Mind Games, Part 3: Living Freely

Joel Thomas · Romans 12:1-2

AT A GLANCE

In the third and closing part of his Mind Games series, Joel Thomas builds on week one's lesson that the brain filters for the familiar and week two's lesson that emotions are indicators, not dictators. Reading Romans 12:1-2, he argues that everyone is being formed, either conformed by drift or transformed by deliberate renewal. Freedom comes from seeking reality, surrendering false stories, and repeating truth until it becomes reflex.

- Feelings are always real but not always reliable; treat emotions as clues pointing to a need, never as evidence for a verdict.
- No one stands still: you are being conformed by drift or transformed by deliberate choice, and repeated thoughts are the primary shaper either way.
- Because the nervous system mistakes familiar for safe, freedom means seeking reality, surrendering toxic stories, and rehearsing what is true until truth becomes reflex.

> *"We're all in a formation process right now. You're either being conformed or you're being transformed."*

EXPOSITION

Scripture engaged

> Romans 12:1-2 — [1]So I beg you, brothers and sisters, because of the great mercy God has shown us, offer your lives as a living sacrifice to him—an offering that is only for God and pleasing to him. Considering what he has done, it is only right that you should worship him in this way. [2]Don't change yourselves to be like the people of this world, but let God change you inside with a new way of thinking. Then you will be able to understand and accept what God wants for you. You will be able to know what is good and pleasing to him and what is perfect. (ERV)

The argument

Mercy Is the Lens Paul Hands Us Before He Asks for Anything — Romans 12:1 opens with a pull-aside, not a command

Joel Thomas slows down on Romans 12:1. The word translated "urge," he says, means to pull someone aside, the picture of a mentor saying, "Let me help you out." Those pulled aside are "brothers and sisters," family. Then "in view of God's mercy" becomes the filter to place on the forefront of the mind, and mercy, in his gloss, is judicial leniency: the officer who lets you off when you deserve the ticket. The living sacrifice is therefore no payment. Citing Louie Giglio, he calls worship "primarily a response, personal and corporate, to God for who he is and what he's done."

> **Insight —** *Paul's call to change begins with a mercy already received, so obedience is a response and never a payment.*

No One Stands Still, Because Everyone Is Being Formed — Conformed passively by drift, or transformed actively by choice

Paul gives two options, and Joel Thomas reads them as passive and active. To be conformed is to sit in an environment and fall into everyone's pattern; to be transformed is to swim against the stream. But "you are being formed" either way. Treating this as a human matter, not merely a religious one, he points to neuroplasticity and neurogenesis, which he dates to 1948 and 1998, and to his claim that repeated thoughts are the primary shaper of the physical brain. Quoting Dr. Carolyn Leaf, he insists the mind governs the brain: "Matter does not control us. We control matter through our thinking and our choosing." Paul, he says, was already naming this in Romans 12:2.

> **Insight —** *Neutrality is not an option; whatever you rehearse by default is already forming you, so the only choice is whether to drift or direct.*

The Brain Prefers the Familiar to the True — Confirmation bias, emotional reasoning, and catastrophizing as the common drifts

Having directed the room to count red cars, so that almost no one could say how many black ones there were, Joel Thomas names how drift works: the brain confirms what it has already decided. "Your brain would rather be right than live in reality." Social media, he says, was designed to exploit that appetite, building an echo chamber. Slogans like "be true to yourself" flatter this; he asks, which self? The naive one? The traumatized one? "Follow your heart" mistakes a clue for a verdict: "Your feelings are always real. Your feelings are not always reliable." Catastrophizing treats the worst outcome as the likeliest, and imagination, he says, holds reality and unreality together while the body "does not know the difference."

> **Insight —** *Feelings and instincts are valuable clues, but when they are promoted to evidence, the mind quietly manufactures a reality to match them.*

Deliberate Pursuit of Reality Means Surrendering What Feels Safe — Seek, surrender, and strengthen: three moves against drift

Against drift, Joel Thomas offers three deliberate moves. First, seek reality: Jesus, who calls the enemy the author of lies and himself the way and the truth, gives us "mental maps of reality." There is no "your truth" or "my truth"; truth corresponds to reality. Second, surrender completely. Some stories persist because "what's familiar and what's safe are not the same thing," though the nervous system cannot tell them apart, and a story we refuse to surrender is one the enemy will exploit. Third, strengthen truth repeatedly. Citing Hebb, "cells that fire together wire together," until the pathway becomes automatic and reflexive.

> **Insight —** *Freedom costs the comfort of the familiar story, and it is secured by deliberately repeating what is actually real.*

A Lie Is Displaced by Truth Rehearsed Until the Feelings Follow — Renewal loosens the lie's grip and makes God's will discernible

Paul's sequence matters to Joel Thomas: only after renewal does he say "then you will be able to test and approve" God's will. So his answer to "how do I know God's will?" is to allow the mind "to be transformed by the truth of God's word." He then offers his own story. After a traumatic season, a belief lodged in his heart: if I let people get close, they'll hurt me. It was affecting his marriage and his children. In counseling he wrote the lie and God's truth on a 3x5 card and carried it for 90 days, pulling it out through the day, reading it, and saying, "God help me to believe that that's true." Even now it is emotional to recall. Then he woke to find the feelings gone: "I had been transformed by the renewing of my mind."

> **Insight —** *Lies lose their grip not through insight alone but through patient, repeated rehearsal of what God says is true.*

Cross-references

- John 10:10 — The enemy steals, kills, and destroys as author of lies, while Jesus comes as author of life to the full.
- John 14:6 — Jesus as the way and the truth, giving mental maps of reality.
- 1 John 4:18 — Recalled from last week: perfect love casts out fear, meeting the need beneath the emotion.
- 1 Thessalonians 5 — Cited with Galatians 6 as evidence that Paul speaks of a person as body, soul, and spirit.

DEVOTIONAL

A 3x5 card goes into a pocket at dawn. On one side, a lie that has run for years; on the other, what God says is true. Nothing about it looks like warfare. It is paper, and a man pulling it out again and again, reading it, whispering that he wants it to be true. Most of us have been counting red cars for a long time. Somebody, or something, told us what to look for, and we

found it, and the black cars drove by unseen. The river moves us along the same way: no effort required, no decision made, and still we end up downstream, in a place that feels like home because it is familiar. Paul does not begin by scolding the current. He pulls us aside, the way a mentor would, and turns our eyes first to mercy: a sentence we deserved and did not receive. Everything afterward, the offered body, the refused pattern, the renewed mind, is a response to being let off. That changes how the swimming feels. Upstream is not an audition. It is a family member, called brother or sister, choosing slowly what to rehearse. Some mornings the truth will read like a stranger's words. Believing it may take a pocketful of days, each one a small yes to what is real over what is merely known. And then, quietly, a morning arrives when the old dread is not there. No fanfare. Just the strange lightness of a lie that has lost its voice.

Reflection

- What message about your past, your worth, or a relationship have you rehearsed so long it feels like fact, and where do you suspect it first lodged?
- Where are you treating a strong feeling as evidence rather than a clue, and what need might that emotion actually be pointing to?
- What familiar story feels safe to you right now but may be keeping you from reality, and what would surrendering it look like?

Closing prayer

God, thank you for the boldness of those who stood today. Give them crystal clarity about the thing their minds have latched onto, the lie we don't even realize we're telling ourselves. Help them locate that false belief and discover a truth that not only combats the lie but replaces it, something they can put on repeat in their minds that will transform them. Transform our emotional, relational, professional, and personal health. Free your people into a new form of life, so that this mind game wouldn't overtake them any longer. We trust all this to you, and we pray it in Jesus' name. Amen.

FORMATION

One thing to remember

The most dangerous lies are the ones you don't realize you're telling yourself, so naming your one false story is where freedom begins.

This week

This week, ask God for clarity about one message you carry that doesn't match reality. On a 3x5 card, write that lie on one side and what God's word says is true on the other, as Joel Thomas did. Carry it, read it whenever the lie surfaces, and pray it back to God.

Return to Romans 12:2