

Transforming My Experience

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Romans 12:1-8

Sermons Series:
In Christ Together
for the World

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We are in the middle of a sermon series on *The Me I Want to Be*. And we are seeking to better understand what it means to live in Christ Together for the World. Today, we are looking at “Transforming My Experience.” Our scripture text is taken from Romans 12. Listen for God’s Word to you: “I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, 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 renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

“For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the

grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.”

After explaining the gospel in great detail in the first 11 chapters of Romans, Paul moves to application, stating that the only appropriate response to all God’s mercy and all He has done for us is to hand over our bodies as living sacrifices to God in a manner resembling the way people in Israel presented their offerings. Unlike the Old Testament animal sacrifices that were dead, ignorant and unwilling, we are called to be living sacrifices, who present ourselves to God intelligently and willingly.

Transforming my experience means offering my whole life to God. I really like the way Eugene Peterson translates this verse in *The Message*: “So here’s what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does

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for you is the best thing you can do for him.” This is the spiritual worship that pleases God.

Worship: When we hear the word “worship,” many think of what we do during this hour on Sunday morning. Or they may think of singing hymns or praise songs. But worship is not defined by particular activities in a particular space or time. Worship is a response to the sovereign God who has created and redeemed us. Real worship is the offering of everyday life to him—the whole world is the temple of the living God.

Gathering together as a community of faith is an appropriate and important part of worship, but the love we express to our families and neighbors is worship, the way we spend our time and money is meant to be worship, and the work we do with integrity and intensity is worship.

Work: Because we spend so many hours of our lives at work—whether we work in the home or outside the home—we must embrace the truth that work is a primary place where we offer ourselves to God. John Ortberg makes the important point that some people treat their work like a job—a means of making money. Others see work as a career—a place for advancement or prestige. But our work is meant to be our calling. God wants each of us to be his servant in the world. Whatever the position we have,

we can bring honor to God as we do our work with excellence and bless others.

Wilderness: We can even transform our experience when we offer ourselves to God in the midst of our wilderness experiences. The year and half after I graduated from seminary was the darkest time in my life for many reasons. One reason had to do with work. When it became apparent that the call process to become a pastor was going to take longer than we had hoped, I took a job as a temp to help bring in some income. I worked at a large corporate bank doing data entry. I did not think I would be there very long, but I ended up working there for fourteen months.

At first, I was in survival mode, just waiting for my circumstances to change, but after a while, I realized, “This is my life.” It was not what I had hoped for or planned or prepared for, but it was the place where I spent much of my time. Transforming my experience meant offering God the only life I had, and this was it. So I started to look at my life, relationships and circumstances in a different light.

I continued to work hard, but I also began to make more effort in building relationships with some of the other women in my department. Since we couldn’t talk that much during work, I decided to begin eating lunch with others rather than spending the time reading.

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After eating, they would do needlework while they talked. I have never been good at or liked making things with my hands, but I decided to start a cross-stitch project to try to get to know them better as I heard more about their lives and had a chance to share about mine. My cross-stitch project did not work out so well, but that really wasn't the point.

I share this story for two reasons. First, whatever your job, we can bring glory to God as we do our jobs well and as we love the people around us as Christ has loved us. That will look different for each one of us, but our work is a place we are called to give ourselves to God and be a blessing to others, wherever we are.

Second, I want to encourage you not to wait to offer yourself to God until your life or circumstances change. Many of us think we will offer ourselves to God after we find the job we want, get through these exams, get married, have a baby, after the kids are gone, get through this rough patch, complete the treatment for this illness, or get through this grieving period. I do not want to minimize in any way how significant every one of these life circumstances really is. They require a lot from us in terms of energy and intention as we arrange our lives to meet the enormous demands that accompany each of these experiences.

But there is no need to wait, because when it comes to transforming our experience, we are called to offer our whole lives to God, whatever that means. This is your life, and every day you are offering yourself on some altar. Every moment of every day, you are giving yourself to someone or something. The only question is to whom or what are you giving yourself. We can transform our experiences as we offer our whole lives to serve God every day, every hour, every minute in every place, every circumstance, every relationship of life.

I do not want to make this sound simple or easy. It is not. It is actually difficult to do. The thing about living sacrifices is that they can crawl off the altar, and we regularly do. That's why Paul goes on to say, "Do not be conformed any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind."

The Message says, "Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you."

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Unless we are thoughtful and intentional, we will drift into the familiar patterns of our lives before we came to Christ or the patterns of the world. But there is another way for followers of Christ. **Transforming my experience means resisting the patterns of the world and renewing my mind through God's Word.** In short, when we change the way we think, we change the way we live.

My life is a living testimony of this truth. In his book, John Ortberg refers to the fact that 15-20 percent of children are prone to timidity. Their hearts beat faster in new situations than other children's. When I read that statistic, I thought, that was me. My normal state was feeling anxiety all the time.

Though I grew up in the church, I did not read or study the Bible regularly. But when I began to do so, I realized the fear and anxiety I considered normal were the opposite of the fruit of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, and so on. I wanted to change, so I began to resist these patterns in me and renew my mind by memorizing and meditating on Scriptures such as Psalm 139 and Romans 8. Philippians 4:6-7 became a verse I held on to tightly. “Do not be anxious for anything but by prayer and supplication with Thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God, and the peace of God which surpasses comprehension will guard your

hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.”

The Holy Spirit used these and many other words to renew my mind, to change the way I thought and to change my life. Don't get me wrong: It didn't happen overnight. It was a long process that took many years and is still going on. And I don't want to give the impression I never feel anxiety and fear, because I do. But the gnawing, constant controlling presence of anxiety and fear has been transformed in ways I could not have imagined. It was a work of God's Spirit renewing my mind.

This is only one example. I could share other examples of ways God has renewed my mind as I have offered myself to Him through spiritual disciplines of daily devotions, weekly Sabbath, times of silence and solitude. Great Banquet weekends are another example. At least annually for over a decade, I have given myself over to this three-day weekend because God changes my life and the lives of others, so I keep going. You can probably think of examples from your own life.

Another pattern of the world is reflected in the individualism and independence of our cultural mindset. But as followers of Christ, we, as individuals, are called to live as a part of a community. **Transforming my experience means living together with others in the body of Christ.**

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Paul cautions: “For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.”

This is important, because there is a real human capacity for comparison and contrast. We are prone to think too little or too highly of ourselves. **The me I want to be is neither inferior nor superior to others.**

As a parent, I have read a lot of children’s books. Many of them focus on this problem. Dr. Seuss’s book *Sneetches* illustrates this point:

Now, the Star-Belly
Sneetches
Had bellies with stars.
The Plain-Belly Sneetches
had none upon thars....
Because they had stars, all
the Star-Belly Sneetches
Would brag, "We're the
finest Sneetches walking the
beaches."

The book goes on to describe the lengths the plain-belly Sneetches go to get stars, and the lengths the star-bellied Sneetches go to in order to make sure they maintain their perceived superior status. This children’s book creatively and powerfully reflects our human struggle to think rightly about ourselves in relationship to others. The interpersonal and global conflict that is a part of

our human reality reflects our need to have our minds renewed so that our thinking about ourselves and God aligns with the truth of God’s word.

The me I want to be is also a part of the one body of Christ. In verse 4 we read, “For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.”

Paul brilliantly lifts up the unity of the body of Christ by comparing it to a human body. We are one in Christ. But our unity is reflected in a diversity of gifts and functions. And every member, every part, is valued, important, and necessary whether we are an ear, a mouth, or a leg.

Paul goes on to write in Romans 12:6-8: “We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.”

The me God created and redeemed is a great gift to be offered to God in His service in the church and in the world. So, as Paul says, if you have the gift of serving, serve. If you have the gift of teaching, teach. If you have the gift of exhortation, then exhort. If you have

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the gift of giving, then do so generously.

This is the point: **The me I want to be is a unique SHAPE.** This acronym helps us understand that God, in His goodness and grace, has given you spiritual gifts, heart, abilities, personality, and experience to share in building his kingdom. You are unique, and you are needed for God's work in the world. It's important to know our shape so we can live in the flow of God's Spirit and, also, so we can find the way we fit into the body of Christ. If you haven't discovered your SHAPE or found your place to plug in, I recommend going to our website and taking the spiritual gifts inventory you will find there.

Now the flip side of this that is also very good news: **The me I want to be has limits.** None of us has the ability, the passion, or the time to be or do everything. So it's important that we not feel compelled to respond to every invitation. In doing a jigsaw puzzle, it's helpful to sort pieces by color and to get all the edges together. You don't have to try every piece in every place. It may not be clear if a brown piece is a part of a bear, or a tree, or a mountain, but you know it's not the sky, the grass, or the sun. Knowing ourselves well gives us guidance in discerning God's will, so we know when to say yes and when to say no.

The great gift of knowing we are a part of the body of

Christ is so we can live and serve together with others in the flow of God's Spirit. But it's also important because there is so much work to be done in the world. **Transforming my experience means participating in God's work in the world.**

For the last few weeks, I have been thinking about the miners who were rescued in Chile. For two months, they lived in darkness, separated from the life they knew and the people they loved. They were completely dependent on others to do what needed to be done to rescue them.

And I have been thinking of all those people on the surface who gave themselves over to rescuing those living in darkness, trapped under fallen debris. There were family members who never left the site, because they felt called to hold vigil, to pray, to encourage other families. There were countless workers who carried out various tasks in the rescue operation. No one person rescued those men. It was many people with gifts, abilities and experience working together to accomplish a task so great it could not be done alone. I was truly moved to tears thinking about the devotion and persistence of so many who kept working, kept going in the face of so many obstacles because they wanted to see these men alive. And like many of you and people around the world, I rejoiced when I finally heard

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the news that all of those miners were out.

The image of those men living in darkness and the many people working together to rescue them has been on my mind for two weeks now because it is a real-life redemption story. First Peter 2:9 says, “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”

You and I were once living in darkness trapped in our sin, but by God’s amazing grace, in Jesus Christ, we were rescued. And now we have been entrusted with the good news of the gospel and the gifts and abilities to do something for others who still remain in the darkness of brokenness and sin. None of us is expected to save or change the world on our own. God alone can do that, but the great wonder and mystery is that He wants to use us.

As we each do our part and work together, we can make a difference. We can climb mountains, we can move mountains of rubble and debris, as we seek to reach the world with the good news and rescue others who are still in the darkness. This is our calling.

There are myriad opportunities to be a part of God’s work in the world. Think of a neighbor, colleague, friend who does not know Christ and begin to pray every day for that person,

and pray for yourself asking God to open a door of opportunity to share the good news.

Today is our Local Mission Sunday in the Great Hall. Please take time to become acquainted with our mission partners and get plugged in. These ministries need your time and talent, so take time to discover significant ways God could use you. You will find a number of ideas in your bulletin to help you fulfill Christ’s command to love our neighbors and participate in Christ’s work in the world as we

- feed the hungry by giving to the Crop Walk today or prepare a meal for Bethany Women’s Center, a shelter for the homeless,
- clothe the needy through our Soles4Souls Thanksgiving Project,
- provide gifts for the children of prisoners by participating in Project Angel Tree,
- serve as a deacon and engage in our church’s ministry of sympathy, witness and service after the example of Jesus.

These are only a few ideas. Friends, we cannot do everything, but we are called to do something to make a difference in the world. So offer your gifts, your money, your time, and your talent. Offer your whole life to God and allow him to transform your experi-

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ence and empower you to do something to make a difference in the world.

By now, you have probably recognized that I have simply said again, in a different way, what others have been saying for the past month. Our calling is to live in Christ together for the world. As I offer my whole self to God—the me I want to be—I can find my place in the body of Christ. In Christ together we really can move mountains and accomplish the greater things our Savior Jesus has commissioned us to do.