

Bible Text: Romans 12:2
Preached on: Sunday, July 30, 2006

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Well, please turn in your Bibles to the passage that we had read to us earlier, Romans chapter 12 and you will find that on page 947 of the church Bible.

A few months ago we had a phone call from our daughter to tell us that they were buying a new home. They live in New Jersey and they had been living in a church house for a number of years and they had decided that they were going to make the leap and buy their own property. And they told us about this new home. We were able to go to the website and look at it. And as Louise called us as the days went by we heard about all the new things they were going to do to this house. She was telling us the kind of materials that they were going to use, the tiles they were going to be put on the walls, the color scheme that she planned, floor coverings and all of this stuff.

And as time went on we realized that, in fact, their plans for this house were that they were going to totally transform it.

So we came over this time looking forward to seeing this transformed property. We weren't really prepared for what we found. What we discovered when we arrived was that, well, there was no siding on the building and there was no insulation in the walls. The downstairs part where the living room is and the downstairs rooms, basically, you could see right through to the back of the property and the basement was in the process of being extended because they were going to add on new rooms and, apparently this is significant, there was also no kitchen. They had taken possession. They had moved in. They had two small children and life is rather chaotic, partly. We are there just to simply be the baby sitting fodder as our ministry for these couple of weeks that we are over here.

Well, they have got great plans. And by the time we come back in October we are hoping that there will be actually a room for us to stay in and there will be a kitchen.

And that really is one of the great goals.

Well, that work of transformation that is going on in their house I have discovered, really the purpose why they are in the situation they are in right now. The reason is obvious. It was so that I would have a beginning for this sermon tonight. And because the sermon is about transformation. It is about the work that God is doing in us. He has taken

possession of us, but, frankly, if we could see ourselves as he sees us, we would see that we are in a pretty rough state. And he has a big work to do to transform us, to make us into the people that he wants us to be.

Now if you were here last week or even if you weren't, let me tell you that this verse, these verses at the beginning of chapter 12 or Romans are not a new phase or a new theme in the book of Romans. Paul is still expounding the gospel of God. That has been his theme. That is his theme to the very end. He is still expounding the gospel of God. And he has shown us by his own example what our first response to the gospel of God is an that is praise, doxology, this spontaneous outburst of intelligent, joyful praise of God for all that he is and for all that he has done for us that we discovered at the end of chapter 11.

But it doesn't end there. It moves forward because the gospel of God is about the business of changing us, of transforming us.

And so, having sung the praises of God, he now continues to talk about God and the gospel of God as it relates to our every day lives. So with that in mind, let's look at verses one and two of Romans 12 and let's notice that he is speaking here to the people of God. He is speaking to the people of God in Rome. Many of its members he had met because in their movements around the world of that period, in the Roman world where movement was fairly easy, relatively easy, he had meet many of them and knew them by name as you discover if you look at the last chapters of the book.

But there were others, of course, he didn't know. There were young and old, men and women, Jew and Gentile and in this largely Gentile congregation in Rome he describes them as his brothers, meaning his brothers and sisters, part of the family. They had been adopted by God's grace. He had already explained adoption back in chapter eight and he understood that they were his brothers and sisters in Christ.

At the beginning of the book of Romans he tells us who they are, "called to belong to Jesus Christ,"¹ "loved by God and called to be saints."²

Previously in this letter he has described how somebody becomes a brother or a saint. We are proved right with God, he says, by faith alone in Christ alone, justified by faith we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. And he has explained in chapter nine through 11 how it is God's purpose to bring together this new community of men and women from every part of the world, Jew and Gentile and to reconcile them into one new humanity in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Now whether we are Christians tonight in this room or not, what you must understand is that the Christian life does not end at its beginning. It begins when God calls us by his grace and brings us into a new relationship with Jesus Christ in repentance and faith. But that is only the beginning of this new relationship. In many ways the Christian life

¹ Romans 1:6.

² Romans 1:7.

resembles marriage. It begins with two people making this public decisive commitment to one another. That is only the beginning. Ask anyone here who is married and they will tell you. That is the easy part. After that there is the whole business of growth and adjustment and recommitment to one another.

That is what Paul is doing here as he writes to his brothers and sisters in Christ and he appeals to them. Here is the apostle Paul and he is bending all his emotional energy into this as he writes to these people and he exhorts them. He admonishes them. he pleads with them to be what God has called them to be.

You are saints, be saints. You are Christians, be Christian. You have been reconciled to God, now let's show what it means to be reconciled to God. He is writing to the people of God.

And he is writing to the people of God, do you notice, on the basis or in view of the mercies of God.

"I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God..."³

He is pointing us backwards by using the word "Therefore" and he is building his appeal firmly on all of the theology he has been teaching us in chapters one to 11. In other words, he is pointing us to the mercy of God where our Christian lives begin. God's grace is his gracious disposition towards unworthy people. It is his determination to do good to those who deserve his wrath or wrath. I can translate into American for you.

God's mercy, on the other hand, is his response in compassion to our need. He has seen our powerless condition. He has seen the state of the house. He has seen the devastation that is there. And he has moved out in his mercy to act upon our condition. That is, again, going to be one of Paul's great themes in chapters nine to 11. He has told us, for example, in chapter 9:16 that our salvation does not depend on human will or exertion, but on God who has mercy. His eternal purpose, he tells us, in chapter 9:23 is to make known the riches of his glory for the vessels of mercy. And he has just summarized at the end of chapter 11 which we read earlier, summarized the universal mercy of God to men and women who are both Gentile and Jew, just as you were at one time disobedient to God, but now have received mercy.

That is the condition that you and find ourselves in this evening.

You see, the Christian appeal to live a different life is not simply the issuing of commands. It is built upon the mercy of God that we have experienced in our lives and, above all the mercy of God there has been demonstrated objectively, in the work of Christ on our behalf.

Paul comes to us this evening to all of us in this room who are brothers and sisters in Christ and he says, "Men and brethren, will you remember what God has done for you in

³ Romans 12:1.

Christ? Remember that you were by nature the children of wrath. Remember that by nature you were without hope and without God in the world. And God in his great mercy in Christ has acted on your behalf reconciled you to himself by the blood of Christ shed upon the cross, has, more than that, united you to Christ so that all the benefits and blessings that are in him are credited to you and you receive his righteousness as a gift. Not only that, you have been adopted into his family, made the sons and daughters of God with a glorious inheritance that is coming. You just cannot believe what the final building is going to look like. God has brought you up into his purposes. I appeal to you,” he says. “I plead with you. I exhort you on the basis of the mercies of God...”

This evening God wants to speak to the people of God on the basis of the mercies of God.

Now I think we need to reflect on that more and more. John Calvin wrote, “People will never worship God with a sincere heart or be roused to fear and obey him with sufficient zeal until they properly understand how much they are indebted to his mercy.”

One of my favorite catechisms is the Heidelberg and the first question talks about the comfort we have in life and death in Christ and the second question says this. How many things are necessary for you to know that you may in this comfort live and die happily? The answer is this. Three. The first, how great my sins and miseries are. The second, how I am delivered from all my sins and miseries. Third, how I am to be thankful to God for such deliverance.

John Newton who wrote *Amazing Grace* and a number of our hymns, when he was in old age began to lose his mind. His mind began to fail and he had to stop preaching and someone once went to visit him and he would say to his visitors this. I am an old man. My mind is almost gone. And I can remember two things. One, that I am great sinner and, two, that Jesus is a great Savior.

“I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God...”⁴

Here is the third thing. Paul speaks to the people of God in view of the mercies of God about the will of God.

“Present your bodies as a living sacrifice.”⁵

You and I can know how to be thankful for all that God has done for us in Christ and he makes, you notice, a double appeal here. First of all he appeals for the presentation of our bodies to God.

“Present you bodies as a living sacrifice.”⁶

⁴ Romans 12:1.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

The word “present” there is a technical word for offering a sacrifice. He has used it earlier on in Romans and it is the verb he chooses in writing this epistle to stress the believer’s basic response to God’s grace in Christ.

So back in chapter six, for example, verse 13, “Do not present your members,”⁷ that is the members of your body, “to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness.”⁸

Again, in Romans 6:19, “For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification.”⁹

So what are we to present to God? We are to present our bodies and there is no doubt that he means us to understand there the totality of our lives and personality, character, everything. That is everything we do and everything we say, because everything we do and everything we say as men and women we do in our bodies. But if it means everything in particular it means our bodies. And that was a fairly revolutionary thing for Paul to say in a Greek speaking context where they had nothing good to say about the body. The body was evil, a tomb in which the spirit was buried.

We have heard a lot in the UK recently and you have here about the Gnostic gospels, the gospel of Judas that was recently published or printed in the da Vinci code and so on. What they don’t tell you, of course, in the media is the view that the Gnostics had of the body. The view they had of the body is that it was an impediment to any kind of spirituality. It was something to be escaped from. It was something evil. Anything you did in the body, anything physical was evil.

And some of us regard our bodies with distaste, with scorn as a necessary evil. Some Christians have been brought up in environment in which they have been taught that somehow or other giving our hearts to God and our relationship with God is a kind of mystical experience. It is separate. It is something in a different dimension from the ordinary, every day living of our lives in the body in this world.

Here the apostle says, “No. You are to present your bodies as a living sacrifice.”

Kind of sacrifice is God is looking for. Get up in the morning, roll out of bed, go into the shower hopefully and perhaps trudge along to the station or jump in the car, listen to the radio on their way to work, sit at a desk, answer the phone, have lunch with a client. Take colleagues out for a drink. Get home at night in time to read the kids a story and then off to bed again.

⁷ Romans 6:13.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Romans 6:19.

Living sacrifices. Have to get up on a Monday morning, have to be made at Tuesday lunch times, Friday evenings as we turn over our lives to God, to his service. And, says the apostle, this is the most reasonable thing that you can imagine.

We are to offer our bodies as a living sacrifice which is our spiritual worship. I think that means it is reasonable. It is something rational. It is the only thing you can do when you have seen the mercy of God. It is the most reasonable thing in the world once your mind has been captivated by the love of God in Christ Jesus. Once you have been to the foot of the cross, if you like, and seen what our Savior has done for us there, once you have been gripped by his grace the most reasonable, the most rational thing you and I can do is to bring our bodies and give them to God. It is our spiritual worship.

Saying that, of course, I think the translation here in the ESV, of course, is good. I wouldn't say anything negative about it, obviously, here. But it is good in the sense that it is emphasizing that if the spiritual nature of this, this kind of sacrifice is something that brings out the reality. The Old Testament has a lot to say about unreal sacrifices, sacrifices that don't involve the mind engagement of the heart and the mind in the business of giving ourselves to God.

So we can offer our body as a living sacrifice.

Back in earlier in Romans in chapter three Paul has described the life without God. He said there:

No one does good, not even one. Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive. The venom of asps is under their lips. Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood.¹⁰

But now you see the throat, the tongue, the mouth, the feet that once was estranged from God is to be reoffered to God. We are to use our lips to encourage the faint hearted, our feet to take us away from evil and into places where we can serve, our ears to listen to those who have something to share, to listen eagerly and humbly to the Word of God, our whole lives devoted to him.

We worship God when we [?] by thanking him for his rich provision. We worship God as jog by the river by looking after the body he has given to us. We worship God as we turn on the computer, but avoid those sites or looking at that junk mail that would pollute our minds. We worship him at work by giving our best to the tasks at hand and we worship him by being quick to help those who are around us in need.

And as we gather for corporate worship we worship God by offering him intelligent praise based firmly in what we know of him as revealed in Scripture.

The presentation of our bodies.

¹⁰ Romans 3:12-15.

Then the transformation of our lives. That is what he goes on to say.

“Do not be conformed.”¹¹

Do you see it?

“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind.”¹²

What he is saying is Jesus’ people are to be different. Those were the words to ancient Israel. He says about the nations round about you, remember God’s word to Israel?

“You must do... you must not do as they do.”

Remember Jesus’ words about the Pharisees.

“Do not be like them,” he says.

Here is the apostle Paul. “Do not be conformed to this age, to this world, to this world’s system, the world in its ignorance of God, in its frequent hostility to God, the world as described as this present evil age.”

The world is ruled by the God of this world who is the devil. This present world with its desires that are passing away, this world that Jesus distinguishes us from in his high priestly prayer when he says, “I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours.”¹³

Paul is saying that we are not to be conformed to this world.

Now it took a lot for Jesus to deliver us from this present evil age. That is one reason, one good reason for the believer to resist its pull. It took the death of Jesus to loose us from its grip and deliver us from its power.

So every Christian, then, is to live in the Church or live in Christ and live in the world without being contaminated by it.

Now the alternative to being conformed to the world is to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. You will know that the word here means metamorphosis. It means the transition from a tadpole into a frog, a caterpillar into a butterfly. The word is used of the transfiguration of Jesus. This is total transformation we are talking about here.

This is being unrecognizable really in comparison to what we were.

¹¹ Romans 12:2.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ John 17:9.

“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed.”¹⁴

Be different, radically different. Be changed into his likeness, same word, transformed into his likeness, 2 Corinthians three, with every increasing glory.

Well, one day we will be perfectly conformed. One day people will visit us in heaven, visit with us in heaven. They will see us the way God intends us to be.

But right now we are at the same stage my son-in-law is at. Right now we are in the process of transformation. It is a progressive thing. And every day something else needs to be done. Every day there is more work to be addressed. And the means of this transformation, you notice, is mind renewal.

Having spoken of the body he goes on to speak about the mind and the alternative to this age is the will of God revealed in the Word of God. It is a choice between the changing fashions of the world and the Word's unchanging will. We are to develop a Christian mind. And how I am going to develop a Christian mind, I must learn to think like a Christian. My thinking has to be guided by the law of God revealed in the 10 Commandments. The Word of God and the law of God are to act as controls to my thinking. Even as I grow up into Christ Jesus I have to make my decisions myself. I have to decide whether to take this job or that job, whether to have coffee that is decaffeinated or not. I have to make all these decisions myself.

But, you see, what I have to be doing as I am making all of these decisions, as I am looking at the choices that I have of career and so on, what I have to do is allow my mind increasingly to be formed and transformed by the Word of God so that I am thinking the way the Word of God would have me think.

It sets the parameters to my thinking. It guides the way I begin to look at the world. My mind is schooled until increasingly what I do intuitively is exactly what the Word of God would have me to do.

Now as long as we are looking back to it, always be checking myself out by it, always looking back at the law of God because that is the guide that I am living a life that is pleasing to God.

Well, the world and the Word are in fundamental contrast with each other. The world says to you, “Live for yourself.” The Word says, “It is better to give than receive.”

The world says, “Greatness is measured by achievement.” The Word says, “Greatness is measured by service.”

The world says, “Get your own back.” The Word says, “Do not take revenge.”

The world says, “Curse your enemies.” The Word says, “Bless those who persecute you.”

¹⁴ Romans 12:2.

The world says, "Sex is for recreational fun." The Word says, "Sex is for love within the commitment of marriage."

The world says, "Fight for your right." The Word says, "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness."

Now you see it takes a lifetime to stop thinking like the world and to start thinking in line with the Word of God.

Here I think is the biggest challenge for you and me. Because we spend most of our lives being schooled by the world's thinking.

You may work for about 40 to 60 hours a week in a working environment that is completely alien to the environment that we are in and this room is for the people of God.

You turn on the radio and the television and you are being bombarded with the world's ideas, the world's agenda, the world's values. Wherever we look in our society we pick up a newspaper. We get into conversation with people over coffee. We are listening all the time to the world's way of things.

In comparison to that the little time we spend with God's people around God's Word seems pitiful. How ever do we expect to have our minds renewed? No wonder very often when our back is against the wall and we have having to make a decision, the decision we make is the decision the world would make rather than the Word would make, because the world is too much with us. It shapes our thinking. It informs our prejudices. The challenge that you and I have this evening is to be transformed by the renewing of your minds.

When I was a little boy I used to enjoy reading John Bunyan's great classic *The Pilgrim's Progress*. And then I discovered another great book of his called *The Holy War*. In *The Holy War* John Bunyan describes the town of Man soul, very subtle description there. You understand. Man soul is the town. And Prince Emmanuel has taken charge, taken possession of the town of Man soul. And, interestingly, he takes possession in the citadel right at the very heart of the town, the citadel of the heart. And in Bunyan's thinking the heart involves the mind, the thinking process as well as the feelings.

And from the citadel of the heart Prince Emmanuel begins to push his influence out into the streets and alleys, into the homes of the people of Man soul. From that vantage point he begins that kind of terrorist, counter terrorist operation by which increasingly his influence is spread from the center to the circumference of Man soul. So when the devil is working in our lives, he appeals to the lower parts of our nature. He appeals to our sense, to our passions, to our emotions, to our lusts and our desires. He works from there inwards.

God by his Holy Spirit begins his renewal work from the inside outwards. He begins with the mind. Capture the mind and you begin to transform the life.

So how are we doing with mind renewal? Are we giving our minds to think God's thoughts after him by reading his Word? Wondering, I mean, really getting into the Scriptures, really coming to terms with what God has revealed of himself there, reading the Bible and books about the Bible. Are our minds increasingly becoming Christian minds so that the way we look at politics and the way we look at architecture and the way we look at art and the way we look at the issues of our lives are increasingly informed by God's Word.

That is the great desire, I know, of this church. But how are we doing as individuals?

Let's pray together.

Lord, we pray that in your great grace you would establish your throne in the citadel of our lives. Help us, we pray, as you establish yourself there. Help us day by day to yield more and more of our lives to your control, to offer you the members of our bodies, our hands, our eyes, our mouths, our ears, our feet, in other words, every relationship, every interaction we have, everything that we are, in all the things that stimulate our senses we offer them back to you. We pray that you would renew us more and more into the image of the one who loved us and gave himself for us. We pray in Jesus' strong name. Amen.