

Title: Commitment

Series: Stewardship 2022

Scriptures: Romans 12:1-2 and Mark 8:34-9:1

Date Used: November 13, 2022 – Veteran's Day Sunday

Focus: As people in the military are committed to a great cause, so are we invited to be committed to the cause of Christ. It is a cause that demands all that we are, including our very lives.

In the Spring of 1942, four young men from my hometown of East Sparta made their way to Columbus, Ohio to take a test to see if they could qualify to enter the Army Air Corp. A little over ten years ago, one of the fellows from that group, Donnie Hartzell, recalled their trip to Columbus and back.

He remembered how the four of them piled into one of the fellow's convertibles and made a rather fast trip to Columbus and back. Donnie recalled that they outran three police cruisers on the way down and a couple more on their way back home.... These fellows, all of them in their early 20's, must have thought they had already earned their wings.

Three of them made it into the Army Air Corp – Jimmie Ullet, Dick Fry and my uncle, Garry Patterson – Donnie ended up becoming a Navy pilot.

Over the course of a couple of months they each entered basic training in various places before heading off to their respective flight schools. Three of those young men never returned home after the war. Jimmy Ullet and my Uncle Gary were both killed in training accidents, and Dick Fry was killed in action flying bomber escort over Vienna, Austria. Donnie, the Navy pilot, was the only one to make it back home.

I grew up hearing bits and pieces of this story from my grandfather and my mother. I have to admit, it was one of those things you fail to appreciate at the time you are hearing it, and only realize the value of years later.

It is a narrative about dedication, a story about great commitment; and commitment not only on the part of those who enlisted, but on the part of their families as well.

These young men and their families all understood the implications of what they were doing. They knew there was a chance they would never come back home. But they believed in the cause, and they believed that cause was worth dying for.

When it comes to the subject of commitment, I think of our military personnel. Even those who enlist during a time when the country is not at war, know that there is always the possibility that at some time, they will have to be engaged in war.

The level of commitment our military personnel take on, and that the members of their families must share in, finds some parallels in Christ's call to discipleship. Jesus said to his followers, "If you want to follow me you have to be willing to take up a cross and follow me.... You must be willing to lose your life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel."

Jesus' words have certainly rung true for Christians over the centuries who have sought to follow Christ in cultures that were hostile to the Christian faith. There are parts of the world where followers of Christ have been persecuted and even put to death because of their faith.

Paul also speaks about a deep commitment to Christ in his letter to the Christians in Rome. But instead of speaking about a willingness to die for the sake of the gospel, he writes of our need to become a "living sacrifice" - to totally commit our lives to the cause of Christ.

I.) This commitment that Jesus and Paul both speak of begins with transformation. Jesus continually invited people to turn their lives in a new direction. He continually encouraged people to stop trying to set the course for their own lives and to allow God to set that course for them.

Jesus kept calling those who were about to drive off a cliff or who were wandering aimlessly down life's road to get out of the driver's seat, to move into the passenger seat and let God be in control of their lives. That is the first step of being committed to Christ, to allowing our lives to be transformed.

And it is the experience of God's saving grace that moves us toward life transformation. Paul's own life transforming experience on the Road to Damascus illustrates this. When he encountered Jesus on that fateful day, he felt called to take on a new perspective, a radically new orientation toward life.

II.) In Romans 12, Paul writes that life transformation begins with a "renewing of one's mind". To have one's mind renewed means to no longer be conformed to the ways of society but instead, as Paul writes, it is to seek to know the will of God, what is "good", what is "acceptable", and what is "perfect".

Paul is saying that before we can live the right way we have to begin to think differently, we must begin to understand things differently. He is saying that those who seek to really be committed to Christ must first and foremost seek to know God's will. Our minds need to be re-made; our perspective needs to be changed.

The renewing of one's mind brings about a new orientation that leads to a totally different way of doing things.

- It moves us from merely acting out of our own self-interest to seeking to act out of God's will.
- It moves us from being reactive to events going on around us or to us, to becoming proactive in our responses.
- Our focus moves from doing our own thing, to doing God's thing.

A young woman that grew up in a rather emotionally messed up family went off to college. During her junior year of college, she came to faith in Christ through a campus ministry. And she took her newfound faith very seriously. She was really trying to allow God to remake her and mold her into God's image, beginning with her perspective and outlook on life.

As she prepared to return home for summer break, she knew that one of the real tests of her newfound faith in Christ was going to be how she responded to her mother. Her mother was a verbally abusive adult child of an alcoholic. She continually found fault with her daughter, criticizing her for one thing after another. "Where did you get that outfit? It looks terrible on you.... I'm surprised you haven't flunked out of college. You never were very smart.... Do you ever think you will find a guy that wants you?"

She had only been home from college for a few days when her mother started in on her. Her mom was riding her case because she hadn't found a better summer job than the one she had found. In the past this young woman would have run to her room crying or just torn into her mother. But this time as her mother criticized her, she thought about how Jesus would want her to respond. She asked herself, "What is good, what is acceptable and what is perfect?" Jesus had gotten through to her mind.

III.) When our mind is renewed then our actions can be renewed. Paul breaks down the renewal of our actions into two parts.

A.) The first part that Paul writes about is acting with sober judgement. Paul begins this section of his letter by writing, "For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each to the measure of faith that God has assigned."

Paul begins this section of his letter by talking about grace. Grace is God's gift of love, God's gift of forgiveness for our every fault. And remember, the very idea of grace presupposes that we have faults that need to be forgiven.

I like people in 12-step programs. The serious members of these programs know who and what they are. While they may be on one side of an alcohol or drug addiction, they always know they aren't that far away from being back on the other side of that addiction – one drink, one line of coke, and it's all back again.

Paul is saying, remember you are forever a sinner saved by grace. You will always be a sinner saved by grace. Keep an honest perspective about who you are, always remembering who and what you are. We need to practice sober judgement.

B.) The second characteristic of renewed actions that comes from the renewal of our minds is the understanding that we are connected to others. We are always in community with others. And as a person who is in community with others we are called to love.

Paul writes, "Let love be genuine."

Then Paul goes on to explain what he means by this phrase.

- It is about extending hospitality to strangers.
- It is empathizing with the circumstances in people's lives.
- It is loving people that persecute you.
- It is refusing to repay evil with evil.
- It is seeking to live in harmony with others, attempting to live peaceably with all.
- It is about contributing to the needs of others.

In summary, it is about seeking to live in community with others. It is all about establishing relationships with strangers, and staying connected to people, even the difficult ones. It is about being connected with those in need of a shoulder to cry on, or that need help.

A total commitment to Christ begins with a transforming of our minds that leads to a transformation of our actions.

Jim still has memories of junior high and high school, and they are not happy memories for him. His family moved into this new school system when he was in junior high and the kids in that new community did not accept him because Jim stuttered when he spoke. The kids would continually make fun of him.

Despite the cruelty of his classmates, Jim was a top-notch student. He graduated at the top of his class and received a full ride scholarship to attend college. Four years later, he graduated with a degree in computer science and went on to eventually begin his own software company. He did alright.

Now when Jim was in college, he met a young woman named Tabitha, who was very involved in a church. Well, he really wanted to date Tabatha, but she told him she would only go out with him if he started to attend church with her. He liked her so he started to go to church with her and eventually he made room for Christ to enter into his life. And just as the Apostle Paul talked about, he began to experience this transformation of his mind and then his actions began to be transformed.

After they graduated from college, Jim and Tabatha got married and they eventually moved back to the community where Jim had attended junior high and high school. Well Jim was in a store one day and saw this poster about a fundraiser, a dinner, for a guy in the community that had cancer. As he studied the poster, he recognized the name and the face of the guy on the poster. It was Norman. Norman had been a classmate of Jim's and was one of the guys who had been particularly cruel to him when he was in junior high and in high school.

As he looked at the poster for the fund raiser, Jim remembered how every time he stuttered Norman would parrot what he had just said. Norman just loved to humiliate Jim.

Jim stood there looking at the poster about the fundraiser and his immediate thought was, “There is justice”. But as he made his way to the car, he caught himself and he said, “Forgive me God.” Then he turned around and went back into the store and took down all the information about the benefit dinner for Norman.

Jim and Tabatha went to that dinner. Jim made sure he spoke with Norman and shared his concern for his old classmate’s condition. Jim also made a rather substantial contribution to the cause.

Commitment to Christ is a commitment to being transformed.

It is about letting God change our thinking. It is about letting God remind us of who we are – we are sinners saved by grace.

It is about making room for God in our lives to transform not only our thinking, but also our actions.