

When Love Gets Difficult. Part Five. How I See Myself

Romans 12.3 and 16

September 28, 2025

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For the last two days Covenant hosted our regional denominational meeting.

As you may be aware, we are part of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church denomination, and our region, our presbytery, includes churches from Indiana, Michigan, and Ohio that come together three times a year.

I can't tell you what a joy it was to watch our church family extend hospitality to our brothers and sisters.

I had one person after another come up to me and express how warmly received and served they felt. I lost track of how many times I heard the word "wonderful" used to describe everything from their first meeting at the front door to the meatloaf we enjoyed over dinner.

Here's one of several texts I received from participants:

David, thank you so much to you and your church for hosting the Presbytery meeting. It was wonderful. Your volunteers are very gracious and helpful people, and the atmosphere was warm and welcoming.

So I want to express my thanks to Elizabeth Hartley who coordinated the whole effort, John Lackie and his awesome kitchen crew, Jerry Miller and his team: Gloria, John, and Seth, Scott Freeman for all his tech work and set up and break down, Travis and the fifteen folks or so who served on our worship team, plus all the elders and staff members and church volunteers who served. Altogether about forty people. Wow. Well done.

I also just want to tell you how many people raved about how warm and welcoming our church building was. You may remember that was exactly what we said our goal was when we set out to do our Covenant Next building project – for our building to be brought to a place where it reflected the warm welcome that we as a church family want to extend to the people God brings into our lives. Person after person said that was exactly how they experienced our space. So thank you again, church family, for your generosity that made those improvements possible.

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Hosting presbytery this week made me think of another presbytery meeting I attended a number of years ago. That time I was only able to go to the first part of the meeting, so I was determined to maximize the opportunity to connect with fellow pastors while I was there, grabbing them on breaks or over lunch.

Just before I had to leave for home we had a break. I glanced across the room and saw a fellow senior pastor I hadn't connected with yet. Perfect moment. I hopped up and zipped over to greet him.

Scott was talking with another man. The two sat side by side, turned in towards each other in close conversation. I plunked down in the seat on the other side of Scott and put my hand on his shoulder, interrupting their conversation and hardly acknowledging the man he was talking with.

Scott graciously turned around and greeted me, politely asking how I was doing, and about a mutual friend. The whole time, the other man sat patiently waiting while I ran roughshod over their conversation.

After a couple of minutes a voice broke through the hubbub announcing that the meeting was resuming. I said goodbye and turned to go as the next report began. Scott and his friend would have to wait to finish their conversation.

As I was walking to my car the Lord held before me what I'd just done. "Really? Did I just do that? What gave me the freedom to act that way?"

Reuben Land, the narrator of Leif Enger's wonderful tale *Peace Like a River*, painfully concludes: "Could you reach deep in yourself to locate that organ containing delusions about your general size in the world – could you lay hold of this and dredge it from your chest and look it over in daylight – well, it's no wonder people would rather not."

That's exactly what the passages are about that we are looking at this morning: delusions about our general size in the world.

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Just a reminder of where we are in our fall series: we're walking our way through the twelfth chapter of Paul's letter to the Roman church.

You may remember that Paul begins with a backward-looking reminder in verse 1.

Romans 12.1

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice . . .

He says that everything he'll say in the rest of the chapter is predicated on our previous experience of the mercies of God through Jesus.

That took us back to earlier chapters in Romans, chapters 5 and 8, where Paul elaborated on the mystery of God opening the way for humanity to be in relationship with himself, in spite of the fact that we had pushed him out of our lives and sought to live our lives out from under his loving rule.

Nonetheless, he sent his son to take on human flesh and blood in order to make God known to us. But he went even further, and allowed that flesh to be pierced and that blood to be shed – on the cross, in our place, as a substitutionary sacrifice, his life in exchange for ours – in order to bring us home to God.

Some of you may find yourself asking spiritual questions for the very first time in your life. Maybe even coming to church for the first time. The very public death of Charlie Kirk has caused a number of people to start asking deeper questions about life and faith. What gives purpose to my life? Why am I here? Is there a God? Can I know him?

Those are the very things that Christianity is all about. Coming into a personal relationship with the God who created you. And that relationship is made possible by giving your life over to Jesus who came to reveal God to us and who died to bring us to Him.

If you'd like to know more about what Christianity is all about, or you're curious about the Bible, or you want to know more about this thing called the church, ask the person next to you after the service. Find me or one of the pastors here. We'd love to talk to you. Or speak to one of our volunteers in the Corner.

You might also consider joining me in the Hub a week from Wednesday night, on October 8, for Conversations about Christianity. That is designed to be a comfortable and safe setting for those who are exploring what it might mean to become a follower of Jesus. It's a place to come with your questions and objections. I'll be leading those conversations. I was an atheist for a number of years before I became a follower of Christ. And I know how helpful it is to have a safe place to talk those things through. If you're exploring the faith, I hope you'll join me.

Back to the text: Paul says that, given how Jesus offered his life for us, it only makes sense that we would offer ourselves as living sacrifices. That is, to stop living our lives for ourselves, and to begin living our lives for him.

Then Paul introduces this two-worlds idea that shapes everything he will have to say for the rest of the chapter.

Romans 12.2

Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

The New Testament teaches that there are two different realms that we as human beings inhabit. One, the Kingdom of this World, leaves God out of the picture, and it's all about us. The other, the Kingdom of God, puts God in his rightful place on the throne in the center of the picture.

When we become followers of Jesus, he transfers our citizenship from the Kingdom of this World to the Kingdom of God. When our citizenship changes, when we have a new king, a new identity, a new family, and a new heart, then things on our interior will begin to shift.

And Paul gives us a clue of where we might begin to see that shift taking place. He says we will be "transformed by the renewing of our minds."

But he's talking about something much more substantial here than simply thinking new thoughts.

The Greek word for *mind* doesn't refer to the *thoughts* you think so much as it refers to the *way* you think. What is your vantage point? How do you frame things in?

So probably a better translation is *mind-set* instead of mind. "Be transformed by the renewing of your mindset." Your outlook, your perspective, your way of making sense of things. Let all those things be made new by the Spirit of the Living God.

The verbs are in the passive tense. This is something being done to us, by the world in the first case, and by God in the second. "Do not allow yourself to continue to be conformed to the pattern of this world, but allow yourself to be transformed by the renewing of your mind."

This theme of our mindset as citizens of a new realm is central to Paul's message in the verses that follow in Romans 12.

- This morning we'll be looking at two passages, verses 3 and 16, that wrestle with how I should think about *myself* as I relate with you.
- Next Sunday we'll explore four verses, 9, 10, 13, and 15, that address how I should think about *you* as we interact.

- And then the following Sunday we'll look at verses 16 through 18, passages that are about what sort of mindset I should have about *us together* when we relate, when we are in the same family of faith.

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So this morning we are unfolding the first of those themes, which is how we should think about *ourselves* when we interact with our brothers and sisters in the faith.

He addresses that in verses 3 and 16. In both of these verses he points out the old way of thinking about ourselves that we are called to lay down, and then he explores the new mindset that God is forming in us by his Spirit as citizens of his Kingdom.

So picking up in verse 3, which Ethan touched on a bit last week in his wonderful message:

Romans 12.3

For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you.

Think again about those two worlds. In one, the second one, God occupies the center, seated on the throne, and everything in life is seen with reference to him.

But in the other, the first one, the Kingdom of this World, God has been driven out of the center. So who slides into the middle? We do. And everything in life is seen with reference to us. What serves me? What meets my needs? What fits with my preferences? What lines up with my plans? What suits my desires? It's all about me.

So when we interact, I come into this time with you considering myself the more important of the two of us.

Nope, says Paul. When you come into an interaction with someone else, don't have an elevated view of yourself. Don't think of yourself as being better or more important than the person in front of you.

You may remember the opening line of Rick Warren's book *The Purpose Driven Life*. It deserves to be on the mirror, the monitor, the dashboard, the frig door, of every one of us. It says: "It's not about you."

Don't think of yourself more highly than you ought, Paul says. Instead, think of yourself with sober judgment.

John Stott translates this as a "clear-headed understanding of yourself."

Paul then elaborates, saying we should think of ourselves "in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you." That is, with reference to God and a faith perspective rather than with reference to the world and a secular perspective that leaves God out.

Think about it, he says. This is what a clear-headed understanding of ourselves from a faith perspective reminds us is true as we come into an interaction with someone else.

Both of us were created by the same God. Both of us are creatures. Neither of us happens to be the creator.

As fellow creatures we share essentially the same struggles and the same limitations. We're bound to the earth by the same gravity. We are susceptible to the same germs. We rely on the same thin atmosphere to live. And we are mortal beings, here for a day and then gone. What gives us the presumption to think of ourselves as more important than the fellow created being in front of us?

On top of that, Paul has reminded us that we are to view ourselves through the lens of the mercies of God. What's really true about me is I'm not such a great person after all. I am a sinful and unworthy person, undeserving of the riches of God. I have thought things and said things and done things which should make me shrink in embarrassment before you rather than make me elevate myself over you.

And what's equally true, no matter how gifted I may be, and how that may lead me to think myself better than you, is that any ability I may have, any capacity for good, any potential for making a difference in someone else's life, is mine only as sheer gift from my creator.

Paul calls us not to have an elevated view of ourselves, but to see ourselves clearly, through eyes informed by our faith.

I love the JB Phillips translation of this verse. It says:

Don't cherish exaggerated ideas of yourself or your importance, but try to have a sane estimate of your capabilities.

Now let's hop down to verse 16, where Paul picks up the same theme.

Romans 12.16

Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.

Here Paul uses another altitude-related word to describe the way we see ourselves. As in verse 3, this word "proud" means high minded, lofty minded, thinking too highly of ourselves. Another way to put it is "arrogant."

In her wonderful book *The Six Conversations*. Heather Holleman references an article that describes what an arrogant person looks like.

His perceived status as a more excellent human being shapes his relations with others. Since he is superior to others, he does not regard others as having anything to offer him, nor does he believe they have the ability to enrich his life. The views and opinions of others are not of interest to him . . . [but] others owe him, in virtue of his excellence, a special sort of deference.

Again, Paul says, "Nope." That is utterly inconsistent with the new Kingdom into which you have been brought. Instead, he says, we should "be willing to associate with people of low position."

That is one way to translate the text. But I think it misses the core idea.

The phrase "associate with" makes it sound like Paul is describing where our feet should be, in among the lowly of circumstance, but I think Paul is meaning to describe where our *hearts* should be too, lowly, unassuming, humble of heart.

And that last phrase "people of low position" is also misleading. It can refer to a person in a low situation, a person who is poor or undereducated or pushed to the margins of society, and certainly we are called to love those whose resources may be less and whose needs may be greater than ours, as we'll be exploring at our upcoming Engage Locally Missions Celebration in November.

Paul's not inviting us here as high minded people to step into the worlds of the lowly. He is inviting us to resign from being high minded.

Humility is one of the most important virtue words in the entire New Testament, because this is one of the two words Jesus used to describe himself in Matthew 11.29.

This spirit of humility or lowliness results not from seeing ourselves as having no worth but from seeing God as glorious and supremely worthy.

God being big, I don't need to be, so when you and I come into the same moment together, I can see myself as the dimmer star, the smaller city, the less important tributary, the weaker army – all ways this word lowly or humble was used in the ancient world.

When you and I come together, I am free to see myself as the less important of the two of us. It is not about seeing ourselves as less worthwhile but seeing ourselves as less at the center.

It's interesting that in ancient Greek medicine this word referred to reduced swelling. The humble have an uninflated, unswollen view of themselves.

Then at the end of this passage Paul adds one more line.

Do not be conceited.

In the original it says, "Don't be wise in your own estimation."

It means not thinking your thoughts are right just because you thought them, or that other's ideas are not worth considering just because you didn't have them.

In Jerome Jerome's hilarious book *Three Men in a Boat*, the narrator who is telling the story says, "I said I'd pack. I rather pride myself on my packing. Packing is one of those many things that I feel I know more about than any other person living. (It surprises me myself, sometimes, how many of these subjects there are.)"

Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.

Or as it says in the Message translation.

Don't be stuck-up. Make friends with nobodies; don't be the great somebody.

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So summing up Paul's message in these verses, he holds before us two mindsets regarding how we think about ourselves in our interactions with others.

Two Mindsets

Not conformed to the world
Not high minded
Not lofty minded
Not wise in yourself

But transformed by a renewed mind
But sound minded
But walking with the humble

One is the mindset that we begin with as fallen human beings, and that will continue to be formed in us when we live in a realm from which God is removed – a lofty view of ourselves and of our own importance.

The other is the mindset that Jesus seeks to form in us when we change residence and live under his rule and when God is at the center of our worldview.

The first mindset is self-importance. And the second is a mindset of humility.

Here are some ways I think self-importance can reveal itself:

- We are slow to listen and quick to speak, assuming others will be as interested in what we have to say as we are.
- In conversation we think more about ourselves and what would benefit us than about the other person and what might be their interests or needs.
- We assume we're right, and we expect our ideas to carry the day. When someone offers an opposing opinion, our thinking goes immediately to how we can get them to see things our way, not how we might learn from their perspective.
- We are insensitive about others' time, and navigate life with regard to what is most convenient and expedient to us.

I once saw a movie trailer – I don't remember for what movie – in which a woman hurries into a restaurant and sits down opposite a friend who has obviously been waiting for her. "Sorry I'm late," she says. "I just think my time is more important than yours."

As John Grou pointedly observes:

All our disturbances come from thinking ourselves to be something of importance.

Most of us, without thinking, follow the inclination of the ancient philosopher Protagoras and make ourselves the measure of all things.

As Paul cautions in II Corinthians 10.12:

They are only comparing themselves with each other, using themselves as the standard of measurement. How ignorant!

The problem, of course, is if I use myself as the measure, that makes me my own ruler. I need a point of reference outside of myself.

Here's how Eugene Peterson translates Romans 12.3:

The only accurate way to understand ourselves is by what God is and by what he does for us, not by what we are and what we do for him.

The Book of Amos captures a conversation between God and Amos about the only reliable basis of our self-measure: God himself.

Amos 7.7-8

Behold, the Lord was standing by a vertical wall with a plumb line in His hand. The Lord said to me, "What do you see, Amos?" And I said, "A plumb line." Then the Lord said, "Behold, I am about to put a plumb line in the midst of My people."

When God is the plumb line, when his nature and character, his bounty and generosity, his grace and mercy, is the vertical line against which we hold our gifted but bent selves, only then do we see ourselves truly.

Several years ago I took a retreat at a place called Quiet Waters in Lake Wylie, South Carolina.

One morning, I caught a glimpse of bright green tucked behind the base of the railing on the deck. I stopped and slowly raised my phone to take a picture.

There behind the post perched a lizard, a Giant Anole, all five inches of him. Probably thinking I was another anole, he pompously pushed himself up on his front legs, juttied his chin, and puffed out his bright red throat. Then, wide elbowed and impressive, figuring I would be sufficiently cowed by his magnificence, he marched his way around the corner to face me. Here's the photo I snagged of him.



But the moment he came face to face not with another five inch long lizard but with a six foot tall human being, he immediately started backpedaling, dove beneath the rail, and – changing color to match the brown deck – wedged himself into a tiny crack in the floor. Seeing me, he suddenly didn't think quite so much of himself.

John Calvin, in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, reminds us that “without knowledge of God there is no knowledge of self”:

It is certain that man never achieves a clear knowledge of himself unless he has first looked upon God's face, and then descends from contemplating him to scrutinize himself. . . .

As long as we do not look beyond the earth, being quite content with our own righteousness, wisdom, and virtue, we flatter ourselves most sweetly, and fancy ourselves all but demigods. Suppose we but once begin to raise our thoughts to God, and to ponder his nature, and how completely perfect are his righteousness, wisdom, and power – the straightedge to which we must be shaped – then, what masquerading earlier as righteousness was pleasing in us will soon grow filthy . . .

We must infer that man is never sufficiently touched and affected by the awareness of his lowly state until he has compared himself with God's majesty.

* * *

When once we see ourselves "in view of the mercies of God" and "in light of our faith", when once we see ourselves in the light of God himself, we are free not just to have a debased view of ourselves, but to have no thought of ourselves at all. My eyes are on you, standing before me, and they are on the God who intended me to be gift to you and you to be gift to me. They are not on me at all.

That's the perspective that lies behind the famous line from the Archbishop of Canterbury:

Humility does not mean thinking less of yourself than of other people, nor does it mean having a low opinion of your own gifts. It means freedom from thinking about yourself at all.

William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury

C. S. Lewis elaborates on this in his great introduction to the Christian faith, *Mere Christianity*:

Do not imagine that if you meet a really humble man he will be what most people call 'humble' nowadays: he will not be a sort of greasy, smarmy person, who is always telling you that, of course, he is nobody. Probably all you will think about him

is that he seemed a cheerful, intelligent chap who took a real interest in what you said to him. If you do dislike him it will be because you feel a little envious of anyone who seems to enjoy life so easily. He will not be thinking about humility: he will not be thinking about himself at all.

Who preoccupies your thoughts?

* * *

In *Peace Like a River*, Reuben Land describes himself as “a human brimful of self-importance [vainglory].”

That's all of us . . . but for the gracious transforming work of Jesus in our lives.

I can't choose to have a smaller view of myself. I can't make myself think less of myself.

But I can choose to have a higher view of God, and to seek after him with all my heart

I can ask that he might fill me more and more with the fullness of himself, leaving less and less room for me to think of me.

And I can choose to invite Jesus to form his heart of humility in me. Hence those passive verbs that invite us to let God do this work in us.

And this is where a life of love begins. Thomas a Kempis has it right when in *The Imitation of Christ* he says:

The love of Jesus makes a person think little of himself.

People have said you need to be careful what you pray for. That's absolute nonsense. Asking God to humble us is one of the most beautiful and trusting and important prayers we can pray.

And it's the only way I know to experience real transformation – to invite him to do in me what I am utterly incapable of bringing about in myself.

As our worship team comes up to close our service, would you pray that prayer? Would you ask God to give you a heart of humility?