

BECAUSE OF GOD'S MERCY...BE TRANSFORMED
ROMANS 12:2

If you know me, you already know this is true for me; if you don't know me, this is just a little self-disclosure: **I don't like change.** I like regular. I thrive under routine. Sameness is my friend.



And that means that Raye Jeanne and I have had conversations where I have said things like, “Why do you want to get rid of that wallpaper — we just put it up 18-20 years ago.” You can pretty much set your clock according to where I am on a given day or at a given time. If it's Monday morning at 6:15, I just left on my run (I've been running the same route for years, and I park in the same spot every time). If it's Saturday at 2:00, I'm talking to my dad on the phone. If it's Wednesday, I'm either counseling or getting ready for counseling. If it's Sunday night, Raye Jeanne and I are likely eating stove-popped popcorn and watching a movie.

I like routine. I come from a long-line of people who don't handle change well. Maybe you're like me. (Or maybe you're like my wife and you don't understand me at all.) But if you are like me, I have some hard news for the two of us — we need to change. We have to change. We have been called to change. Change is necessary for the one who is in Christ Jesus.

As Paul transitions in the book of Romans to teaching theology to drawing out the implications of theology, the first thing he does in Romans 12 is to state that obedience and sacrifice is the only appropriate response to God's merciful work in our lives (Rom. 12:1). And building on that idea, he also commands us to be transformed and changed spiritually (Rom. 12:2). He will say it this way:

BECAUSE GOD IS MERCIFUL, LET GOD TRANSFORM THE PRACTICES OF YOUR LIFE.

In this well-known verse, the apostle Paul exhorts believers to change by revealing **three characteristics** of biblical transformation:

1. The **OBSTACLE** to Transformation
2. The **NATURE** of Transformation
3. The **BENEFITS** of Transformation
 - You will **KNOW** God's Will
 - You Will Know **GOODNESS** in God's Will
 - You Will Know **DELIGHT** in God's Will
 - You Will Know **MATURITY** in God's Will

1. The **OBSTACLE** to Transformation

- The calling of this verse is transformation. But before Paul addresses that topic, he warns of a danger that every believer must avoid: **do not be conformed to this world**. The world is our obstacle.
 - ✓ When he says **and**, he is directly connecting this verse to v. 1 — this verse is an explanation (in part) for what **presenting our bodies** (lives) to God means. This is how we do that — and Paul gives us both something to avoid and something to do.
 - ✓ The command **do not be conformed** has the idea of being molded, following a pattern, or even masquerading as something one is not. Paul is applying the theology of chs. 5-8 — we have been moved from Adam to Christ, darkness to light, sin to salvation, and while our flesh will still tempt us to go back and visit “the old homestead,” we should be vigilant to fight that thinking.
 - The word is also a present tense; generally when a present tense is used with a negative, it means something like “stop it,” as if the person was already doing it. But given what Paul thinks about the Roman believers (e.g., 1:8), it probably isn’t a rebuke as much as a warning: “Beware, and don’t ever allow yourself to be taken to this lifestyle.”
 - We should also note that because Paul uses the negative he is asserting that this is a real temptation. There really is the presence of sin in this world. We dare not ignore the reality.
 - The word **be conformed** is a passive which means — “don’t allow this to happen to you — don’t allow yourself to be molded.” In other words, there is a force outside us that is enticing us to ignore God’s provision for us in Christ and enticing us to live the way we did before Christ.
 - What is that force? It is **this world**. We might expect Paul to use the word *kosmos*. But he doesn’t. He uses the phrase, “this age.” It parallels “world” but with a different emphasis (1 Cor. 3:18-19). He is contrasting this world with the world that is coming — this age vs. eternity.
 - What are the pressures of this age that seek to conform us to anti-Christ ways?
 - ... The pressure comes from the world, the flesh, and the devil (Eph. 6:12; 1 Jn. 2:16).
 - ... The flesh is an *inward pressure* (Rom. 7:19; Gal. 5:13, 16ff).
 - ... The world and the devil are *external pressures*. The world system is constantly putting pressure on us to embrace its way of thinking and living (2 Cor. 10:4-5). And Satan (and his evil demons) is always seeking ways to entice and devour us (1 Peter 5:8-9).
 - ... The world system is entirely under the domination of the Evil One (1 Jn. 5:19).
 - ... While this world system is powerful, it is also going to end disastrously (1 Cor. 7:31; 10:11). God is judging and will judge and all those ensnared by it will not escape His wrath.
 - ... It has been paraphrased this way: “Don’t let the world...squeeze you into its mold.” (Phillips)
 - ✓ We cannot over-estimate the power of this influence or the danger of the world system.

- What does conformity to the world look like? One writer [Boa & Kruidenier] says this:

“Age” carries with it a sense of the beliefs, the philosophies, the methodologies, and the strategies of the fallen world in which we live. It is not just the world and its people in their fallen state. It is the worldviews and practices that derive from the fallen state that define the age in which humans live at any time in history.

- ✓ In a word, it’s living and thinking like the world. It’s having the world’s beliefs as our ideology. It’s not just doing ungodly things, but it is thinking and being directed in ungodly ways.
- ✓ That is the believer’s great danger. A number of years ago one well-known pastor wrote this:

“Most of us recognize the danger of exposing ourselves to sinful content, so we tend to set arbitrary limits based on how much we think we can ‘handle.’ When a movie or a tv show presents us with mild or infrequent profanity, and occasional adulterous affair, or a limited amount of gratuitous violence, we sort of weight the danger level. We act as if we each have a ‘sin threshold’ beyond which we dare not go. We might as well ask how much of a poison pill we can swallow before it kills us.”

- ✓ A few weeks ago, that same (now former) pastor wrote this:

“A lady left a comment on one of my recent posts in which she stated that I’d swung from legalism to licentiousness in my life....And I thought about this and I can’t disagree with her. She’s not wrong! Sometimes I look at my life (or crazy things I post on Instagram) and I hardly recognize myself....I am swinging and reacting and I am not in any type of respectable balance.”

- ✓ He has openly embraced a licentious (rebellious and disobedient) lifestyle and has (among other things), also publicly rejected the gospel he preached for 10 years. He ignored the danger of the world and allowed himself to be conformed to the world. He swallowed the poison pill. His philosophy is secular, worldly philosophy and his life and mind show it (as does his ex-wife). He is an enemy of the cross. His life is ruined and his soul is in grave danger.

- In his commentary on Romans, MacArthur says “the world is an instrument of Satan, and his ungodly influence is *pandemic*.” [my emphasis] That’s an interesting word choice that he made more than 25 years ago. The world system is far more deadly than COVID.
 - ✓ The story is told about President Coolidge going to church one Sunday. Mrs. Coolidge asked him what the sermon was about. “Sin.” “What did he say?” “He was against it.”
 - ✓ There is a reason why preachers, Scripture, and God are against sin/worldliness. It will destroy us (1 Pt. 2:11). And it will keep us from the joy of obedience (Jn. 15:10-11). Do you believe that?
 - ✓ We need to get in the habit of reading and observing and watching the influences around us and say, “that is opposed to my soul and it will only bring grief if I engage in it.” Calvin was right: “The earth must either be worthless in our estimation, or keep us enslaved by an intemperate love of it.”

2. The NATURE of Transformation

- There is a better way to live than conformity to the world and the good news for the believer is that we *can* live in this new and redeemed way.
- In strong terms he says there is a better way: **but**. Rather than conformity to the world, the command of Scripture is ***be transformed by the renewing of your mind***.

• Recognize the command to be transformed

- ✓ The word ***be transformed*** (metamorphosis) is somewhat unusual, appearing only a few times in the NT. Interestingly, the word is used of Jesus' transfiguration in **Mt. 17:2** (Mk. 9:2). That gives us a hint of what Paul might mean. When Jesus was "transformed," it doesn't mean that His inner man was changed, but it was a revelation of His inner glory that already existed. That idea of our transformation fits well with Rom. 5-6 — our inner man has already been changed entirely; our lives and actions now are merely reflecting the reality of the change that has already occurred.
- ✓ When we are transformed, we are letting the butterfly of our spiritual reality out of the cocoon.
- ✓ This word is also a command — we are responsible to be engaged in the process of sanctification. The command is also a present tense, which means that this revelation of ongoing change is continual. It is an ongoing process, as long as the believer is alive (*progressive* sanctification).
- ✓ It is also a "passive" command which means that we are not ultimately responsible — it is something that is done to us (by the Spirit of God, **Rom. 8:11, 13**).
- ✓ So the sense of the command is something like, "submit yourself to the Spirit's work and do not resist what He will naturally do in you — let yourself be changed." (E.g., **1 Thess. 5:19**).
- ✓ The sense is that we *will* be influenced in our lives by something — either the world or the Spirit. So "don't let the world influence you...do let the Spirit influence your godly transformation."
- ✓ If the Spirit of God resides in me, He is going to produce His fruit in me. Am I actively engaged in that process and submitting to it?
- ✓ I have not been saved to remain in my sin. I have been saved to be redeemed from my sin. I will experience that ultimately in Heaven; God is progressively freeing me *now* from my sin.
- ✓ Also recognize that this is not merely changing a few habits. This is *real* change that happens because our hearts have been changed.
 - Let's say that you have a problem with the kinds of things you say — your speech is prone to being critical, harsh, angry, and even filled with profanity.
 - Does that need to change? YES. (E.g., Eph. 4:25-32). But not as a change of habit only.
 - As the inner man is changed, then the outward man gives evidence of that change (**Lk. 6:45**). In his extended explanation of the tongue, James concludes it is the fruit of righteousness (**Js. 3:17f**).
 - So we have a responsibility to be changed. But *how* are we changed?

- **Recognize the provision for being transformed**

- ✓ God's provision for us is through *the renewal of the mind*. This is *how* we change.
- ✓ The key to change is our *minds*. When Paul uses that word, he doesn't mean just our "intellect." He means everything that is inside us — our *inner man* — what we think, what we believe, what we desire and want, what we "feel," and what convicts us (our conscience).
- ✓ It is the total summation of everything we are internally. And all those internal mechanisms feed and direct what we do (Lk. 6:45).
- ✓ Paul has already indicated the importance of the inner man and our mind — if we are rebellious against God, He will judge us by giving us "worthless" minds that only engage in increasing sin (1:28). That is a warning that we dare not rationalize, "the sin is just in my mind; it's not hurting anyone else or anything else." The thoughts we are thinking when we are alone *are* shaping our lives and will overflow into life that will be sinful and destructive against others (1:29-32).
- ✓ One thing we can be sure of is that the mind is critical to our sanctification. We can't keep thinking the same way we have always thought and expect to change.

- So God has given us a new mind. What are the realities of this mind?

- ✓ We have the mind of Christ (Rom. 12:16; 15:5; 1 Cor. 2:16)
- ✓ Our pattern is to be heavenly (godly) minded (Col. 3:1ff)
- ✓ Our goal as a church is to have a unified mind (purpose) in our actions (Rom. 12:16; 1 Cor. 1:10). Unity in the church is the overflow of right thinking.
- ✓ Worldly minds and thinking are futility (Eph. 4:17-19) and lead to destruction (Phil. 3:19)
- ✓ We are to actively engage in new thinking (Eph. 4:23)
- ✓ Mind renewal includes thinking the way the Spirit thinks — desiring what He desires (Rom. 8:5)
- ✓ Godly thinking will keep us from pride (Rom. 12:3) — prideful thinking is immature thinking
- ✓ Right thinking will change everything we do — how we think about ourselves (v. 3), how we think about ministry in the church (vv. 4-8), how we think about our relationships (vv. 9-13), and how we think about our suffering and hard relationships (vv. 14-21). Right thinking changes everything.

"What's the most effective way to contaminate a water supply? Poison it at its source. If you don't guard your heart from the world's values, you will be conformed to the world (Rom. 12:1-2). It takes no more effort to be conformed to the world than it does to float downstream. To be transformed by the renewing of our minds is to swim upstream against the current. Renewing our minds requires conscious, deliberate effort." [Alcorn]

- How are our minds transformed?

- ✓ What Paul makes clear in this passage is that our minds must be renewed. But he doesn't explicitly say *how* we renew our minds.
- ✓ Our minds will only be made to work and think rightly when we take in God's Word —

- We have to be filled by the Spirit, and the Spirit fills us by His Word (Eph. 5:18; Col. 3:16)
- The Scriptures are adequate to teach and mature every person (Col. 1:28)
- When we look at the Lord of Glory in His Word, we will be changed (2 Cor. 3:18)
- Growth comes from grace and knowledge of God in His Word (2 Pt. 3:18)
- Sanctification comes by and through the Scriptures (Jn. 17:17)
- And then there are all the benefits that come through the Scriptures in Ps. 119
- ✓ In that culture, most people wouldn't have had their own Bible scrolls. So how did they take in Scripture? By listening to sermons. And having it read to them in worship. And singing it in worship (Psalms). And having conversations about it.
- ✓ Similarly, we need to avail ourselves of every avenue we can to think about the Bible: read it, study it, think about it, memorize it, have conversations about it, pray it, listen to sermons, read books about it. We cannot think about Scripture too much. But we can think about it too little.
- ✓ Several years ago a prominent pastor of a very good and healthy church took a survey of how much the people in his church read their Bibles. He said he'd never do it again because the results were so discouraging. And that was in a healthy church. I'm afraid that in the 1-2 decades since then we have not seen an increase in that. And in COVID it seems to me (unscientifically) that most of us are listening to FOX and CNN much more than we are the Bible. And we are being entertained (and having our minds shaped) much more by Netflix, Redbox, Facebook, and Twitter than the Bible.
- ✓ If that's what we are doing, we can only be sure that we will be conformed to the world and left untransformed by the Spirit of God in our minds. We will be an impoverished people as long as we willingly take in the world more than we take in God's Word.
- ✓ Because the goal of the Scriptures are to change us, we need to constantly be asking as we read:
 - What would God desire to change in me because of what I've heard?
 - What can I do because of what I have seen/heard in God's Word?
 - We want to move from hearing to doing, since that is what God's Word is designed to do.

3. The **BENEFITS** of Transformation

- You will **KNOW** God's Will

- ✓ In summary, Paul says there is one great benefit of being transformed — we will demonstrate that we know what God's will is — and there are three further implications of knowing that will.
- ✓ When he says that we will **prove** what the will of God is, he means that we will demonstrate that we know what God's will is by the way we live our lives. We will be living God's will.
- ✓ What does he mean by God's will? He is not talking about the secret plans and purposes of God's plans for people that are only revealed in time. He is talking about the moral will of God — His standards, desires, and purposes for us. It is God's decreed, stated will/purposes/regulations.

- ✓ How does this work in daily life? We fill our mind with God’s Word and we allow it to shape us and then we go through the day and have to make daily decisions and those decisions are informed by our growing and increasing knowledge of God’s Word and will:
 - Someone from church comes to mind and instead of thinking “that’s odd,” you pray and call...
 - You are delayed in traffic and instead of anger you are aware of God’s sovereignty and rest
 - You are given free tickets to a ball game and you think first about impact on family
 - You have a conversation with struggling co-worker and you think about how to talk gospel
 - Your child sins and needs discipline and you use it as an opportunity to also teach about grace
 - Your yard is dying from lack of rain, everything is brown, and you don’t complain about weather
 - You talk to a friend after church and your first thought is, “how can I bless him?”
- ✓ All these things and thousands more are demonstrations (proof) that your inward transformation by the Word of God has led you to a knowledge of God’s will and what to do in any situation. We are putting into practice what we have learned from God and how He has changed us. Is there value?

• You Will Know **GOODNESS** in God’s Will

- ✓ Paul gives us three further words about God’s will. These words explain what the will of God is, but they should not be taken only as “attributes” of God’s will — they do more than explain God’s will, but “describe the nature of the things the believer encounters as he follows God’s will.” [Hiebert]
- ✓ So when Paul says God’s will is **good** He doesn’t just mean “God’s good will” (it *is* good) but he also means “God’s will is good for the believer...”
- ✓ Does God make commands? Yes. But they are good. They are consistent with His nature and are always an expression of His goodness. And that will produces goodness through us and they are the means by which God makes us good (which he does, **15:14**).
- ✓ When He makes a decree, it’s good, and good for us.

• You Will Know **DELIGHT** in God’s Will

- ✓ God’s will is **acceptable**. Some translations say “pleasing” or “well-pleasing.” Those are helpful.
- ✓ The sense is that doing the will of God makes us pleasing to God (which he also says in **v. 1**).
- ✓ But it also means that doing the will of God will give pleasure to us. Obedience to God’s will “leads to discernment and discernment to delight in God’s will.” We happily obey.
- ✓ Before we sin, the stream into which the sin will take us seems ankle deep; as soon as we step into it, we feel like we are in a riptide in the deepest part of the ocean. As soon as we sin we instantly (if our consciences are working) recognize the magnitude of our sin. And if we consciously avoid the sin, as we look back at the stream we will have no regret as we see the depth of the ocean of sin.
- ✓ Sometimes we need to remind ourselves of this reality — there is no lasting joy in that angry conflict, prideful word, covetous spending, lustful looking, or lazy inactivity. Delight is in obeying God’s will.

• **You Will Know MATURITY in God's Will**

- ✓ The word *perfect* is a word that refers to completeness and maturity (e.g., Eph. 4:13; Phil. 3:15; Col. 1:28). When we know and follow God's will, that is the end and goal for which God created us. And that obedience is also the means by which God matures us.
- ✓ Obedience to the will of God is God's finishing school for the believer.
- ✓ That will of God is also the means by which we will bring us to final completion (**1 Thess. 5:23**)

CONCLUSION: This call to transformation may feel daunting and impossible. It's not. With God, all things are possible (Jn. 15:5; Mk. 9:23;10:27). We have seen that, haven't we? We've seen Abraham believe. We've seen David and Solomon repent. We've seen Isaiah and Jeremiah endure. We've seen Peter become a rock. We've seen the thunderous John become the apostle of love. We've seen a murderous opponent of Christ become His most influential apostle and missionary.

And we've seen it closer to home. We've seen angry people become loving people. We've seen despairing people become hopeful people. We've seen adultery redeemed and marriages saved. We've seen ungracious speakers become gentle and kind. We've seen covetous people become generous givers. We've seen defensive people become humble listeners. I have hundreds of stories. But I can't use them because most of them are in front of me and I won't betray confidences. But I *can* say this: God changes people. Be confident and hopeful in His power.

So, what do you think?

When I say that, I'm not asking for your opinion. I'm asking, "what do you *think*? Where is your mind? What are your heart desires and motives? What controls your thought life?"

Only as our thoughts are controlled will our lives be changed. And God has re-created us spiritually as new creatures so that we would be changed into the likeness of Christ. That's the goal: change. And the goal comes by thinking in new ways, according to God's revealed will.

So as you leave this morning, and head into the world, what do you think: about the world, about transformation, and about God and His Word?

BENEDICTION: **Romans 11:33-36**