

On the way to the airport, before flying back to Alaska, I made a strategic stop. There are some things you just cannot do in Alaska that you can do in Washington state, like buy inexpensive groceries. There are three main things I miss from Washington, family, trees, and WINCO Foods. After 4 years in Alaska, WINCO has become an overstimulating combination of sticker shock and variety. The first thing to catch my eye was a bin near the entry with a sign that read, "78 cents each". I don't even remember what was in that bin, I just remember thinking that in Alaska, nothing sells for 78 cents. I passed up the bargain on a mission to the bulk food section. It was actually my second visit to WINCO. On the first, I bought \$200 worth of dry roasted peanuts, raw cashews, and chopped dates coated in oat powder. In Alaska, such a \$200 purchase might fill a backpack, but there my plunder nearly filled two suitcases. The night before our flight I carefully packed our luggage and weighed each bag to make sure it was right at the 50-pound limit. My meticulous measurements revealed that I had more room. I could buy another 130 pounds of dried goods. So, on WINCO stop number 2, I picked up some lentils, flax seed, pinto beans and oats, each in a 25-pound bag. I had about 30 pounds to go. It was so satisfying, as I estimate how much each item might cost at Carrs or Fred Meyer or Three Bears.

My sister, who was driving us to the airport, was shopping with me. In a hurry to make the flight, we decided to split up for the last few items. I asked her to go to the bakery to get some bagels for a preflight lunch while I finished in the bulk section. When we met at the front of the store she got in line while I ran through the aisles grabbing last minute additions while keeping a mental count of the total weight. I hopped in and out of line several times. The line was long, so I had time. On my last trip, as I was running to the register with a box of gluten-free crackers, my sister met me. She gave up our spot in line. I felt confused. She looked concerned. Then she clued me in, "There's a fight."

She maneuvered to put grocery shelves between us and the fight. I stretched my head above the shelves to watch the fight. Right there in front of the bagel display, the whole bakery section was an active fighting ring. There were about 6 upset customers, one of them notably not wearing his shirt. They were surrounded by at least 12 employees, who didn't appear to have had any recent training in hand-to-hand combat. There was screaming and shoving, and it just felt like anything could happen next. Like I could be part of the live audience for the 2023 Bagel Smackdown. It was one of those moments when you become intensely aware of your surroundings, and you automatically begin assessing your next best step. In less than 5 minutes, the employees were able to escort them outside, still screaming, less shoving. We went back for our place in line. I was pleasantly surprised that there was no line. Apparently, everyone else had also abandoned the checkout stands to hide behind shelves of groceries.

We were all sensing that their behavior was a little bit off. It was behavior I don't get to experience very often. I had just spent 35 days in the wilderness. There were some strange things on the trail, but nobody acted that way. There is a certain way we expect people to behave socially, and their behavior was off. When they failed to check and correct their own behavior others did it for them. Cultural expectations checked their behavior and store management corrected it.

All of us have times when our behavior is off. If we don't have tools for checking and correcting our own behavior, others will do it for us. But we don't want that. The longer bad behavior goes unchecked the more damage it does. Our quality of life and our influence is impacted by how well we keep our behavior in check. What tools do you reach for when your behavior is off? How do you check and correct your behavior?

Today, in our study of behavior from Romans 12:1-2, we are going to see a principle that we can use as a tool for checking and correcting our behavior.

Romans 12:1-2 *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. 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.*

Verse 1 begins with the words, "I appeal to you." Do you hear the urgency in these words? Behavior matters.

There were really only two things I knew for sure about the people in the center of that fight, they were at WINCO and they got in a fight. Yeah, I saw what they looked like, I heard some of their vocabulary and tone of voice, but I did not know them. I don't know what triggered them. I don't know who started it. I don't know if it was typical behavior for them. I don't know where they live, what they drive, or how they spend their time. But I know how they behaved that day in the grocery store. Their behavior had an influence on everyone who witnessed it. It was their behavior, but it impacted our choices, our feelings, and our schedules. Our behaviors impact the quality of our lives and the experience of those we come in contact with. Our behaviors have consequences, and rewards. They impact the friends we make, the jobs we get, and the reputations we build. Behaviors matter. It matters to us. It matters to others. It matters to God. It matters to the stranger at the grocery store. When we consider the importance of behavior, we can see the importance of a tool to check and correct our behavior. We can see why Paul feels the need to urge.

Now let's go one level deeper in the importance of behavior. I have admitted that I know very little about the people in that fight. But from that one glimpse, there is a whole lot that I assume about them with considerable confidence. Maybe I shouldn't. Maybe I am wrong. I try to be cautious about putting labels on people. Profiling people can get you in trouble. Still, here are some assumptions I have. I assume they were not there to purchase 5 dozen bagels for that evenings' youth group meeting, that they would be leading with exemplary gentleness. I assume they were not loading up on bulk food before returning to the town where they pastor the local Seventh-Day Adventist Church. I assume that the fight did not start as a result of them passing out GLOW tracks. In fact, and I hope I am wrong, I assume that they were not practicing and growing Christians. I know that sounds bad. I am self-conscious about admitting these assumptions. I have this insecurity that you will judge me for being judgmental. Why is it that I would make such harsh assumptions when I know so little about these people? Behavior. Behavior is revealing. Our actions broadcast our values, they display our character. There are

certain behaviors we should expect from those who profess to hold certain values. Christians are messed up and imperfect. We are not above other people. But we should expect a certain quality of behavior from someone who calls themselves a Christian.

The Seventh-Day Adventist Fundamental Belief #22 affirms this calling of Christian behavior. Our church feels that it is such a foundational teaching of Scripture that we have included it in our fundamental beliefs. For the next 7 weeks, we will be finishing up a study of the Fundamental Beliefs of our church. The study has been spaced out over 4 years and it is called Fundamentals. We believe in a fundamental teaching of Scripture that God calls us to behave in ways that honor him. Here is how we have summarized this Biblical teaching.

Fundamental Belief 22: Christian Behavior

We are called to be a godly people who think, feel, and act in harmony with biblical principles in all aspects of personal and social life. For the Spirit to recreate in us the character of our Lord we involve ourselves only in those things that will produce Christlike purity, health, and joy in our lives. This means that our amusement and entertainment should meet the highest standards of Christian taste and beauty. While recognizing cultural differences, our dress is to be simple, modest, and neat, befitting those whose true beauty does not consist of outward adornment but in the imperishable ornament of a gentle and quiet spirit. It also means that because our bodies are the temples of the Holy Spirit, we are to care for them intelligently. Along with adequate exercise and rest, we are to adopt the most healthful diet possible and abstain from the unclean foods identified in the Scriptures. Since alcoholic beverages, tobacco, and the irresponsible use of drugs and narcotics are harmful to our bodies, we are to abstain from them as well. Instead, we are to engage in whatever brings our thoughts and bodies into the discipline of Christ, who desires our wholesomeness, joy, and goodness. (Gen. 7:2; Exod. 20:15; Lev. 11:1-47; Ps. 106:3; Rom. 12:1, 2; 1 Cor. 6:19, 20; 10:31; 2 Cor. 6:14-7:1; 10:5; Eph. 5:1-21; Phil. 2:4; 4:8; 1 Tim. 2:9, 10; Titus 2:11, 12; 1 Peter 3:1-4; 1 John 2:6; 3 John 2.)

Paul appeals to us about behavior because it matters enough to be urgent about.

The Principle: As we continue in the text we will start to see the principle that we can use to check and correct our behavior. It is part of the appeal in verse 1 and 2 but it is stated most explicitly in the verse just before.

Romans 11:36 For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.

The key words are “from”, “through” and “to”. Our behavior is to come from God, be done through God and be done to God. **Your behavior will always be off when it is not from God, through God, or to God.** That’s the principle. I have stated it in the negative because it lends itself well for being used as a tool to check when we are off. But we can see it in the positive as well. It is from him. He is the source and motivation for our actions. It is through him. His Spirit is the means by which we act. It is to him. His glory is the mission and goal of our actions.

We can use this principle as a tool by asking 3 auditing questions of our behavior.

1. From God(motivation)- Where is this behavior coming from?
2. Through God(means)- How am I doing this? (or through what means am I doing this?)
3. To God(mission)- Why am I doing this?

Now, let's take our principle and questions to Romans 12:1-2.

From God (motivation)

Question #1- Where is this behavior coming from?

After the phrase "I appeal to you" comes the word "therefore". There is a reason for this urging. The reason is detailed in Romans chapters 1-11. Here, Paul gives the most thorough teaching on the gospel in all of Scripture. Why are we urged to have transformed behavior? Because of the Gospel! What a wonder, what a distortion of Scripture, that we would ever make behavior a legalistic endeavor.

Ask that first question: Where is this behavior coming from? Holy behavior comes from our experience with the gospel. It comes from what God has done for us.

The pattern goes like this: *Gospel, therefore, behavior*. There is a foundation from which Paul urges us to live transformed lives. When we read that "therefore" in Romans 12:1, these are the gospel truths it is calling back to:

- **Romans 1:16-** For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes ... *therefore behave holy*.
- **Romans 3:23-24-** For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus... *therefore let God change the way you treat people*.
- **Romans 3:27-28-** Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith. For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law... *therefore live in obedience to God's commandments*.
- **Romans 4:16-** That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring... *therefore talk nice to your wife*.
- **Romans 5:6-** For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly... *therefore live with purity*.
- **Romans 6:23-** For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord... *therefore you are free to serve people and live sacrificially for others*.
- **Romans 8:1-** There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death... *therefore don't fight in the grocery store*.
- *Gospel therefore Behavior*

Where does it come from? From the gospel! **Your behavior will always be off when it is not from God, through God, or to God.**

I struggled in preparing this message. Partially because I haven't preached for 10 weeks, way back on July 15. I haven't even attended a church service. Also, when you are gone for 2 months and haven't had the opportunity to check in with your friends and learn how they are doing and what they have been up to, it doesn't look good, in the first interaction with them, to blast them about their behavior, from the pulpit. Like saying, "Hey, I haven't seen you for a while. We need to have a talk about your behavior. I know you are messing up while I was away." I struggled with that.

There are other reasons I struggle with this message, and I invite you into my struggle because I suspect you share some of these struggles.

Messages about Christian behavior are not always helpful, or grace filled. We have so often emphasized behavior in harmful ways. In the worst forms, behavior has been portrayed as the means of earning salvation. We have emphasized particulars over principles. A principle being that God calls us to wholistic health. A particular being that Elder Jones condemns you for eating cheese, and he does it while you are in line at fellowship meal. Some of you have been confronted about your behavior in legalistic, judgmental, and unloving ways. It has become a sensitive topic to address because of the many wrong ways it has been addressed. Ironically, we have been guilty of bad behavior in the way we have treated people because of their behavior. There is a lot of potential guilt in a behavior focused message.

Another struggle is that today is a communion service. It is all about receiving what God has done for us not about what he requires us to do. I prepared the topic because it was on the preaching calendar, but, for a while there, I wasn't feeling good about it.

I struggled with how to organize and present this message. Many behavior messages focus on lists. A weakness of lists is that they are incomplete. You need the entire Bible to fill out that list. Others organize this message in clear cut categories: speech, dress, and health. It can feel oversimplified, formulaic, maybe even legalistic. Our takeaway from these messages is something like this, "I will be on the good list so long as I speak so that I don't offend anyone, dress so I don't attract anyone, and avoid any food that tastes good."

The "therefore" speaks to these struggles. We are called to behavior change but not first. First, we are called to experience the gospel and that experience will transform us. The topic of behavior will not be weighed down with judgment, legalism and condemnation when it springs from what God has done for us and is no longer about what we do by our own strength.

This is why we ask the question "where does it come from?". ***Your behavior will always be off when it is not from God, through God, or to God.***

If it wasn't clear enough where transformed behavior comes from Paul inserts the words, "by the mercies of God". He is just about to urge us to some radical Christian behavior, and all of this

“by the mercies of God.” It doesn’t start with behavior. Something must happen on the inside and it happens “by the mercies of God”.

A helpful way to summarize the order of this truth is through the words belong, believe and behave. That is the order in which the gospel deals with us. God calls us to belong before we believe, while we were still sinners. Huh, do we give people the opportunity of truly belonging before fully belief? Then there is the very important “believe” piece. Faith is how we access the gifts of God. All of this comes before behavior. Behavior is a product of belonging and believing.

Are you doing some things that are not from God? When you ask, “where is it coming from?” do you get some answers that are not “God”. They are motivated and driven by something else. Behavior comes from a lot of places: anger, insecurity, a desire to please people, greed, desperation. It is so instructive to us if we can get behind the behavior and ask where it is coming from.

How is your behavior? Are you abusing people? Are you addicted? Are your control issues out of control? Is anger hurting people close to you? Are you cutting people down with your criticism? Are you failing to be fully honest? Are you cheating? Are you destroying your body with foolish choices? Are you seeking glory for yourself? Your accomplishments? Your skill? Your body? Your appearance? Are you living a lie? Do you waste your time in a mindless scroll? Are you crossing boundaries in a relationship that you know are inappropriate? Take a serious look behind that behavior and ask, “where does it come from?” We cannot change it at a fruit level but at the root level. You have to find its source. There is only one appropriate source and that is Jesus.

Where is your behavior coming from?

Through God(means)

Question #2: How am I doing this?

We find the how in verse 2, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind”. Here is a picture of how the means through which we act, the transformation and renewal of God.

This point could be confusing. Here’s how I understand the “through him” in Romans 11:36. When I speak of behaving “through God” or ask “how am I going” I am not talking about the attitude or demeanor of our behavior. I am not just thinking of positive adverbs such “patiently”, “joyfully”, or “kindly”. Those are certainly ways of acting that the Bible calls us to. I am speaking of God’s power animating our action. His Spirit enables our behavior. He is the means by which we accomplish the task. How am I doing this? Am I doing this through God’s Spirit or by my own strength?

Being transformed by the renewal of your mind sounds like it could be a mantra for a new age spiritual practice. There is a flood of podcasts and books that will guide you in transformation through mind renewal. It is inclusive enough language that we need to put Biblical parameters on it.

First, “transformation”. The gospel is not about behavior modification but heart transformation. We don’t need better hearts we need new hearts. We don’t just need correction we need death and resurrection. When it comes to behavior, we must not fall into the trap of trying harder by our own spirit. We need the power of a different Spirit. Notice, there is no neutral option, either conform to the pattern of the world or be transformed, you cannot just do you. Whatever a new age practice does, it is not Biblical transformation. Transformation cannot happen by getting in touch with our own spirit. It happens by being filled with the Holy Spirit.

Ezekiel 36:27 I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances.

Romans 2:28-29 For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God.

Now, “renewal of your mind”. The Greek word used for “renewal” in Romans 12:2 is only used twice in the Bible. The other occurrence is in Titus 3:5.

Titus 3:5-6

He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior.

Again, how are you doing what you are doing? God but through the work of the Spirit. The renewal is a work of the Holy Spirit. We don’t need to chase after renewal of our mind in some mystical technique, it is from God. The gospel calls us higher and enables us to get there.

The mind is renewed by him as we focus on him. Thinking about God renews our minds.

Colossians 1:10 Put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.

Philippians 4:8 Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

Being transformed by the renewing of our mind is the means of behavior change and it happens under direct mentorship of the holy spirit.

When we say that a behavior is done “through God” you might understand that figuratively, simply as something Jesus would approve of. I urge you to understand it literally. We literally act through the power of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit lives in us. He produces fruit in us. The energy behind our action is his energy. The holy impulse is his impulse. The power to act is his power.

Zechariah 4:6 Then he said to me, “This is the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel: Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord of hosts.

Luke 12:11-12 Do not be anxious about how you should defend yourself or what you should say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say.”

1 Peter 4:11 Whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

God does not save us and then tell us to produce the good behavior on our own strength. The spirit lives in us and produces behavior in us. They are fruits of the spirit.

There are many other means that we might do things through. We get the job done through financial power. We resolve the conflict through our communication skill. We meet the deadline through extra effort. What is your “through”? If God wants to use your money or your skill that is just fine. But that is his call. Our calling is to live through the power of God and not to rely on any independent means.

I want to urge you to understand this “through God” dynamic as a literal indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Doing it all through God is not just a Christian way of saying, “do good things”. It is our call to live under the influence of the Spirit of God.

Too often, we measure behavior by what is done as if that is all that determines if it is good or bad. We need to also assess behavior by how it is done. Did we do the right thing by the wrong spirit? We can endeavor to do good without it coming from him. We can attempt to do good works by our own strength. And since it doesn’t come from him it is still bad works. It is legalism. It is hypocrisy. And God hates it. Don’t just try to do good things. Get the right source for your action.

With behavior, the “from”, “through” and “to” are all linked together. God gets all of them. Or, whatever replaces God gets all of them. We can’t do something for God’s glory if it comes from our own pride. Where it comes from is what it is done for. When God is the source of our behavior, he gets the glory for our behavior. If it comes from anger, it will promote anger. If it is from you or done through you, it will always be for you. This is the bankruptcy of legalism. You can never have behavior that is for God if it is from you. The only ways to do it for him is to do it

through him. If you are the one supplying the behavior, if it is you trying hard, if it is your efforts, it cannot ever come around to be for God. This is the essence of legalism. If it comes from you, it will be for you. Legalism is not only fruitless in earning salvation, it is idolatry. God gets no glory on either end. If we want to preserve the goal of glorifying God we have to care about what the power our behavior is done through.

Your behavior will always be off when it is not from God, through God, or to God.

To God(mission)

Question # 3: Why am I doing this?

In verse 1, the thing that Paul urges believers to do is “to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.” First, notice that our behavior is to be done for God. Second, notice how interesting the wording is here, “present your bodies”.

Behavior is a presentation of the body. We act with our bodies. I use my hands to clean the car. I use my mouth to speak the words. I use fingers to type the email. I use my face to express the condemnation. As soon as our inner person comes out in an action it is always done through our bodies.

The behavior that we are called to is the surrendering of our bodies to be directed by God for his glory. Behavior is tangible worship. Yes, often the direct recipient of that action is another person. But when it is done for them in love it is ultimately done for God who is honored by our character of selflessness.

Our culture is big on respecting the autonomy and privacy of the body. My body, my choice. God also does not approve of abuse, force, and physical control. But God does push back against our culture by insisting that he has the right to our bodies. To offer our bodies as living sacrifices we have to be ok with the fact that our bodies are not our own.

1 Corinthians 6:19-20 Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.

The interesting wording continues in the phrase “a living sacrifice”. It does not mean to be burned alive. A dead sacrifice requires one behavior, to die. A living sacrifice requires ongoing behavior and encompasses every action. He doesn’t need a dead sacrifice. That was done by Christ, and it is enough. He wants a living one, every action an act of worship to him. Fold those clothes for Jesus. Read that report for Jesus. Discipline your diet for Jesus. Sort through that inbox for Jesus. Choose your outfit for Jesus. Get that education for Jesus. Have that hard conversation for Jesus.

It is living. And it is a sacrifice. I could draw attention to myself, but I am going to sacrifice pride for Jesus. I could manipulate my spouse but I am going to sacrifice control for Jesus. I could enjoy fruitless entertainment, but I am going to sacrifice a little indulgence for Jesus. I could spend all my time for myself, but I am going to sacrifice my schedule to Jesus.

The phrase “acceptable to God” is used twice in our text. Our behavior doesn’t need to be acceptable to us or to others but to God. It is his standard that we submit to. To obey is better than to sacrifice. The motivation is to please God. The idea of an acceptable sacrifice reminds me of Cain and Able. Cain brought a quality sacrifice but it wasn’t an acceptable sacrifice. We have ways of behaving that are culturally acceptable. We justify our own behavior. The problem is that it is not acceptable to God. When we say, “**Your behavior will always be off when it is not from God, through God, or to God.**”, the word “off” means “not acceptable to God”.

Our behavior is for God!

1 Corinthians 10:31 So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.

Romans 2:23-24 You who boast in the law dishonor God by breaking the law. For, as it is written, “The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.”

Your behavior will always be off when it is not from God, through God, or to God. Holy behavior comes to us as grace and flows from us as worship. It is produced in us by God and performed by us for God.

Maybe you are applying the principle now and it is not encouraging. As you ask the questions you are not getting the happy Christian answer that your behavior is from, through and to God. But here is what you do if you find that the motivation or means or mission of your behavior is something other than Jesus. Apply Jesus to the thing that is taking his place. If you are acting out to insecurity, bring Jesus into your insecurity. If you are acting out of pride, bring Jesus into your pride. If you are relying on your skill to perform, let Jesus reclaim your skill for him. If you are doing it through financial power, surrender your finances to Jesus. If you are doing it for attention, let Jesus meet your longing for approval. If you are doing it from revenge, let Jesus heal your desires for revenge. Let Jesus transform each space that drives your inappropriate behavior, until you can say that your behavior is from God, through God and to God.

Your behavior will always be off when it is not from God, through God, or to God.

It turns out that behavior is a fitting topic for a communion service. It is a profound opportunity to consider the “from” and “through” and “to” of your behavior. Jesus washed the disciples’ feet when the disciples were dirty. Not just the dust on the feet, but the dirt of betrayal on their minds, the dirt of doubt in their hearts, the dirt of pride in their positions. When you go to have your feet washed, you know how you have been. You know that you need some more serious washing to make you spiritually clean. Jesus knows that too and he still bends down and washes feet. When you see Jesus kneeling down in service of sinners you know where holy behavior is

from. When you take the bread and the juice you know where any good works come from. Use this opportunity to confess and surrender your unholy behavior. Leave this place to do for him. To be a living sacrifice.

Your behavior will always be off when it is not from God, through God, or to God.

Romans 11:36 For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.