

April 27, 2025

“Change Your Thinking”

Romans 12:1-3

\*Note: sermons in this series are influenced by the book *Following Jesus* by N.T. Wright, Eerdmans 1995.

### **Intro:**

The summer after I graduated from high school, my parents and I went on a trip to the British Isles. Part of this trip involved spending about a week driving through southern Ireland. It was quite the adventure, and that isn't even taking into account the various places we stopped at along the way. What I am talking about here is the driving itself. We had been in England for about a week already by the time we got to Ireland, but we had been driven around during that time by the people we happened to be visiting. Ireland was our first test of doing the driving ourselves. Since I wasn't old enough to qualify for an international license and Mom had no interest in driving, this left the job to my Dad, which worked out well enough as he preferred to be the driver anyways.

The adventure lay in two areas – the first was that the roads were a lot narrower than we are used to here in the wide-open prairies (and we had rented the biggest car we could as Dad was mostly used to driving larger cars), and the second is that they drive on the wrong... I mean *opposite* side of the road to what we do. This, in particular, required Dad to make a mental shift to how everything worked – from where he was in relation to everyone else, to the stone walls right next to the road, and staying in his proper lane. It also meant that the controls such as the signal lights were on the opposite side of the steering wheel. I am sure you will all be happy to know that there were no major traffic incidents or accidents, and in spite of many confusing directions we did get to where we wanted to be. The only real problem was that every time Dad wanted to turn, he would signal by putting the windshield wipers on. While funny, I thought it was a sign that the poor man was starting to lose his mental faculties.

Fast forward 13 years, and Cindy and I are heading off to New Zealand for our anniversary. The connection here is that they drive on the wrong... I mean *other*, side of the road over there as well. Fortunately, I had already had the experience of watching Dad drive in Ireland, and so knew all the things to avoid doing – like trying to signal with my wiper blades. We pre-rented a car so that when we landed we wouldn't have to worry about it. We booked a mid-sized automatic. When we arrived, the only car on the lot was a compact with a manual transmission. Did I happen to mention earlier that when the driving is on the other side of the road, all the controls are also mirrored for the driver? Yeah. So not only did I need to very quickly figure out how to drive in a different country (so many roundabouts!) and on the wrong side of the road, but I had to do so in a standard transmission, which meant using my left hand to shift gears and not my right. I had to re-train my entire thought process about driving.

Again, I am sure you will all be happy to know that we managed the week of driving around New Zealand with no major incidents and I managed to stay in my proper lane the whole time. I do have to confess, however, that after giving my Dad a hard time about the turn signals in Ireland, I also tried to signal my desire to turn with the windshield wipers of the car on several occasions. Cindy was kind enough to point it out to me each time though.

Following Jesus is something that requires a shift, or a change, in our thinking as well, but this shift is more than just keeping driving differences straight in our minds. It is a shift that requires us to entirely re-orient ourselves to a new paradigm of living. It is the shift that Paul is talking about in Romans 12 when he challenges us to be transformed in our actions and interactions with the world by the changing of our minds. The NIV phrases it as the “renewing of your mind.” The mental shift we need to take is to result in a wholesale change in our behaviour.

Maybe taking a look at a story from 2 Kings will help us understand.

**Naaman and Gehazi:**

In 2 Kings 5, we find an interesting story of two people who have very different reactions to God doing an amazing thing.

It begins in an unlikely place, namely not Israel, but Aram. At the time of the story, the Arameans were actively invading Israel – not exactly the expected start to a narrative about God doing a miraculous thing. The King of Aram had a general whom he had great respect for because this general, Naaman, had engineered many great victories for Aram. The problem for this mighty warrior and leader was that he suffered from leprosy. During one of the earlier raids against Israel, a young girl had been taken captive and put into the service of Naaman's wife. To her credit, she did her best to help her new masters, even to the point of being genuinely concerned about Naaman's condition. She pleaded with her mistress to get Naaman to go see the prophet in Israel (Elisha), who would surely be able to heal him.

Some of you might be familiar with the story. Naaman got permission from the king and headed off to Israel with all the pomp, ceremony, and reference letters a person of his standing could expect. The king of Aram personally wrote a note to the king of Israel asking him to heal Naaman. Given the military dominance that the Arameans had at the time, it would probably have been seen as a command, not a request. Of course, the King of Israel did not have this sort of power and eventually Elisha stepped in to save his king the stress. This is where the story gets more interesting. Rather than attending to Naaman in person, as would be expected for such an important person, Elisha sent his servant with instructions for Naaman to go and have a bath in the Jordan River, which would cure the leprosy. After a good deal of feeling slighted and mocked, and claims that the rivers of his own country were better than the rivers in Israel, Naaman determined to return home with, likely, the intention of punishing the Israelites for this insult. However, his advisors showed some wisdom and convinced him to give it a try. After all, he had nothing to lose, he'd come all this way, and what would it hurt to take a bath?

So, Naaman went to the river, dipped himself in the water seven times as instructed, and the leprosy immediately went away. At this point, most of us would think the story was done. The instructions were followed, God performed a miracle, and someone was healed. While that is a big part of what is going on, for our purposes this morning, the story is just getting started. Because now, Naaman had to do something with the miracle he has experienced. He couldn't just head off back home as though nothing had happened, as if it was no big deal. He had had a significant and very personal encounter with God and it had left him a changed man, and not just because he was physically healed.

Look at his response. In verse 15, he returned to Elisha and acknowledged that there is no God in all the world except in Israel. This was a confession of a change of allegiance from the god of his own country, the god Rimmon, to the living God – Yahweh. Whatever Naaman's life was like before, it was now different. His worship would now be directed towards God. This was good, but also imperfect.

“Hold on” you might say, “where are you getting ‘imperfect worship’ from?” Well, Naaman came from a religious setting where gods were considered to be located in their own region and country. Yahweh was the God of Israel and so he was connected to that land. In order for Yahweh to be with Naaman, or more specifically if Naaman was to worship Yahweh, he needed to do so on Israelite soil. While this might not make a lot of sense to us, Naaman was doing his best to offer his best to his new faith.

Naaman offered to give Elisha gifts, which were refused, but when Naaman asked permission to bring Israelite soil back home with him so he could worship Yahweh properly, Elisha gave him permission. Things were looking up for Naaman, but there was one other small problem. The king he served still worshiped Rimmon and might call on Naaman to accompany him to the temple to worship. When that happened, Naaman would be compelled by the actions of the king to participate. Naaman didn't want to offend Yahweh, and so he asked Elisha to provide a pardon for him, as well as for God to pardon him for that action.

Elisha's response? "Go in peace". He blessed Naaman in his new way of thinking about worship, and in the struggle he would face in keeping things balanced in his life.

The second person in this drama now enters the scene: Gehazi, Elisha's servant. This was a man who had travelled with Elisha for years, and who had seen God do amazing things through Elisha. He had witnessed what it meant to follow God and truly worship him.

However, he missed the point. He wanted more. He saw in Naaman an enemy of Israel who had just received a benefit and blessing from Israel, without paying for it. He intended to squeeze Naaman for as much payment as he could, just to prove a point. Or maybe he saw an opportunity to get a little ahead, maybe pad his retirement savings. He chased after Naaman's entourage and made a false claim about Elisha changing his mind about accepting a reward. He then took this ill-gotten loot and hid it. When Elisha asked what he has been up to, he lied and said he wasn't up to anything. The narrative ends with Elisha revealing that he knew about the ill-gotten gains and as punishment for the lies, Gehazi and his descendants would suffer from the same disease that Naaman had been healed from.

### **Conclusion:**

So, here we have two people, two different results, in the same story. What are we to do with it, and what does this have to do with following God? As I said at the beginning of the message, following God means changing your thinking. It does not mean living under a requirement of perfection. It does not mean that we never make mistakes. It does not mean that the instant we make a commitment to following Jesus, every problem in our life up to that point magically disappears or is transformed into something perfect and holy. What it does mean is that we now move forward with the intention and effort to be genuine in our worship and in our commitment to following Jesus. Naaman is the example of what that looks like. He was all in on following God. But there were going to be times when he was not going to do a great job of it. His request for pardon anticipated this – not as

an excuse, but as a desire to be transformed even in the difficulties. Elisha saw his genuine faith; hence his blessing to go in peace.

In our lives, there are going to be situations we find ourselves in that wouldn't be defined as strictly Christian. The question is, are we in them because of our own desire to engage in those activities, or were they unavoidable but we don't want them to hinder our relationship with God? Jesus anticipates those moments in our lives, and that is why in the Lord's prayer we have the line "forgive us our sins". We aren't perfect, yet. But we should be striving to be transformed, to no longer conform to the world.

"Conforming to the world" means willingly going along with whatever is popular and cool, or self-serving.

That was Gehazi's problem. He wanted some money for himself. He wanted a little bit of payback. He wanted what he saw the rest of the world getting, and figured that he should be able to enjoy some of it too. In spite of all he had witnessed, Gehazi wasn't allowing his life to be transformed by God. Naaman, in spite of knowing there would be setbacks, was moving towards having everything he understood about worship and the true God transformed as he renewed his mind.

Are you allowing your mind to be transformed by God?

Let's pray.