Whose Child You Are

On Two Fathers, Two Minds, and the Collective Shape of a Renewed People

Rob Massie

Rob Massie Sermon Collection, Volume 3: The Upside-Down Kingdom, Chapter 12

Sermon preached June 15, 2025

My Father's Hand on the Steering Wheel

Father's Day asks a particular question. *Whose child are you?* The characteristics of a father show up in their children, not completely, not always, but often enough that the resemblance is striking when we catch it.

I remember driving once and looking down at my hand on the steering wheel. *That's my dad's hand on the steering wheel.* It was the way I was holding it: the nonchalant grip, the casual posture. My dad had been pretty nonchalant about a lot of things, looking at the fields as he drove, taking the road as it came. *That's kind of like me. Or I'm kind of like him.* It is a small example, but the small examples accumulate. Studies of twins separated at birth have shown the characteristics emerge in parallel even when the twins are raised in different homes.

I know of one man who met a sibling through a DNA testing service: a brother neither of them had known existed, born to the same biological father but raised in a different family on the opposite coast. When they finally compared notes, both of them had grown up to become lawyers who played music. Same combination of vocations. They had never met. The characteristics of the father had come out in the children across thousands of miles of biographical distance.

Jesus said it bluntly once:

"You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do" (John 8:44).

That is sobering. The implication is that we are not blank slates. We come from somewhere. We bear someone's resemblance. The question Father's Day asks is *whose*.

Adam's Children and Christ's Children

Paul, in Romans 5, lays out the framework directly:

> Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned . . . For if by the one man's offense many died, much more the grace of God and the gift by the grace of the one Man, Jesus Christ, abounded to many. (Romans 5:12, 15)

There it is. Our default daddy is *Adam*, and through him, sin entered the world. When you are in the body of Israel, when you are in Jacob, all the blessings and proclivities given to the patriarch are given to the individual component parts as well. What was true of the man Jacob was true of every member of Israel descended from him. So it is in the New Testament: all the curses and proclivities flow from Adam to those who belong to him. But there is another option. *Much more*, Paul says, the grace of God and the gift by the grace of the one Man Jesus Christ abounded to many. We can find ourselves grafted into a new Man. The characteristics of *that* adoption, joint heirs with God, become ours. We are no longer required to live in the old way.

"Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:4).

There is a death that can take place in the old man, the Adam who is in us. And there is a resurrection that can take place in the new man, the Christ who lives in us. The glory of the Father is manifested in those who have walked through that death and into the newness.

There are people whose own fathers became good fathers only because God had first become *their* Father. The bridge from the old generation to the new is built at the level of *who fathers whom*. When God's fatherhood becomes the headwaters of a family, every river downstream begins to change.

"Abba, Father"

Now look at the verse that anchors the very center of Romans. Sixteen chapters in length, with this passage at the middle:

> For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, "Abba, Father." The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs: heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together. (Romans 8:15–17)

That word *Abba* is the Aramaic word a small child uses for their father: *Daddy*. It is endearing. It is the word of a child in total trust that the father will provide what the child needs. *Abba.* The Spirit of adoption does not give us the trembling formality of a slave. It gives us the easy, intimate confidence of a child climbing into a lap and calling out *Daddy*.

And which father we cry out to, *Adam* or *Abba*, is, in a real sense, ours to determine. The power for who we allow to be our father in this world is *ours*. It comes down to whose mind we give ourselves to. Whose mind do we let renew our own?

Romans 1: The Futile Mind

I want to show you two passages in Romans that bracket this whole question of which fathered mind we are operating with. The first is in chapter 1, the second in chapter 12. They are mirror images of each other.

Romans 1 begins this way:

> For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse, because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. (Romans 1:18–21)

"*Futile in their thoughts.*" Some translations render the word *vain* or *empty in their imaginations*. They became *empty*. They saw the truth of God's goodness in creation, but they did not want to retain God in their minds. And once the mind became empty of God, the very first thing it filled with was *idolatry*:

". . . and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man, and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things" (Romans 1:23).

We can serve many things, but they are all part of a corruptible creation that ends in death. Even our stars, which appear eternal, are dying, some of the light we still see in the night sky comes from stars that have been dark for billions of years; the light is the last echo of bodies long ago burned out. *Everything* is dying. And when we reject God and gravitate to something

else that is dying, whether ourselves or anything else corruptible, we are placing our confidence in the wrong direction.

Then notice what Paul says about the consequences a few verses later:

> And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a debased mind, to do those things which are not fitting; being filled with all unrighteousness, sexual immorality, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, evil-mindedness; they are whisperers, backbiters, haters of God, violent, proud, boasters, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents, undiscerning, untrustworthy, unloving, unforgiving, unmerciful. (Romans 1:28–31)

Catch the subtlety that I had missed for years. *They*, plural, did not like to retain God in their knowledge. But the result was that God gave them over to *a debased mind*: singular. The *many* who individually reject God collapse together into a *single* debased mind. And the verse that follows is the inventory of that collective mind: a long list of plural sins (*they are whisperers, backbiters, haters of God* . . .) flowing out of one shared corruption. Notice how Paul keeps the word *filled* deliberately in contrast to the *empty futility* of their thoughts a few verses earlier. The emptied imagination does not stay empty. It fills with something else.

The Power of the Collective

Now follow the math. Nothing is more powerful than the *singular* mind of a people fixed on doing evil. We call it *synergy*. I can lift thirty pounds with one arm. I can lift thirty pounds with the other. But when I grab a barbell with both hands, somehow the sum becomes greater than the parts, seventy pounds together, not just sixty. That principle works in *both* directions. Many minds collectively turned away from God collapse into a *singular* debased mind, and the leverage of that singular mind is far greater than any one individual’s empty thought could be.

This is why a private, individual sin is, in a relative sense, *not such a big deal*. If just one of us is empty-headed in some corner of our private life, the harm is limited. But get a thousand empty-headed people together, and the math becomes a big problem. Get three hundred and ninety million empty-headed people together, who happen to know how to make nuclear weapons and have learned how to hate others, and the math becomes catastrophic. The collective dimension of the debased mind is where the destruction actually lives.

It works the same way in a church. One person in the congregation with envy and hatred in his heart is, by himself, not particularly dangerous. But get a *whole community* of people who are envious, backbiting, inventing evil, boasting in themselves, *and who think they're doing it for God,* and you have created something that history records under many names, none of them flattering to the church. There is nothing worse than people who believe they have a mandate from God but whose hearts are filled with the catalog from Romans 1.

The Spirit of a City

There is a tangible feel to this when the collective mind has been taken captive. When my wife and I moved to a small town outside of Knoxville years ago, we walked into a community where the air felt clean, people wanted to help, they invited us in, they showed up to visit when we mentioned we were starting a church. *Oh, you're starting a church? Well, we'll come by and visit you.* That was unusual, and there was a *spirit of goodness* in the place you could feel from the first day.

You can also walk into other cities and immediately feel the opposite. *I'm going to take an Uber to a hotel that's only half a mile up the road.* You feel a sense of *dis-ease* in the space. The collective mind of that city has been taken captive. The people have not retained God in

their imaginations, and something dark and broken has filled the vacancy. People hurting one another.

Romans 12: The Renewed Mind

Now look at the mirror passage. Paul builds it *on top of* everything from chapters 5 through 8 (the goodness of God, the adoption as sons, the indwelling of the Spirit):

> I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God. (Romans 12:1–2)

Watch the same plural-singular move that we saw in chapter 1, but running in reverse. Paul addresses *plural*: *brethren and sisters*. And he calls the plural to be transformed by the renewing of *the mind*: *singular*. The plural people who individually receive God collapse into the *singular mind of Christ*: exactly the same grammar that the debased turning produces, but pointed in the opposite direction. *Many becoming one* through the renewal of mind.

And just as Romans 1 catalogued the characteristics of the debased mind, Romans 12 catalogues the characteristics of the renewed one. Watch the parallel:

"For I say . . . do not think of yourself more highly than you ought to think" (Romans 12:3).

Against the boasters and proud of Romans 1. Humility.

". . . having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, let us use them" (Romans 12:6).

Against the envy of Romans 1. Rejoicing in the diverse gifts of others.

"Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil. Cling to what is good. Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another" (Romans 12:9–10).

Against the evil-mindedness, backbiting, and unloving of Romans 1. Love without hypocrisy. Outdoing one another in honor.

". . . distributing to the needs of the saints, given to hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep" (Romans 12:13–15).

Against the covetousness, unmerciful, and haters of God of Romans 1. Hospitality. Blessing instead of cursing. Weeping with those who weep.

Every characteristic of the renewed mind is the *character of God*. You want to know what God is like? *He distributes to the needs of the saints. He is given to hospitality. He blesses those who persecuted him on the cross.* From the cross: *Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they do* (Luke 23:34). He blesses and does not curse. He rejoices with those who rejoice and weeps with those who weep. When Jesus stood at Lazarus's tomb, the shortest verse in the Bible records him: *Jesus wept* (John 11:35). His heart was broken by the suffering of the people around him.

Be the people God has called us to be. Choose the mind of Christ. When you evaluate everything you see in the news through the mind of Christ, a mind that is full of love, that outdoes others in honor, that is given to hospitality, that does not revile when reviled, that does not threaten when it suffers, that constantly gives itself to forgiveness, what kind of world would this be?

Of course the objection comes immediately. *Oh, no, Rob, you don't understand. You can't give them an inch. Those kind of people, you can't give them an inch. I know how they are.* And the answer is: we have to jump up on the cross. We have to give our lives. It is easier said than done: I know. But the collective mind over our cities will not change until *somebody* refuses the easy logic of resentment.

Idols of the Heart

Ezekiel adds one more layer to all of this:

> Son of man, these men have set up their idols in their hearts, and put before them that which causes them to stumble into iniquity. Should I let Myself be inquired of at all by them? . . . Every man of the house of Israel who sets up his idols in his heart, and puts before him what causes him to stumble into iniquity, and then comes to the prophet, I the Lord will answer him who comes, according to the multitude of his idols. (Ezekiel 14:3–4)

Confirmation bias is the contemporary name for the same thing. If you look for the works of God, if you retain God in your imagination, you will see confirmation of his work everywhere around you. If you do not want to retain God in your mind, the bias goes the other way: God will answer you *according to the idols of your heart*.

Look at how this works in the case of King Ahab. When Ahab wanted to go up and fight at Ramoth-Gilead, four hundred prophets of Baal all said: *Go up and prosper, big guy. Get her done.* Jehoshaphat asked, *Don't we have a prophet of the Lord around here?* Ahab said, *Yes, but he never says anything good about me. His name is Micaiah, and I put him in prison.* They pulled Micaiah out of prison and put the question to him. Micaiah said sardonically, *Go up and*

prosper, king. Ahab apparently heard the tone. He said, *How many times have I told you, Micaiah, tell me the truth. What is God saying?* And Micaiah said:

> I saw the Lord sitting on His throne, and all the host of heaven standing on His right hand and on His left. And the Lord said, 'Who will persuade Ahab to go up, that he may fall at Ramoth Gilead?' So one spoke in this manner, and another spoke in that manner. Then a spirit came forward and stood before the Lord, and said, 'I will persuade him.' The Lord said to him, 'In what way?' So he said, 'I will go out and be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets.' (1 Kings 22:19–22)

And here is what is striking. *Even after hearing this*, Ahab went up anyway and died in the battle the next day. *What if he had repented? What if he had not gone up?* That would have been amazing. The idol he had set in his heart determined what counsel he was willing to accept. The lying spirit was, in a real sense, God's answer *according to* the idols of Ahab's heart.

How many cities have been given over to a spirit because of the imaginations of their people: a spirit of violence, of greed, of malice, of envy? The cities are not random victims. They are the conglomeration of the mindsets of the people in them.

The Mandate to the Principalities and Powers

And the answer to the corporate debased mind is the *corporate renewed mind*. *The church.* That is why Paul says in Ephesians 3:10 that the principalities and powers are watching what the church does. They are watching this strange community to see whether male and female, bond and free, Jew and Greek can actually give up their status to live in Christ Jesus with one another. The very existence of a community that has done that becomes a witness *to* the powers about what is possible in this world.

Let's be that. Let's not find our own divisive levers to pull. Let's not allow the principalities and powers and the spiritual wickedness in high places that animate these cities, the conglomeration of all the wicked individual mindsets adding up, to win the day. Let the love that has been shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit (Romans 5:5) manifest itself instead.

Because if I am more *Republican* or *Democrat* than I am *Jesus-follower*, if I am more *American* or *Russian* than I am *Jesus-follower*, if I am more, *pick your divisive thing of the day*, then I am operating out of the same festering wound of the human soul that Adam handed down. It just manifests itself in a new pride, a new arrogance, a new self-confidence that says *I know, and you don't*. There was only one who knew. There was only one who was faithful. That was Jesus Christ. Let's hold to *that* head:

". . . holding fast to the Head, from whom all the body, nourished and knit together by joints and ligaments, grows with the increase that is from God" (Colossians 2:19).

And, as Paul puts it elsewhere: *Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus* (Philippians 2:5). The body fitly framed together in its component parts, holding to the head, sharing the mind of Christ. This is how the early church shook the Roman Empire. Not because they had political power. Not because they had military force. Because they were slaves and shopkeepers and women who gathered together before the morning light, and they rejoiced with one another, and they served one another. *It shook the powers.*

Practical or Worthless

This world needs to be shaken. Iranians and Jews. Chinese and Americans. Legal immigrants and the un-legal immigrants and the descendants of immigrants who have now forgotten that they were once immigrants too and resent the next arrivals. *Pick the divisive thing of the day.* And someone will object: *Rob, we have to have laws in this land.* I one-hundred-

percent agree. People entering this nation are appropriately governed by law. But let's not allow the necessary work of law to turn us into festering bigots. Let's not allow legitimate civic concern to become a wound of ugliness in our hearts. We have to have laws *and* we have to have hearts that have not festered. Both.

I want the love of God to be what governs me. How unfair was it that I received the grace and mercy of God? How unfair was that? It was not just. Thank God for the *grace* and *mercy* of God being given to me, and to you. And now we have an opportunity to share that grace with others.

Here is the test. If we cannot take our faith and practically apply it to the political, economic, religious, and family situations of the world we actually live in, *it is worthless*. Let's just shut the doors, go home, sit on our back porches, and watch the grass grow until we die of old age. But if God has truly done something through Jesus Christ to *transform this world*, then let us speak to the things of this world and not allow ourselves to be caught up in its course as puppets having our minds conformed by every media sensation. There is somebody pulling the strings. The technical name for that is *bondage*. But when we make ourselves slaves to Christ, the technical name for that is *freedom*.

Do you want to be jerked around by every media sensation? Or do you want to be a *free thinker*: your mind renewed by the Holy Spirit, able to look out into the world and think clearly about what is going on? Let's be thinkers. Free. Powerful. Pillars in the corners of our homes, in the corners of our cities, in the corners of our nations. Trees of life that bear fruit to the nations. *That* is what God has called us to.

The Center of the Week

It is easy to slide into a different posture. Well, I'm going to do my Jesus thing on Sunday between ten-thirty and noon. Click, I'm off. And then the rest of the week, I get to be whoever I want to be with the people at work, the people at the grocery store, the people in my home. But if Christ is not the *center* of us in the rest of the week, then we are serving the old man. We are serving Adam. We have his mind. And it does not matter how many times we come and pray at the altar, speak in tongues, or call ourselves Pentecostal. The renewed heart is not the heart of one who has merely received the laws; it is the heart, *according to Romans 2:29*, that has had circumcision *of the heart*. Jeremiah said it long before Paul did:

> This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. (Jeremiah 31:33)

That is the powerful thing, to have the heart of stone removed, and the heart of flesh put in its place: a thumping, breathing, life-giving, blood-flowing heart with the word of God written on it. *Everything* is possible when that happens to us.

Coda: One Heart Turning

Cities can be healed. Paul says, in 2 Corinthians, that as soon as the heart *turns* to the Lord, the veil is lifted, and we are transformed from glory to glory by the Spirit of the Lord (2 Corinthians 3:16, 18). One heart. One turn. That is enough to start.

My heart breaks over this world. Have you ever seen so much brokenness and division? But as long as *one* person will hope, as long as *one* person will love, as long as *one* person will outdo others in showing honor, there is something that can change in our homes, in our churches,

in our cities, in our nation, and in this world. The whole creation is waiting for the sons of God to manifest themselves (Romans 8:19). So let’s do that. Let’s do the hard thing.