



Conform or Transform

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Romans 12:1-2

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Today's sermon is all about change. My premise is that God changes people. In this last season of my ministry I'm talking about things that matter most to me. One of my bedrock convictions is that God changes people. Change is possible for people who believe. I have witnessed change in other people. I have experienced it myself.

Yet here's the rub. We want change. We resist change. We can't have it both ways. If we want God to change us, we must come to terms with our resistance. Hold this thought. We'll come back to it later in this sermon.

We devoted 16 sermons to Paul's letter to the Romans pre-COVID. I can hardly remember anything before COVID. Life before the pandemic seems prehistoric. So, let me reacquaint you with this substantive letter. Romans functions as Paul's magnum opus. It is his seminal writing on what matters most to Paul. Paul expresses in this letter matters of first importance pertaining to God, human nature, and the mission of Jesus.

A major shift takes place in Romans 12. Paul turns from theology to address everyday ethics. He introduces chapter 12 with the words, "Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy..." (Romans 12:1). Mercy acts as an appropriate one-word summary for the first 11 chapters. God's mercy revealed through Jesus Christ is central to Paul's theology. The adverb "therefore" serves to connect everything Paul has previously written to issues of practical concern.

"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, which is your spiritual worship." The

language of living sacrifice recalls the Old Testament sacrificial system. People would sacrifice a lamb or dove as an offering for sins. While the practice seems archaic and barbaric to our modern sensibilities, those to whom Paul is writing are agrarian people. Their wealth is measured in livestock. Offering God something of value is time-honored. It's equivalent to offering our money in today's worship context. We offer something of value as a tangible means of expressing gratitude.

Animals were killed in the offering. They became dead sacrifices. Yet here in Romans 12, the sacrifice goes on living. The people to whom Paul is writing (including us) do not offer a dead animal. They offer themselves as living sacrifices.

There is a death in this living sacrifice offering. Jesus offers his life as sacrifice for our sins. Since Jesus offered his life for us, the least we can do on our side is offer our lives back to God.

Paul continues in verse 2, "Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind..." Paul contrasts the words "conform" and "transform" in this verse. Do not conform to the prevailing values of Greco-Roman culture. They stand in opposition to Jesus' teachings. Rather, be transformed.

Conformity to the prevailing values of modern culture remains a temptation for us as Jesus' followers. Although we claim to take our lead from Jesus, we give more credence to secular values than a Biblical worldview. Take most any hot button social issue of our day. We listen more to talking heads than what Scripture has to say to us.

I recall Martin Luther King's 1963 *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*. King lamented in his letter the silence of the church in addressing matters of injustice. He then challenged God's people to become a thermostat rather than a thermometer. He observed that the early church was not merely a thermometer to register the temperature of majority opinion. The early followers of Jesus functioned like a thermostat to transform social mores.

The Greek word, "be transformed" (*metamorphoo*) is where we originate our English word "metamorphosis." The change from caterpillar to butterfly is an apt description to characterize the change God wants to bring about in people. Some of you will remember a classification of toys called Transformers that would change in shape. God wants to similarly change us.

I observe three things about this phrase "be transformed." First, it's written in passive voice. In active voice, I am the one doing the changing. In passive voice, change is what God brings about in me. We are not the ones doing the transforming. God transforms us.

Second, "be transformed" appears in present tense. Transformation is an ongoing process of becoming changed into the image of Christ (2 Corinthians 3:18). We never arrive at the place where we stop changing. Let me bring you back to our mission as a church. We are *Becoming Like Christ Together for the World*.

Third, "be transformed" is composed in imperative mood. Imperative mood directs us to do something. Transformation is not optional, like adding an accessory to a

new car. Transformation is foundational to every believer. Wherever did we get this silly notion that we can be Christians without making any real progress toward becoming his disciples?

“Do not conform to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your minds...” It’s curious that Paul singles out the mind for renewal. Minds need renewal. Attitudes influence behavior. Right thinking promotes right behavior.

“Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds so that you may be able to test and approve what is God’s will—His good, pleasing and perfect will.” The phrase “so that” functions as a purpose clause. We renew our minds so that we can know God’s will and then do it.

We are living in a time of immense change. Unprecedented, in my lifetime.

Change is a daily occurrence in COVID. Change in new strains of the virus. Change in vaccine supplies. Change in reports about how long this pandemic will last.

Change in this politically charged environment. Change from a conservative to liberal administration. Change in the tone of civility (and it’s not for the better!).

Change in our church. My imminent departure after 42 years. For some of you, this change is huge. For others, it’s no big deal. Regardless, there’s change coming for our church.

Let's be clear about one thing. God doesn't change. God remains wonderfully the same. "The grass withers and the flower fades but the Word of the Lord stands forever" (Isaiah 40:8). This Jesus we pledge to serve remains the same, yesterday, today and tomorrow (Hebrews 13:8).

So what difference does this sermon make in my life? I have three recommendations for you to consider about change.

First recommendation: Admit your resistance to change. Confront the reality that while we want change, we also resist change.

Resistance to change isn't all bad. We want our bodies to maintain a stable body temperature of 98.6 degrees Fahrenheit. We call it homeostasis. Yet staying the same in the spiritual realm is deadly. The religious leaders of Jesus' day were change-resistant. They wanted Jesus to keep everything the same. I appreciate what Mark Twain said about change, "The only person who likes change is a wet baby."

Why do we resist change so much? We like the comfortable. We prefer easy. Change is risky. Change is painful. Our first impulse when confronted with change is to focus on what we will give up, not what we will receive in return.

The Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy wrote about change, "Everybody thinks of changing the world but no one thinks of changing himself." If you want to change the world, change yourself. Be the change you want to see in the world.

If truth be told, we want improvement. We don't want change. We want God to change our circumstances. We want Jesus to change other people. We want our lot in life to improve. Yet we don't want transformation. This would explain why we seal off large portions of our lives to God's transformation. What parts of your life do you still hide from God's transforming love?

Second recommendation: Engage in practices that put you in the place of greatest spiritual potential. I talk regularly from this pulpit about the practices of regular prayer, consistent Bible reading, and cultivating spiritual friends. Some of you think I'm intending my comments for someone else. No, I'm talking to you.

You might find it hard to pray regularly or meditate on Scripture on a consistent basis. This is why I'm urging you to practice these disciplines with spiritual friends. Identify someone or a group of people with whom you can pray and read the Bible.

Don't go cynical on me here. Change is possible. God changes people. We have God's word on it.

Third recommendation: Recognize that it all comes down to desire. How badly do you want God to change you?

I am not talking this morning merely about a self-improvement plan. Some of our negative attitudes and self-destructive behaviors are so ingrained in us that change will never be possible by willpower alone. God works cooperatively with your willingness. There is a world of difference between *willing* and *willful*. Some of us are

willful—headstrong and stubborn about opening our lives to God's change. Become willing. Let go and let God. Learn surrender.