

Putting It All Together

So far in this section I've given you a lot of information on the interpretation of Scripture. I've pointed out some of the obstacles to understanding the text, along with some of the dangers to avoid. I've discussed the importance of genre and how it influences what we read and I've handed you five keys to unlocking the meaning of the text-content, context, comparison, culture, and consultation.

I reviewed some of the many kinds of secondary sources that can assist you in that consultation process. Then I focused on the use of the concordance in investigating terms, and finally I listed ten principles for figuring out the figurative passages in the biblical account.

Now let's get some involvement and demonstrate how to put these parts of the process together by looking at a specific passage, the first two verses of Romans 12.

What Is "Therefore" There For?

We said that the first key to accurately interpreting Scripture is content. That is based on observation of the text, so let's start with that.

The first thing that grabs me about this text is its sense of urgency. "I urge you," verse 1 begins. "I beseech you." "I implore you." So Paul comes at his readers with a sense of urgency. The first key word in the paragraph is that key word, *therefore*. That's essential. Remember our motto: whenever you see a therefore, stop to see what it's there for. Here it compels us to go back and check out the preceding context. So let's take the suggestion of the writer and step back to get the big picture of Romans.

Investigation shows that the book of Romans is talking about a "righteousness of God" - not our own righteousness, but one that He provides. Moreover, there are three major divisions to the book. The first eight chapters deal with a righteousness that God has revealed but we must receive. Then chapters 9-11 turn to the subject of Israel, where Paul says the righteousness from God was rejected by His people. Finally, beginning in chapter 12 (where we find our passage, beginning with *therefore*), we come to the practical section of the book that talks about a righteousness reproduced in the believer's life. So, on the basis of one connective, we've already got a good overview of the book.

But there's an additional phrase that forces us to see the connection: "by the mercies of God." That is to say, the mercies of God become the basis for Paul's urgent appeal. Paul is saying, essentially, "On the basis of what God has done for you, I want you to do something." That's an important spiritual truth. God never asks us to do anything for Him until He fully informs us of what He has done for us.

What is it that He wants us to do. Verse one states it plainly: "to present your bodies." What does that mean? The word *present* is a key term, and we need to make an effort to understand it. It was used of the presentation of a sacrifice to God in the Old Testament Temple. It has the idea of giving something over to another, to relinquish one's grip on it. To "present" something means you can't give it and then later take it back.

REAL TALK FROM THE WORD

Investigating Terms

Now as we've seen, whenever we find a term like that, we need to make extensive use of a concordance, so let's do that. A concordance tells us that the same word, *present*, is used in Luke 2:22 and tells us that the meaning of present means His parents were giving Him to God, with no thought or possibility of taking Him back. The concordance also tells us that *present* is used elsewhere in the book of Romans. That's helpful, since the same term used by the same author in the same book provides a lot of insight. It's like having brothers and sisters in the same town, as opposed to distant relatives far away. In Romans 6:13 Paul is giving us an option: You can either present your body as an instrument of righteousness, or you can present your body as an instrument of sin. Paul is describing in Romans 6 to present your body to the right hands, to the Person who is going to use it skillfully to accomplish His purposes.

Insights Through Consultation

Back in Romans 12, we need to notice several things about the presentation of our bodies to God. First, we are presenting a "living sacrifice." That's a contradiction in terms—except in the spiritual realm. You see, we're not talking about offering a dead body but a very alive body. It is to be sacrificed to God and it must be both Holy and acceptable.

Paul gives a conclusion about doing this in the expression, "which is your spiritual service of worship." What does that convey? It shows the expectation that presenting ourselves to God is really the least we could do, the most logical thing we could do, in light of what He has done for us.

Now we come to verse 2: "And do not be conformed to this world." We've used the interpretational principle of comparing Scripture with Scripture to investigate the meaning of *present*. Here we can use it to learn something about being "conformed" to the world.

If we look up *conform* in a Bible dictionary, we discover that it has the idea of pouring something into a mold. That's the idea Paul uses here. "Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mold. Don't allow the world to do the opposite of what God wants to do. You see, we have an option, according to this passage. The little word *but* indicates a contrast, and we've learned to pay close attention to things that are unlike. Our option—The alternative to conforming to the world's pattern—is to "be transformed." That, too, is a grabbing term. It actually indicates a metamorphosis, a complete makeover. It's like the little caterpillar that builds itself a cocoon, after a time, it begins to wiggle and gradually work its way out, revealing a completely changed form as a butterfly.

Another principle we looked at was consultation. That is, having made our own exhaustive study of the text, we can then go to the secondary sources, perhaps to a commentary, to find out what light they might throw on the passage. Consulting a commentary on this passage, we gain some profound insight. We learn that the word for "be transformed" is actually the passive form of a verb, whereas the word for "renewing" is active. Anything passive is being acted upon; if it's active, it is doing the acting. So Paul is saying that we don't do the transformation; God does that. We can't do it, so He does what we can't do. Is there anything we can do? Yes, we can renew our minds. That's our job. In fact, the overhauling of our thinking is what allows God to effect the transformation.