader in my church asked me not to confess sin during a sermon because he wanted his son to know the pastor was honorable. Seeing ourselves as other people see us does not protect us from shame and pride, it nurtures them. This is not about faith, this is about fear.

- We're also told to see ourselves through ourselves. In other words, we get to be the experts of ourselves. We might call this self-love or self-esteem. It goes by many names. But usually this view involves a kind of self-appreciation which tries to be gentle with self when we mess up and grateful when we succeed. At first blush this might seem a lot like grace. But grace is very different than modern self-esteem. Grace is based upon meaning, love, and power outside of ourselves. Grace is an objective value outside of us. It's about facts and faith, not feelings. Living in by your feelings is also about fear; fear that you won't live as your authentic self. Fear that you'll be shaped by someone else's mold. But that's what faith is, you are a living sacrifice unto God ... but not to crush you, to free you and be gracious to you. Grace tells the truth—you are sinful and you are loved. By grace we are able to think rightly about ourselves through faith. Or another way to consider it, the gospel is not that you can believe in yourself but rather we believe and trust in God.

Like seeing ourselves through others, seeing ourselves through self is based on a truth. We should care what others think about us. We are social creatures meant to be sensitive and connected to others. We should also maintain an unwavering self love which celebrates who and how God has knit us together. But neither of these are sufficient on their own. Only seeing ourselves through others leads to shame. Only seeing ourselves through ourselves leads to pride. But thinking about ourselves through grace gives us a sober mindset. That's faith. That's seeing ourselves the way God sees us.

Christians have a new mind. A mind with eyes that see self through grace. That's who you are. Not too high ... not too low ... through faith.