

Be Transformed: In Love

Romans 12:1-2, 9-21

Key Verse: 12:1, 2, 9

“Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. ² Do not conform any longer 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.”

“Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good.”

Since we are in a series about being transformed, I could not resist the urge to talk about the transformers. In the movie, transformers are not what they appear to be. At first they may look like a car, truck or something else but then they transform into robots. Through their transformation they become something completely different. It’s pretty cool to watch them transform from one state to another and back again. Sometimes we are just like those transformers but the problem with us is like them, we keep switching forms back and forth. Spiritually speaking this is not good. In chapter 12 of Romans Paul speaks of being transformed, but it is not to hide one’s identity as in the movie but to grow more in the image of Jesus, to be transformed from the image of sinful man into the image of Jesus. In this section of chapter 12 Paul talks about our relationships being transformed from that of the world to that which is of God.

Let’s read verses 1 & 2. “Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. ² Do not conform any longer 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.” Here we see Paul urging the Roman Christians to remember what God had done for them. In God’s great mercy, while they were still sinners Christ died for their sins. So in thanksgiving he urged them to offer themselves as living sacrifices so that they would not be like the rest of the people in the world but rather lived in a way that pleased God. In doing so, this would be their act of worship. From the moment they had given their life to God, they should no longer act as if nothing had happened. There should be some evidence of how Jesus changed their lives.

To do this their minds must be renewed because the mind of sinful man is death. (Ro 8:6) So their minds must change because our minds are like the rudder of a ship, they guide and direct us through life. So what we focus our thoughts on really matters because our thoughts become our actions, our actions become our habits and our habits build our character. Before accepting Jesus, we live according to our natural desires, unfortunately those desires are sinful. This is the pattern of how most of the world live but those who live according to this pattern are dead in sin. (Eph 2:1-3) This way of living does not lead to life. So we have to renew our minds, change the rudder so that we go in a new direction. And Paul is trying to help the Roman Christians to do this in very practical ways. Last week Paul showed how we should be transformed in our self image, to be humble and not proud and this week it’s about love.

In this passage Paul talks about loving other Christians in the first part and loving non-Christians in the second part. I don't think he is primarily talking about the people closest to us, those we love and who love us back. I believe that he is talking about those we may have conflict with, those we have difficulty being around. This is where Paul prays that we may have transformation. Take a look at verse 9. "Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good." Love was such an important issue that it is mentioned 261 times in the new testament. Jesus talked about love over and over with his disciples. He said things like, "Love your neighbor as yourself," (Mt 19:19) "Love your enemies," (Mk 6:27) "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love." (Jn 15:9) or "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another." (Jn 13:34) Why was sincere love so important? Because Jesus knew that in the future, with the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold (Mt 24:12) and it was imperative that God's people love one another. Not only will they need it to survive but also it would be by their love for one another that people would know that they were disciples of Jesus. (Jn 13:35) As we look around the world today it is not easy to find love. The world has become such a cold hard place with little trust among people and most have become hard hearted or apathetic. People long for love. The most common topic of songs is love. People want to love and be loved.

We need to love and be loved but it HAS to be sincere. Paul says that love must be sincere. One of the worst things that could happen is if love was not sincere, that it is fake. It would be better if love was non-existent than to be fake. Insincere love is terrible because on the outside it gives the appearance of love with plastic smiles and flattering words, but when they're not around it's cruel and back stabbing. Judas was like this. He was one of the 12 disciples, living with them and sharing meals together pretending to love Jesus and then he betrayed Jesus for 30 pieces of silver, he even betrayed Jesus with a kiss. As Christians we are commanded to love one another. Maybe some of us have tried but it is not easy. Have you ever heard someone say, "I love him in the Lord?" When I first heard it, it sounded pretty good. But what this really means is, "I can't stand him." And what happens is that they tolerate that person. They don't really love them, they tolerate them. However we are not called to tolerate people, but rather to love them.

So often we see insincere love like in the story of the prodigal son. When the son took his share of his father's inheritance and left for a distant country, he used that money to live wildly. During that period of his life, he had a lot of friends that claimed to love him. Sure they loved him as long as he had money but when his money ran out and he began to be in need, all his so called loved ones abandoned him. This is what insincere conditional love looks like. And I believe that anything but sincere love is evil because it deceives others. So Paul emphasized the rest of verse 9 says, "...Hate what is evil; cling to what is good." Here we see two diverging patterns, evil and good. The pattern of the world is trending toward what is evil while God wants us to cling to that which is good. Verse 10 shows us what is good to cling to, it says, "Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves." Christian love is expressed in devotion. Devotion is commitment. It does not change according to the situation or depending upon what you receive. Devotion is constant and steady reaching out to show affection to one who can offer nothing in return. Think about a little baby. In the first years of their lives all they can do is take our love, they can't offer anything in return and yet we love them so much. We are devoted to them and they can't survive without us. Paul encourages us to be devoted to our Christian brothers and sisters for they are our spiritual family.

Our attitude should be to honor them above ourselves. Verse 16 says that we should not be proud or conceited, but willing to associate with people of low position. Pride destroys relationships. Paul implies that it is evil to honor ourselves above others. And actually pride was one of Satan's biggest sins. So much so that he wanted to take God's place. When we are devoted to one another in love, there is no room for pride. Not only that we are to practice hospitality by sharing with the Lord's people who are in need. (v13) To practice hospitality we have to be able to serve. When we go to the restaurant we like their hospitality because they serve us our meal. But this does not come naturally to most people. We would rather be served than to serve. So we need a lot of practice. That's why Paul says to practice it until we get it right. It's not easy to practice hospitality because we have to open our homes and invite others into our lives. Some people are very private and it is very hard for them to open up.

One secret in doing this is found in verses 11 & 12. They say, "Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord."¹² Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer." When we have a lot of spirit in serving the Lord we can embrace and love others. When we have zeal for Jesus others are encouraged and strengthened and join with us. We must have joyful hope. If we are the one who is full of gloom and doom, we will bring all those around us down. There are some people who's spirit is always uplifting and encouraging and we like to be around such people because their hope is contagious. These same people are patient when going through tough trials. Sometime we wonder how do they do it but their secret is found at the end of verse 12 for they are faithful in prayer. The power source for a spirit filled Christian is faithfulness to prayer because everything comes from our heavenly Father.

So far all of this was concentrated upon our fellow believers. But what about non-believers? This is the hard part for me. Should we despise them for not believing like us? Verse 20 says, "On the contrary" this means the opposite of what we want to do. Again the theme of not conforming to the pattern of the world. Take a look at verse 14. "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse." This is so abnormal to our way of thinking that Paul has to say it twice. When someone persecutes us, we are more likely to curse them under our breath than to bless them. This would be the pattern of the world. Verse 17a says, "Do not repay anyone evil for evil..." and verse 19 says, "Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord." How many movies are made with the theme of getting revenge? Almost all the villains, and even sometimes the heroes of the stories seek revenge. And we cheer when the good guy gets revenge. In the movie Braveheart when William Wallace gets revenge on the English Lord that murdered his wife, we feel like justice has been served. This is the pattern of the world. But God does not want us to conform to the pattern of the world. Jesus said to love our enemies." (Mk 6:27) We are to do the opposite of the world. Look at verses 20 & 21 "On the contrary: 'If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.'"²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." In the late 1800's there was a famous feud between two families - the Hatfields and the McCoys. They took revenge so far to the extreme that they became famous for it. But as Christians we are called to love God and love one another. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, we should try to live at peace with everyone. (v18) This requires us to go against the pattern of the world, against our desires. This requires sacrifice on our part, we have to deny ourselves.

Transformation of our inner beings requires us to face our sins. Unless we confront our sins, how can we ever truly be transformed? When Jesus met the woman at the well he loved her. He wanted to sincerely help her but how? What could Jesus possibly do sitting there by the well? Jesus asked her the impossible. He asked her to go call her husband. It was impossible because she was not married. However that didn't stop Jesus. In doing this Jesus confronted her sin problem. She had to deal with her sin problem. However when she was confronted with her sin, she repented and her heart began to be transformed. In the end this Samaritan woman was completely changed. She went from being a lonely outcast of society into a vibrant loving person. She was transformed into one that restored the relationships with those who persecuted her. It was through her that the whole town came to know Jesus. It was an amazing transformation. Unless we are confronted with our sins, we will NEVER truly be transformed. We might conform, but we will never be transformed. You have to get the junk out there before you can be healed.

Another example is the story of the good Samaritan. Jesus told the story of a Pharisee that as he walked along the road he came upon a fellow Jew that had been beaten up and robbed. He needed help. Jesus challenged him to love your neighbor as yourself but who could really do that. That is an impossible request. So the man made an excuse and asked who is my neighbor. When Jesus talked another rich young ruler, the ruler asked "what do I need to do to receive eternal life?" Jesus said, "keep the commands," "I have done this since I was a boy" he said. Then Jesus told him to go and sell everything he had. This was impossible. How could he do this? Jesus confronted him with the impossible, why? Because it is only AT THAT MOMENT when we realize we can't do it by ourselves and we need help. We need Jesus to do it. My love is too shallow. Your love is too shallow. Love must be sincere. It must overcome evil with good but there is no way that we can do this by ourselves. We need Jesus. We need to confront our sin to be really transformed. When someone confronts your sin, the pattern of the world is to get angry and attack, but the pattern that God wants is for us to be humble, repent and be changed.

Let me ask, who have you really loved lately? How many good friends, real friends do you have that you can share your deepest struggles with? Is there anyone in your life that you struggle to accept? How have you tried to love them? If you think of yourself as a Christian, your heart must be transformed in order to love others the way Jesus has loved you. May God bless you to love sincerely.