

Buzz King

buzz@BuzzKing.com

<https://BuzzKing.com>

Romans 12:1–2, ESV

***12** 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. **2** 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.*

Earning Privilege: A wall of boxes.

When I was a young guy in my early twenties, I worked as a computer programmer in San Francisco. I worked for a company called EDS, Electronic Data Systems, owned by Ross Perot, a billionaire in Texas who would later run for President. EDS assigned me to Blue Cross/Blue Shield of California. I wrote code for systems that performed actuarial calculations; actuaries are those people who decide how much of a risk a candidate for insurance would be – you know, the folks who conclude that men under twenty-five who drive red sports cars are a very bad risk. I also wrote code for claims processing systems; it is of course computer systems that process your insurance claims, and only a very, very small percentage of them are ever looked at by a human. When I was a programmer working at this insurance company, my parents lived down in Los Angeles, and they had insurance with Blue Cross/Blue Shield. At one point, my mother received medical treatment for a serious illness. The problem was that the insurance company kept denying her claims, saying that they were for something that they didn't cover. My

mother happened to complain about this to me one night on the phone. When I realized that the office I was working in, up in San Francisco, processed my mother's claims, I decided that I could probably figure out why they weren't being paid. It was, of course, very much against the policies of Blue Cross/Blue Shield and for EDS, the company that hired me out to Blue Cross/Blue Shield, to use the system for personal reasons, but I decided that I was more concerned about my mother's insurance claims than doing the right thing. I figured that I had worked hard to get to where I was in life, and I deserved the opportunity to help out my mother.

So, the next day at work, I decided to check things out. I waited until the end of the day, and then just before leaving, I submitted a transaction to the computer system to print out on paper my mother's insurance claims, along with some audit information about the software's analysis of her claims. My plan was to figure out just why they were denied - from the perspective of the software, because this would give me a very precise understanding of just what went wrong. Once I knew why the computer didn't like her claims, I would be able to give her advice on how her doctor's office should resubmit the claims in a different way, so that the software would find favor with her claims. I thought it might be as simple as changing the listing of an assistant surgeon to that of a primary surgeon to get that doctor's fees paid. Or maybe there might be something that triggered an inference that there was a pre-existing condition, something like that. But again, what I was doing was, of course, very wrong. Now, back then, computer systems

were single machine, million-dollar IBM systems that processed everything at night in a giant batch mode. So, I left that evening, having submitted the transaction, knowing that my mother's insurance claim printouts would be sitting on my desk in the morning. As always, I will get back to this.

The following is from 1st Peter, from Chapter 1, verse 13 to Chapter 2, verse 3, and I have removed verses for the sake of brevity:

13 Therefore, preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. 20 He was foreknown before the foundation of the world but was made manifest in the last times for the sake of you.

*22 Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart, 23 since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God; 24 for **"All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord remain forever."** And this word is the good news that was preached to you.*

2 So put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander. 2 Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation— 3 if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.

1st Peter is written to the people who lived in Asia Minor, which is now in the Asian part of Turkey, that is, the majority part of Turkey. The first verse of this letter identifies the author as the great Apostle Peter. Most scholars believe that it was written by someone who followed a school of thought that was based on Peter's teachings, not Peter himself. The Greek of the letter is extremely literate, not something we would expect from a poor, uneducated fisherman from the Galilee. Also, some of

the ideas in the letter represent theological developments that were not fully developed in the Christian church until much later, after Peter would have died. And, the letter shows a strong influence of Paul's letter to the Romans, and Romans did not become widely read and talked about until long after Peter and Paul had both died.

In the part of the letter we are looking at, our pseudo-Peter is offering strong words of encouragement to readers who are facing persecution or suffering in any way. The passage says something about being sober-minded, but it of course has nothing to do with alcohol; the author is using the notion of being sober as a metaphor for keeping one's mind clear with respect to moral issues and to never fall to the temptation of thinking that something wrong is in truth okay to do. We must always remain in control of our actions by allowing God to keep us clear headed. That's a key to striving to be holy like Christ. Although we can never truly be like him, we must be thoughtful about how we live from day to day and hold ourselves to the highest standard possible. That's not what I was doing that evening when I was programming the system to spit out my mother's claims, along with the logic for rejecting them. The passage goes on to make it clear that the standard of conduct that Christians should follow is provided by God, not by people, not by us. The phrase "*You shall be holy, for I am holy*" apparently comes from Leviticus 11:44, and "holiness" is the same word as "sanctified" in biblical Greek; the word is "*hagiasmos*". The noun form of this word means "saint". Thus, we are being told to set ourselves apart for God, and to consecrate

our lives to God, and to strive to be as holy as God – which is, of course, the highest goal, one that we can never fully achieve. The bottom line is that believers are to not take part in sinful behavior. After all, we have been saved, not through earthly things like money, things that are very temporary and have no eternal value, but through the suffering and death of Jesus himself. And, importantly, we should remember that we have nothing to fear:

He was foreknown before the foundation of the world but was made manifest in the last times for the sake of you²¹ who through him are believers in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God.

We know that we are part of a plan that existed before the world was created.

The passage goes on to give us some practical advice on just how to be holy: we must obey the truth that God teaches and have a sincere love for other Christians. This way, we can draw support and strength from each other. The passage ends with:

Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation—³ if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.

The reference to infants and spiritual milk is there to tell us that when our faith is still raw, we need to focus on the fundamentals of being holy, of being true Christians, before we seek out more complex theological truths. So, we shouldn't get overwhelmed. Stick to the basics. Follow what we have been taught by Jesus, take care of other believers and support them in their faith, and focus on the basics.

But what does it mean to be holy? Does it mean to be perfect? That would mean

that we achieved that goal of being just like God, and we can never do that. Does it mean that we should always be praying, always thinking about God? That would fit in with sticking to the basics, it would seem. But it still seems impossible to achieve. We must do the daily things of life, working, taking care of our families. Maybe it means that we should always be ready to admit our faults, to acknowledge it when we do evil, and then to seek forgiveness and regeneration, and to not repeat what we have done wrong.

So, this gets us back to my mother's insurance claims: The next morning when I arrived at work, a few of the other programmers happened to be in the entryway of the building when I walked in. They chuckled and said *hey, Buzz, that data you set to have printed it is waiting for you*. I said thanks, wondering why they were so interested in my printout and what they were laughing at. Did they realize that the data was about my mother? Well, I certainly figured it out when I got to my desk. I had made a small programming mistake when I coded my transaction to printout my mother's insurance claims. It was a one-character mistake. A single keystroke. The result was that instead of printing out my mother's insurance claims, I submitted a transaction to printout the insurance claims of everyone who had insurance with Blue Cross/Blue Shield of California.

There was, of course, millions of people in the database. How many of you remember those huge, extra wide sheets of green and white striped computer printout paper with little holes along both sides? Well, as it turned out, in the middle of the night,

when the results of my little transaction were being printed, the computer operator realized that something was wrong and stopped the printing. But still, when I got to my desk, I found it surrounded by a tall wall of boxes, about thirty of them, each filled with computer paper. My friends proceeded to applaud as I worked my way around the wall of boxes and sat at my desk. Then my boss came in and asked me to come to his office. I assumed that I was about to get into trouble for trying to use the computer system of the insurance company for personal reasons. Maybe I would be fired.

But that was not the case. My boss was simply upset about all the paper I had wasted. It wasn't about trees back then, by the way. It was about money. That paper was expensive. I needed to be more careful, he told me. He asked me what the hell I was trying to do. I said that I was trying to print out my mother's insurance claims to see why they weren't being paid. He said that the next time I needed something paid to just tell him and he would show me how to rig the system, that we had a special transaction that we could run that would make any given claim get paid in full, without question. He said that they sometimes used it for important people, that they had once forced ex-President Ford's claims to get paid in full. He added that we of course sometimes use that special transaction to get our own claims paid.

In the decades since this happened, society has become even more like my boss. We're not held to a high moral standard by society. We are to help the people we work for make a profit. We're to do what we must do in life to take care of ourselves.

But when it comes to abstract things, like being holy, well, hell, most people don't believe in God anymore. It makes it all the harder to live in the way Christ taught. How can we admit what we've done wrong, when society hardly considers anything to be wrong?

The following are the first two verses of Chapter 12 of Romans.

12 *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. ²Do 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.*

I like this passage very much. *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.* It's from Paul's letter to the Romans, a letter he wrote to a church he had not visited and hoped to visit someday. Romans is often considered the finest explanation of Christian theology ever written, and it has been extremely influential with people like John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, and with Augustine of Hippo, the famous theologian who lived from 354 to 430 A.D., and who was a Bishop in Roman North Africa, the southern end of the Roman Empire. In Chapter twelve, where this passage comes from, Paul is transitioning from talking about theological issues to discussing ethical issues. These words say that we should rise above the low standards of the world and instead to try to understand just what God wants us to do in our daily lives.

Today, the world is a demanding place when it comes to achieving. We are to earn as much as possible. We are to possess nice cars and all the latest high-tech gadgets. We must be powerful and influential. People must envy us. It's not enough to live comfortably. We must thrive materialistically. Society does not demand that we live in a holy way. In fact, people who live like that are laughed at. After all, this interferes with being successful. The truth is that if we have faith, if we answer the call of the Holy Spirit living within us, if we dedicate our lives to living the way Christ lived, to emulating him, then the path to holiness, although we will certainly not reach the end of it in this life, will be obvious. There is a lot of talk in our society today about "privilege", about the notion of somehow thinking we are born with special needs that we have a right to fulfill. I think this misses the true point. It's not so much that we think we were born better. We think we have *earned* special treatment on Earth. We have worked hard, gotten educated, followed the law at least most of the time, and put in long hours at a job. Thus, we have earned our privilege. But Christ, of all people who ever lived, would certainly have earned a special place on Earth. However, he chose to reject it, to walk and live among the outcasts of society, people who were poor and had no influence. No one listened to the people he hung out with. He never strove for special treatment. He never ran his mother Mary's insurance claims through a special program to try and get them paid in full.

When I went back to my desk, a couple of the guys helped me carry the boxes off

to a dumpster. We did not recycle back then, of course. Trees were just these big things that stood in the way of parking lots and gas stations. We laughed the whole time, and I bought everyone a beer after work. The next day, it was completely forgotten. I forgot about it too, until one day not that long ago when I found myself thinking about the ways that God speaks to us. God does pop his head up from time to time and put something right in front of us. It was then that I remembered making a tiny programming error while doing something unethical. As I was dwelling on this memory, I realized that God had spoken to me that day, decades before. God had said, hey, you want some special information that other people can't get, something you've earned, well here's a wall of boxes, chock full of privileged information.

And in case you are wondering, I never did figure out what was wrong with my mother's insurance claims, but her doctor resubmitted them, and somehow, they got paid.