

“Biblical Imagineering”  
Romans 12:1-2 | December 29, 2019

I want to think together this morning about the imagination through the lens of Romans 12:1-2. My sister recently subscribed to Disney+ and as I looked at all the options, I was particularly struck by a documentary called “The Imagineering Story” which takes a behind the scenes look at how all 12 Disney parks got built and the team behind it all – known as the Imagineers. If you’ve been to any Disney attraction, you’ve encountered the work of the Imagineers. What’s most fascinating to me is their ability to insert themselves into a story, imagine what it might be like to live in such a place, and then bring it to life. They do this within the parks – but also in their rides. Pirates of the Caribbean tells a story, the Haunted Mansion tells a story, Peter Pan’s flight tells a story, the Star Wars ride tells a story and then immerses you into it. The name “Imagineer” is a compound word from engineer and imagination. They are interested both in the mental world and also the practicality of it. So, I’ve titled this sermon “Biblical Imagineering” because I think part of the call on our lives as Christians is to be biblical imagineers – to be so completely immersed into the story of Scripture while also having an eye towards its practicality in our lives.

We’re great at using our imaginations as children. We loved the stories of battle, espionage, love triangles, deception, dragons, failure, heroism, and rescue from our emerging imaginations. But, we have all of that and more in the Bible. The Jesus Storybook Bible says the Bible is an adventure story about a young hero from a far country who wins back his lost treasure, or a love story about a brave prince who leave his throne/palace to rescue the one he loves. When we use our imagination, we’re learning to see something true that we can’t see with our physical eyes. But, then we grow up and those hopes are crowded out by the normal pressures of family life, sports, academics, college, jobs, mortgages, and car payments. We don’t talk about princes and heroes anymore, but that’s my invitation to you this morning – let’s re-ignite our spiritual eyes so we can really see the world.

Netflix, Amazon Prime, ESPN, commercials, publishers, and businesses all know that adults still long to be caught up in a story. Which means as Christians we need to be asking ourselves: **What story is shaping our life? What claim about how life works are we believing? What story should be shaping our lives?**

The apostle Paul helps us think about this question. If you’ll turn in your Bibles to Romans 12:1-2 or to page 947 in the pew Bible, I want us to see the apostle Paul’s biblical Imagineering. I want to show you how the story about what God the Father has done through the Son by the Spirit is the true story that shapes the world around us.

When we get to Romans 12:1-2, we’ve been immersed in the biblical story for eleven chapters (from creation, to Adam, to Abraham, to Israel, and to Jesus) so we’re prepared for the practical ways we respond to God’s wonderful works. Look with me at Romans 12:1-2.

*“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.”*

Let’s take some time to understand the passage and then I’ll offer a few quick-hitting points of application. Here’s our outline this morning: I see three responses, two results, and one reason.

### I. Three Responses to God’s Mercy

Paul appeals to his audience to respond in three particular ways to what the Father has done through the Son by the Spirit. Romans gets a bad reputation for being super theological and hard to understand – but it’s also imminently practical. Paul isn’t just concerned with our knowing – he’s concerned with our living, too. Let’s look at the three ways we respond to God’s work of redemption.

#### a. Give yourselves wholly to God (v. 1b)

The first response is to give yourselves wholly to God. This is a simpler way to say “present your bodies as a sacrifice – living, holy, and acceptable – to God. He is not interested in lip-service or spiritual ritual on a few days of the week. God wants all of us, our whole lives turned over to him. He can ask for this because the Father has done the very same thing through the Son by the Spirit. There are many cultural stories about what “the good life” means. But God says the life that is holy and acceptable to him is a life lived in total submission to his will, when someone willingly lays down his plans, desires, and goals. We often talk about this as “putting our yes on the

table.” Thinking toward 2020 – is there an area of your life you need to offer as a living sacrifice?

**b. Do not be conformed to this world (v. 2a)**

The second response is a negative command – do not be conformed to this world. Paul is warning us not to be like Play-doh which is easily squeezed into a mold. That’s what the world is trying to do to us. We’re bombarded with advertisements all the time and they’re telling you some story about your life. This is why I asked our key question: ***What story is shaping your life?*** Everyone is living out some mental world-story that gives their life meaning. It might be a story about the struggle to save the environment, or find true love, or be successful despite your family origins, or to establish your own political identity. But, ultimately, you’re allowing some larger story that shapes your daily choices – even if you know and believe the gospel.

Theologian Kevin Vanhoozer says, “It is difficult to connect [cultural] pictures of the good life with biblical pictures of discipleship. Many Christians want to live for God’s glory but have trouble relating what they read in Scripture and hear in church to everyday life...There is a disconnect between the world we live in and the world of the biblical text that we confess as truth...If faith’s influence is waning, then it is largely because of a failure of the church’s imagination to connect the biblical and cultural dots. It is simply not clear how the biblical story of what God has done and is doing in Christ relates to the modern world of climate change, stock market fluctuations, and mass immigration.”

Biblical Imagineering attempts to connect those dots. We develop our Christian imaginations so that we can see what we can’t see with our physical eyes. And we keep an eye toward how the biblical story helps us make sense of the world around us. How does this happen? Paul doesn’t leave us hanging, he completes the thought by offering a positive third command.

**c. Be transformed by the renewal of your mind (v. 2b)**

The third response is to be transformed by the renewal of your mind. This is also something done to us. Just like the world is trying to shape us into its mold, the Holy Spirit is striving to transform us from the inside out. Transformation happens through the renewal of the mind (literally “newing again/re:newing”). When we were buried with Christ in baptism, we’re

raised to walk in newness of life. So, the renewal of the mind is a lifelong process in which we discover how our thinking and living matches our newness of life in Christ. I’m reminded of Romans 8:5-6, “*Those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.*” Do you see that? There’s a close connection between what we think and what we do. We must train our minds, our imaginations to see what’s most true about the world around us.

The renewal of the mind by the Holy Spirit allows us to imagine God, the world, and ourselves through the lens of the biblical storyline. Instead of listening to the world’s stories, we let the Bible guide our thinking so that we see everything in light of the wonderful thing God is doing through the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ and the coming of the Holy Spirit.

**II. Two Results**

Paul has given us three exhortations about how we respond to God’s mercy. But, tied to those three appeals, are two results. They’re closely connected with how we respond.

**a. Spiritual Worship (v. 1c)**

The first result is spiritual/logical/reasonable/true and proper worship. True worship happens once we offer our whole selves to God. Once we present our bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God. I think this is absolutely brilliant. When we hear the word sacrifice, we think about the OT system where people worshipped by offering sacrifices in the Temple. So, the sacrificial animal died, and doesn’t walk out of the temple. But since Paul says we are living sacrifices, then we offer our lives in service to God wherever he has called us. Our spiritual worship is no longer confined solely to the church gathering but in the midst of everyday places and everyday life. So whether you’re at school, at work, at home, part of how you worship God is by laying down your life in service to others. [That changes the way you work, do chores, learn and contribute at school, etc] This is reasonable service because it’s exactly what God the Father has done through the Son by the Spirit. Romans 5:8, “God showed his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us.” That’s one way to let the biblical story shape our lives. So the first result is true worship – offering our whole selves to God and therefore to our neighbors.

### **b. Discerning the Will of God (v. 2c)**

The second result, which happens as we are transformed by the renewal of our mind, is that by testing we may discern the will of God. So, in other words, discerning the will of God means testing, examining, and paying attention to things that are good, acceptable, and perfect. One commentator (D. Moo) said, “Approving the will of God means to understand and agree with what God wants of us with a view towards putting it into practice.” As the Spirit transforms us by the renewal of our mind, we grow into an almost instinctive awareness of what we are to do in order to please God. Again, I’m reminded of Romans 8:27, “the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.” So, as we are transformed by the renewal of our mind, we grow into a greater awareness, a deeper sense of God’s will for our life – which can be summed up in one word: sanctification. Or, being conformed to the image of Christ. Anything that happens in your life that makes you love Jesus more or look more like him is good, acceptable, and oriented towards God’s ultimate purpose.

### **III. One Reason**

All of this leads us to the lynchpin of the whole passage. The three responses and two results lose their effectiveness without one foundational reason for Paul’s exhortation – and I’ve skipped right over it the whole time. If I were a journalist, you might accuse me of burying the lead. All the practical application of chapters 12-15 hinge on this little phrase in verse 1, “by the mercies of God.”

### **a. The Mercies of God (v. 1a)**

I cannot overstate the significance of this little clause, “by the mercies of God.” One of the most prolific New Testament scholars and expert on Paul’s writing said “Paul’s whole written work could be seen as an extended application of Romans 12:1-2.” That’s significant. And I want to take it further to say that all of Romans 12:1-2 hangs on the phrase, “by the mercies of God.” If you remove God’s mercy and the whole thing falls apart. It’s the basis for his exhortations.

Paul has been mobilizing an army of verses and when he makes the turn to 12:1-2, he marshals all eleven chapters of Romans to show how the unfolding story of God’s mercy shapes the way we live.

Paul has engaged in serious Biblical Imagineering. He’s taken his audience on a grand tour not of Disney’s Magic Kingdom, but of God’s Mercy Kingdom; not of Tomorrowland, but Foreverland. Paul has walked with us

down the Main Street of God’s redemption to show us that in the midst of humanity’s unrighteousness the Father sent the Son (Jesus Christ) to redeem the world through his death and resurrection so that all who have faith in him might have life in the Spirit.

All of Romans 12:1-2 hangs on the mercies of God. That little line is like Mary Poppins’s purse – it looks small, but there’s an entire story of redemption packed into it. So, as we head into 2020, is there a better goal to set than allowing the story of redemption to be the primary story that shapes our life? I can’t think of one. Let me offer 4 quick applications.

1. We’ve provided two Bible reading plans. Pick one of those up on your way out or download one from [shades.org/readthebible](https://shades.org/readthebible). Research shows Bible engagement is the number one indicator of spiritual maturity – and in my own experience, there is no substitute for familiarity. Reading and knowing the Bible is the surest way to let it shape your life because it is living and active.
2. If you need community and accountability for reading the Bible, consider joining a DGroup. You’ll spend one year reading the Bible together, pursuing transparent friendships, and focusing on gospel conversations – then we’ll invite you to begin your own group. If a DGroup sounds like a lot, then do it with friends.
3. On January 12<sup>th</sup>, we’re launching the Shades Equipping Center, and especially keep your eyes open for a class on the Biblical Storyline.
4. Finally – and most broadly, I want to offer you three questions to help you diagnose the stories you’re being told on a daily basis. You can use this on anything – movies, books, TV shows, commercials, advertisements – to help you see through it.
  - a. Who/What is God?
  - b. What claim is being made about how life works?
  - c. Where (if at all) can redemption be found?

Church family, let’s engage in some Biblical Imagineering in 2020. Let’s immerse ourselves into the story of Scripture so that with eyes of faith we can see what we can’t see with our physical eyes. Because on this side of eternity, we live by faith and not by sight.