

BE TRANSFORMED

Romans 12:1-21

Key Verse: 12:2

“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.”

In chapters 1-8, Paul explained the gospel of Jesus. Through faith in Jesus we are saved from our sins, declared “not guilty,” and made righteous by the holy God. In chapters 9-11, Paul explained that God’s salvation—first to the Jews and then to the Gentiles—has been carried out by his sovereign mercy. God works through a remnant in every generation. God has hope that all men will be saved. In chapters 12-16, Paul explains how Christians must practice their faith in daily living. These chapters are practical, down-to-earth applications. Chapter 12 teaches us how to respond to the mercy of God. We must be transformed and take on a new lifestyle in Christ.

First, offer your bodies as living sacrifices (1).

Look at verse 1. “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.” Thus far, Paul has spoken of God’s mercy. While we were still sinners Christ died for us. We were totally helpless in our sins. We made ourselves and others miserable but could do nothing to improve. One woman knew that her anger was destructive for both herself and her family members. She knew she should not get angry. But she was helpless. While we were helpless, God came to rescue us. God did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us to save us from our sins. God forgave us and justified us to be righteous by simple faith in Jesus. Jesus changes us from the inside by the work of the Holy Spirit. Jesus gives us peace. Jesus gives us joy. Wonderful is the mercy of God! How, then, should we respond?

Verse 1 says, “...offer your bodies as living sacrifices...to God...” What does this mean? One young man heard these words and suddenly became scared, thinking he would be roasted as a burnt offering. To offer oneself as a living sacrifice is simply to recognize Jesus as Lord and surrender to his sovereign rule. It is to present oneself for God’s service without conditions or strings attached. When God gave us Jesus, he gave everything to us. Now Paul urges us to offer our bodies to God. This offering is not just mental, it is practical. The Lord may ask us to cook a meal or build a Bible house. We are ready to do it, whatever it is. Those who offer themselves to God are no longer “their own man;” they belong to Jesus. They are available for Jesus’ use. Jesus himself showed us the example. Once Jesus crossed the sea of Galilee to have a quiet retreat with his disciples. Suddenly, over five thousand people appeared, desperately seeking his care. Jesus shepherded the crowd, putting aside his own plan. One woman of God was about to take rest when suddenly her sheep called. She welcomed her sheep, listened to her, and shared God’s word with her. She offers herself to Jesus daily. Now we are preparing the 2004 UBF International Bible Conference. Let’s offer ourselves to God as living sacrifices.

Second, be transformed by the renewing of your mind (2).

When we want to offer ourselves to God as living sacrifices, there is something we must do. Look at verse 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.” Before God’s intervention, we lived according to the pattern of this world. Those who live with this pattern are dead in sin (Eph 2:1-3). The mind of sinful man is death (Ro 8:6). Under the power of death, people are empty and feel meaninglessness. They become cynical. They think that enjoying the pleasures of sin during their few short years is the best way of life. They don’t care who they harm to do so. When they give in to sinful desires, they become slaves of the devil. They boldly express rebelliousness and disobedience as though they are non-conformists. They do not realize that they are conforming exactly to the pattern of the world, doing the devil’s bidding.

It is interesting to study the history of the American and French Revolutions. In some ways they were the same. Both emphasized freedom, equality and brotherhood. Both succeeded. However, American forefathers were God-fearing, while French leaders were atheistic. The Father of our country, George Washington, warned that only with a strong moral foundation and Christian faith would the American system of government succeed. Over the last two hundred years, we grew remarkably, becoming the only superpower nation. During that time, we were respected as a shepherd nation and seen by many as the hope for the world. After World War II, America did not gloat over

Germany and Japan, but rather extended a helping hand to rebuild their economies and their nations. In 1956, Congress declared, "In God we trust," to be our national motto and it was inscribed on our coins and currency. Senators openly referred to America as a Christian nation. This was the America that Mother Barry knew before going to Korea as a missionary. But in the last fifty years, the influence of secular humanism has changed America. Godless people removed prayer from public schools and won court decisions that spawned rampant immorality. America began to lose identity as a Christian country. Without God, America does nothing but follow the pattern of this world. Without God, freedom is not freedom to do good, but a license to sin. Without God, equality does not lead to mutual respect, but to mutual degradation. Without God, nationalism degenerates to nothing more than brutish arrogance. At present, each person's human rights seem more important than a national moral standard. Through corrupted educational institutions, the devil is producing young people who think only about themselves. They become slaves of disobedience. They think it is normal to be rebellious and disrespectful. They hardly learn from others. They do not submit to anyone, even to God. Their social life is nothing more than mutual exploitation. They are enemies of God. They are destined for tragedy in this world and everlasting condemnation in the next.

All Americans of this generation have been influenced by this pattern of the world. In order to please God, we must be changed in our thought world. Look at verse 2a again. "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." When Jesus comes into our hearts as Lord and Savior, he liberates us from the rule of the devil and the power of sin and death. We don't have to conform to the worldly pattern anymore. Now we can be transformed by the renewing of our minds.

How wonderful it is that our minds can be renewed! Our minds can be purified and cleansed. Consider Peter. He once confessed that Jesus is the Christ (Mk 8:29). However, he continued to think according to the pattern of the world. He hated the words "self-denial" and "cross." Jesus did not give up on him. Jesus taught him his suffering, death and resurrection again and again. Finally, Peter accepted the truth of God. His mind became new. He understood the love of God and the meaning of Jesus' death and resurrection. He decided to follow Jesus' lifestyle. Later, he boldly told scattered Christians in the midst of persecution, "Rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ" (1Pe 4:13).

Although Jesus did many things during his earthly ministry, he focused on raising his twelve disciples as men of God. He taught them the word of God at every opportunity and helped them to put it into practice. In their natural minds, they thought that being a leader meant having authority and bossing others around. They were not at all different than Gentile leaders. Jesus taught them, "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mk 10:45). Just before his death, Jesus could have done many things. Yet Jesus took time to wash his disciples' feet one by one (Jn 13). Peter really did not like it and talked back to Jesus. But Jesus said, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me." Jesus insisted that Peter change his idea and accept his teaching. Jesus wanted to change his disciples' thought world until they could serve others humbly. In this way, Jesus cleansed their minds from worldly thoughts and planted God's truth in them. By the end of Jesus' earthly ministry he could say to them, "You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you" (Jn 15:3). Likewise, we can be cleansed and renewed in our minds by the word of God. Hebrews 4:12 says, "For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart." We have many things to do. But it is most important to study the Bible deeply, honestly and systematically so that our minds can be renewed by the word of God. Then we can live to please God in obedience to his will.

Third, honor Christ, honor others, know yourself (3-8).

Our minds need to be renewed in many ways. But Paul makes direct application to one area in particular. Look at verse 3. "For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you." The most striking characteristic of a natural, sinful mind is groundless pride and ingratitude. This is the devil's mind that compelled him to compete with the Creator God though he is a mere creature. The mind of sinful man is ready to exalt himself as the greatest, the best, the most outstanding, without any contents. Paul himself had struggled with this. He does not speak down to the Romans, but testifies as one who had received grace.

Here we learn that we must know ourselves in God. We must not think of ourselves according to our natural inclination and emotions. We must think of ourselves with sober judgment, that is, based on facts and sound reason,

most of all based on our faith. One young man thought of himself highly on the basis of his handsome appearance, goaded on by admiring young ladies. But he had no faith. In the course of time, he was exposed as a man of no contents before the holy God, and a danger to others. One woman thought of herself highly because she was able to perceive the faults, weaknesses and sins of others. But she had no shepherd heart. She was found to be not only useless, but harmful in the sight of God. One man thought of himself highly on the basis of his superior education. But his habit of looking down on others only wounded many weak people. In the sight of God, groundless self-exaltation is a great sin. It is the worst mental illness. It causes division and strife in the body of Christ. We must think of ourselves with sober judgment, in accordance with our faith. This faith is the gift of God. We have nothing to boast about but the cross of Jesus.

Just as the natural mind thinks too highly of itself, it is too critical of others. Therefore, Paul teaches us how to see others in God with due respect. Look at verses 4-5. "Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others." Fellow Christians are precious children of God for whom Christ died. In his infinite wisdom and grace, Christ has joined us together as his body for his own glory. When we confess Jesus as Lord we cannot look down on fellow Christians. We must respect them as members of Christ's own body.

Look at verses 6-8. "We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully." We must discover the greatness of God in one another and encourage the use of our God-given gifts to the fullest extent. This glorifies God and builds up the body of Christ for meaningful missionary work. Instead of digging out others' faults, we must recognize their gift and greatness and encourage them to serve God. One man is quiet and unassuming. But he has marvelous spiritual insight and writes excellent Bible testimonies. We must not envy him, but thank God for him and encourage him all the more. One woman missionary has mastered serving guests of all kinds, like a mother caring for her children. Thank God for her. One staff shepherd is ready to show mercy to others and does so freely. So he has many sheep. Some feel competitive with him. This is foolish. We must thank God for him, learn from him and pray for the continued blessing of his ministry. May God help us to honor Christ, honor others and know ourselves.

Fourth, practice the love of God (9-16).

Look at verse 9a. "Love must be sincere." As Christians we are commanded to love one another. So we try hard. But it is not easy, especially when our sheep don't seem to make progress. Sometimes our love degenerates to pretense and plastic smiles. This does not please God. We must love others sincerely, from our hearts. When we do not have the love of God in our hearts, we must repent. We must remember the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ who loved us while we were still sinners. Then God restores his sincere love in our hearts.

Verse 9b says, "Hate what is evil; cling to what is good." Love must be based on truth and result in spiritual edification. It helps others overcome the power of sin and the temptations of the devil. When we truly love someone, we hate the evil things that damage them. At the same time, we must cling to their good point and never let go. There was a young man who was filled with all kinds of sinful desires. At the same time, he had a shred of spiritual desire to study the word of God and grow as a Bible messenger. He didn't really seem likely to grow as a man of God. But God gave him a good shepherd who grabbed onto to his small spiritual desire and encouraged him with a life-giving effort to use his spiritual gift. At the same time, his shepherd hated the sin and temptation that followed this young man like a shadow. This shepherd babysat him through intensive fellowship day and night for more than fifteen years. Gradually the young man began to love the word of God from his heart. It was purely the grace of God through the intense love of his shepherd. Many so-called leaders have lost sincere love; they have no shepherd's heart. May God help us to restore the sincere love of God in our one-to-one Bible study ministry.

Look at verse 10. "Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves." Christian love is expressed in devotion to brothers. Devotion is commitment. It does not change according to the situation or the spiritual condition of the brother. It is constant and steady. It reaches out to the one who is struggling and continues to show affection to one who can offer nothing in return.

Look at verse 11. “Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord.” We cannot love others or be a good influence if we have a lazy mind. We must be full of zeal that inspires others to work hard for the Lord Jesus. One person who exudes spiritual fervor can change the entire atmosphere of a fellowship. Be that person! Someone thought that zeal was a spiritual gift that he did not have. What a mistake. Zeal is kindled in anyone who loves God. Our Lord Jesus was full of zeal for God. On the other hand, those who love the world spread spiritual gangrene that makes others dead in spirit. May God help us to never be lacking in zeal, but keep spiritual fervor, serving the Lord.

Look at verses 12-13. “Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with God’s people who are in need. Practice hospitality.” When we want to love others we must be joyful. Sometimes we see no reason to be joyful. Then we must remember the hope of God and be joyful in hope.

Look at verses 14-16. “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.”

Fifth, overcome evil with good (17-21).

Look at verse 17a. “Do not repay anyone evil for evil.” As human beings we have a sense of justice. So we naturally applaud when the bad guys get what they deserve. But we must be careful not to repay anyone evil for evil. If we do so, we become evil. We become no different than those who are doing evil to us. We must remember that God is the Judge. Look at verse 19. “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. Finally, Paul urges us in verse 21, “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

In this passage we learn that God wants us to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. Especially we must learn the mind of Jesus who humbly served others. We must learn the love of Jesus which was sacrificial and unconditional. Let’s pray that we may be transformed until we have the mind of Christ and can please God.