

Be Transformed in Self Image

Romans 12:1-8

Key Verses: 12:2, 3

“Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.”

“ For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you.”

This week we start something a little different, something that we are not quite used to in our church. We usually study a book of the Bible from beginning to end. Since August, we have been in the book of Romans and we are still going to continue on until we finish the book, but this is a unique spot in Romans. There have been connected themes throughout the entire letter, like how righteousness is not something that we can earn, but it comes purely by the grace of God through his mercy to us. We have heard that statement for a long time, but chapters 12 through 15 are connected in a little different way. If you read through those four chapters, you begin to notice that each of the sections in these chapters are examples of what is stated in the first couple of verses of chapter 12. Because these things are connected, we will always be looking back to 12:1-2 in each sermon in the next few weeks. In fact, verse 2 is going to be our key verse while we are in this section, and we will have some sub-key verses along the way. This is going to be a series within a series, or a mini-series, if you will, about being transformed.

Being transformed means that something is changed from what it was to what it is becoming. Plus, being transformed is not about small and subtle changes. A new case for your phone won’t transform it; neither will new clothes transform you. Transformation is radical and all encompassing. In a transformation, the changes are deep and affect everything. A desert is transformed when it becomes lush and green. Our building is being transformed from an abandoned, moldy place that was toxic for people into a warm and inviting place where my family lives and people enjoy being there. You are transformed when your thoughts no longer dwell on what they did before. As we have learned for a while in the book of Romans, Jesus died on the cross to give us a new life. We were stuck in our sins; we were stuck doing things that are evil and go against God, but God freed us, not by our actions or because we are something special, but by his love for us. He sent Jesus to take our punishment and to restore our relationship with him. We were spared from his wrath because he poured out his wrath on Jesus. Jesus died for us so that we could live.

But what kind of life should we live now that our punishment is gone? Should we go back to our lives of evil, like nothing is different? Should we thank God with our mouths and plot evil with our hands? Should we live in fear not knowing what is going to happen next? Do we take his mercy and throw it out the window, like it is a piece of garbage? Not at all. Look at the beginning of this passage in the Bible. “Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship.” (1) Paul writes that in light of God’s mercy we need to offer our bodies as a living sacrifice. We must never forget what God has done for us. Whereas all religions require their people to meet certain standards, to do a certain amount of good, to gain eternal life (if they could ever do that), our God came down to give us freely the eternal life that we seek. We never had to ask for it or perform any great acts, God did everything, including die for us, so that we could be saved from God’s wrath and have eternal life. We cannot forget what

God has done. We can't treat it lightly. When we do, we slip back into our old ways, the ways that put us in God's wrath in the first place, and that is just a complete disregard for what Jesus has done for us. When we return to our old ways, we tell Jesus that his sacrifice was nice, but we don't need it. We're happy the way we are. Thanks, but no thanks. Honestly, it is easy for us to fall back on our old ways. I know that Bob has mentioned a couple of times about New Year's resolutions. We have a horrible track record of keeping our resolutions. We can want to go to the gym everyday to get healthier, but as soon as there is the smallest form of resistance like being extra tired or the weather or a friend is coming over or your favorite TV show is on, it all falls apart. That is why Paul wrote, "I urge you". He strongly compelled the Roman Christians to remember God's mercy.

When we remember God's mercy to us, our response should be one of true gratitude. The Bible says that this true gratitude is offering our bodies as a living sacrifice, which means that we offer our bodies to God. We give an offering to show our thanks to God for what he has provided us. We offer money because God gave us our jobs and income, and we want to give him the first fruits out of a thankful heart. In the Old Testament, people some of the offerings were for similar reasons, but if it was an animal, they gave up that offering my killing the animal to show that they could not take back the offering. It was given to God. In God's mercy, he gave us eternal life through the blood of his son Jesus. In gratitude, as Paul states, we should offer back our bodies in service to God. We sacrifice our bodies, but not by killing them, rather, it is by turning over our will to God and saying that our life now belongs to him. It is no longer our life, it is God's life. I no longer do what I want to do, but I do what God wants for me to do.

Paul says something very similar in verse 2, "Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will." The pattern of this world is how we have been living our lives. The pattern of the world is the way that things currently work. If you look at our society and if you look at our culture, you see a very selfish society with people that think that they are perfect as they are. If everybody is out for themselves, how can any collaborative work be done? If everything is all about me, then I will only go as far as it benefits me, not one step further. Sometimes we think that our government is falling apart. It seems like there are more deadlocks in Congress than ever. They bicker over things that benefit themselves, but not what really benefits the country as a whole.

The pattern of this world is to scream as loud as you can to get your way. You whine and cry and insult other people until they agree with you. You embellish your plight so as to gain as many people on your side of an argument. The pattern of this world is to break people down to make yourself appear to be lifted up. Grammar Nazis parade around the internet to call people idiots to look more intelligent. Yet, the pattern of this world does not actually solve anything. By tearing people down, you have not changed anything about yourself. You've made a lot of enemies, but your condition remains the same. Thinking yourself to be better than someone does not actually make you better, in fact it usually makes you worse.

We can try to change ourselves. We can realize that we are bitter and selfish, and try to be better. "I won't insult anybody. I'll be nice to everybody," but it doesn't change the real problem. You might have tried this before. You might have decided to only say nice things about people, but inside you're still bitter about other people. You feel sad when other people are having success: "Why didn't that happen to me?" and you cheer when misfortune finds other people: "I'm glad that wasn't me." When your inside is still the same but the outside is spruced

up, frankly, you're still the same. Have you ever had a piece of fruit that looked wonderful on the outside and looked perfect and pristine, only to find that the inside of the fruit is rotten? It looks like it tastes great, but it's really nasty. I've had some pears that were blemish free on the outside, but when they were cut open, they were all brown and it got worse the closer you got to the core. When we try to change ourselves, we become like that pear. We can be flawless on the outside, but we're rotting on the inside.

Instead, Paul says that we should be transformed by the renewing of our mind. Like I said before, transformation is different than changing outward appearance. Just like putting on a new set of clothes does not change us, keeping up appearances doesn't change us either. Instead, we need to be changed from the inside out. Jesus also referred to this transformation as being born again. The change is so severe that it is like being born again. When we surrender ourselves to God and offer our lives back to him, he begins to change us in ways that we don't fully realize until after it has happened. Sometimes, we struggle with certain sins and by God's grace, one day, they are not there anymore. Other times, fear may grip our hearts about something, but God can change that too. God transforms us and he takes care of the root issue. I can remember that I was so afraid to speak publicly. If I had to get up in front of a class, I would stand by the board and hold on to the tray because my hands were shaking so much and I wanted something to keep me steady. When I was in grad school, I finally accepted Christ and wanted to give my life to him. I just wanted to share the Bible with people, but God worked in me and he cured me of my fear of public speaking. The first time I noticed it was when I gave my Master's defense. I had to speak for 45 minutes and I was never nervous about it. Now, I stand up here pretty regularly. I can tell you that it was not by my doing. I honestly don't even know what exactly happened. I tried to make myself better but the best that I could do was to hold on to the chalk tray. However, God transformed me in this way so that I can better serve him. He took away my fear by changing my heart.

This is just one small aspect of transformation. In fact, in the next few weeks, we will see different areas where we no longer need to live by the pattern of the world but be transformed by the renewing of our minds. In this passage, Paul focuses on one thing, "For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you." (3) Paul essentially tells the Romans that they should live humble lifestyles and to not think of ourselves as better than we actually are. Pride and puffing yourself up are common these days. It is what happens when adults don't want to make children feel bad, so we give every kid a trophy for little league. The winners don't really win and the losers aren't taught to pick themselves up after they lose. They are taught that it is more important to feel good about themselves than it is to actually improve themselves. We live in a society that doesn't want to hurt anyone's feelings, but in the end we stunt their lives.

As we get older, we think that the world revolves around us and that we can do anything that we set our mind to. To some extent, our will is powerful and enables us to do many things, but we are not the most important person in the world, that would be Jesus. You might see this later today in the Academy Awards. It's Oscar season and all the actors and actresses will be gathering in the most prestigious awards show there is. Talk about being puffed up. We have elevated actors above all other type of people in so many ways. Their salaries are huge and they don't perform any life altering duties. It's not like they are a doctor that saves lives or an engineer that builds the world or a lawmaker or a protector. They pretend to be other people, and while they are very good at it and are very entertaining, they are just puffed up beyond all

need. Some actors become so deluded in who they are that they speak out on politics, but most of them don't know what they are talking about. What I said about actors also holds true for many musicians and athletes. It's what our society produces.

Another example of this is politicians. Many of our elected officials act like they are royalty and have more interest in advancing their political careers than actually helping people. Some politicians feel entitled to a certain lifestyle and they misuse funds to support themselves. Former Representative Jesse Jackson, Jr. and his wife former Alderwoman Sandi Jackson pleaded guilty on Wednesday for misusing funds. In seven years they took \$750,000 in campaign donations and used it for personal indulgences like a \$43,000 watch, celebrity memorabilia, and even a trip to Disney World. It was about themselves because they elevated themselves above all other things. They were puffed up.

The Bible says that we shouldn't think more highly of ourselves than what we actually are. In fact, we should use sober judgment. The words "sober judgment" make is sound like we are drunk on pride, but you know what, that is exactly what it is like. When we are full of pride, we don't think straight and our worldview becomes twisted. However, having sober judgment means that we can take a step back and evaluate ourselves objectively. The fact of the matter is that there are things that we are good at and things that we are horrible at. We aren't horrible because we are horrible at a few things, and we are fantastic because we are great at a handful of things. Our worth is not dependent on what we can and cannot do.

God values each of us because we are his children, and we can see that because he gives each of his children gifts. The Bible says, "For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us." (4-6) In Christ, we are all like a body: we are all different and don't have the same function, but we are all part of the same body. This sounds a lot like our ministry's key verse for the year 1 Corinthians 12:27, "Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it." We are all part of the body and every piece is important. "The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I don't need you!' And the head cannot say to the feet, 'I don't need you!'" (1 Corinthians 12:21) We each have a key piece to the body that we need. Sometimes we might wonder what a person's gift is or even what our gift is, but we all have a gift from God. The Bible says that we have gifts and they were given to us purely by God's grace. We shouldn't feel proud of our gifts or look down on others because their gifts seem less important. Like Bob said at the beginning of the year, the colon is an important part of the body, but nobody really wants to be it. Because it is so disliked, we might think that it is not important and ridicule it, but it is essential for us to live to have a healthy colon. We all have gifts from God and we need to have sober judgment in regard to them.

None of us is good at everything, if we were then we wouldn't need any body else, even God. There are some people who are good at one thing or a few things, and other people are good at many things, but the gifts that were given to them were given purely by grace in order to serve God. At my work, I have a certain position with certain responsibilities and my boss has another position with other responsibilities. His position is higher than mine, but honestly I don't envy him in his position because he spends half his time in meetings and I hate being in meetings. He can take being in that many meetings, but I don't think that I could. Likewise, we each have different gifts to serve God and we shouldn't envy someone because they are serving in a certain way. I'm standing up here preaching today, but I've spent two weeks

listening to material and all day yesterday writing. I've been locked in my house working on this message. Last night, I went to bed at 12:30 and woke up at 5 so that I could finish this message. This happens every time that I give a message. The gifts that God has given me allow me to do that, but I lack in different areas. I'm not socially competent. In small groups, I can talk with people, but in large groups, I lock up. I don't know what to do. I see other people and they are able to navigate the room and hold conversations wonderfully. I can't do what they do.

Because I get anxious in large social gatherings, I could stand and be envious of others who are able to what I can't, but what gain is there in that? It won't help me and it surely won't help God. I can try with all my effort to do the things that I am not gifted to do and I may get it a little bit, but a jack of all trades is a master of none. When we try to be good at everything, we won't be great at anything. Instead, Paul notes that we should focus on our gifts, "If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully." (6-8) Take a look at that list: "If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully." Whatever your gift is, use it and use it well. We should use our gifts to the best of our abilities. We don't need to focus on what we don't do. We're a part of a body that has many parts and someone else performs the parts that we are unable to take care of.

The pattern of this world is that you are the most important person on the planet and you have to be able to do everything on your own. If everyone is out for themselves, you have to do everything because you can't trust anybody. They don't have your best interest in mind. We've been taught that for so long that we need to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. We are unable to have sober judgment about ourselves by ourselves. We have been clouded by our pride and cannot be fully objective. We're biased towards ourselves, but by the grace of God our minds can get a service pack to update them. By offering our bodies to God as a living sacrifice and turning our will over to him, he proceeds to perform our software update.

"Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will." (2) When he surrenders to God and gives our will to God, he begins to change us the way he gives us his will. We become able to test and approve what God's will is and we can't do that without being transformed. We see that in passage. God's will is that his people be united as one body in Christ and we are not able to do that when living in the pattern of this world. We tend to be selfish and selfishness breaks apart, but when we are transformed to be humble and selfless, it brings unity. Think about it: what would the world look like if people had sober judgment and did not think too highly of themselves? If pride and selfishness were banished, there would not be corruption or blowhards or people who cut you off on Lake Shore Drive. The world would be so much better. Doesn't that sound like God's will?

We can't do this by our own power. If you look historically, when we try to tackle the problem of change from the outside, it leads to dictatorships, fascism, Marxism, and communism, all of which were doomed to fail. We can't conform people into change. It has to come about through an internal transformation. The heart and mind have to be changed before any external change can happen and the only one who can change our hearts and minds is God himself. We can kill action, but we can't kill an idea. We cannot help people from thinking

what they think, but God can renew our minds and transform us into something greater than we could ever imagine. Surrender yourselves to God and be transformed.