

Be transformed in the way you live

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“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” (Romans 12.2).

Introduction

Last week we were looking at Romans chapter 12 verse 1. We saw there how the apostle makes an appeal to his readers, on the basis of the mercies of God. Paul urges us to offer our bodies to God as living sacrifices. Everything we do in our lives should be done for God’s sake, to show love to him. This is, he says, our reasonable worship. This is only right in view of all the goodness that God has shown to us in Christ.

Today I want us to think about verse 2, which restates what the apostle says in verse 1, but from a different angle. He says that we should not conform any longer to the pattern of this world. We should not be like the people around us, whose lives are lived in opposition to God. Instead, he says, we are to be transformed, utterly changed, in the way we live. This transformation is to come about through our minds being renewed. When we do this we shall know God’s will in our lives, and will find it to be good and pleasing and perfect.

The verse divides naturally into four sections:

1. What we are not to be

Paul says, “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world.”

What is “this world”? The Greek word means literally this “era” or “age.” The word

is used sometimes in English. People sometimes speak of something taking “aeons” of time, by which they mean that it takes ages and ages. The word which the apostle uses here is that word “aeon”.

What is this era or age? It is the period of time from the fall of man right up to the second coming of Christ. In Luke 20.34, Jesus says that, “The people of this age marry and are given in marriage,” in contrast with the age to come when there will be no marriage. So the “age”, or “era” in which we are living is the period of time since man’s fall into sin right up to the second coming of Christ.

And what is its fundamental characteristic? Its fundamental characteristic is that of evil. Men have been in rebellion against God. This age has been under the domination of Satan. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4.4 that the “The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.” From the context clearly the “god of this age” is Satan. He says also in 1 Corinthians 2 verse 8 that “None of the rulers of this age understood it [God’s message of wisdom], for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.” He says in Galatians 1.4 that Jesus “gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father”

So we should be in no illusions about the age in which we are living. It is an evil age. Men are in rebellion against God. They hate his laws. They are following Satan, the god of this age. We who are believers have been rescued from this age. We will not be destroyed with this world. We have been given new hearts that want to please God. Yet until Christ comes again we have to live in a world which is dominated by evil.

And as long as we live in this age we will be subject to enormous pressures to conform to the pattern of this age.

- Through our friends in the world. The apostle Paul says, “Bad company corrupts good character” (1 Corinthians 15.35). Proverbs 13.20 says, “He who walks with the wise grows wise, but a companion of fools suffers harm.”
- Through what we are taught at school and university
- Through the media: Television, films, music, magazines.

Some of these influences are very crude and direct. Others are very subtle. But

their aim is the same, to get us to be like the people of this age, so that we work as the people of this age, as rule, do: lazily; so that we spend our spare time as the people of this age do: on our own pleasures; so that we spend our money as the people of this age do: for our own desires; so that we conduct relationships as the people of this world do: in a self-centred way to satisfy our own needs and desires, without any real love.

Paul says that we are not to let it happen. We are not to allow ourselves to be conformed to the pattern of this world. Someone has offered this paraphrase of what Paul says, "Do not let the world squeeze you into its mould". We must be different from this age. Remember, God has said "Be holy as I am holy." What does the word "holy" mean? Different. Set apart. Not like the rest of the crowd. Again, remember how Jesus says that we are the "salt of the earth. But if salt has lost its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men" (Matthew 5.13). What is the characteristic of salt? It is different from all the other flavours that there are. We must be different. We must not conform to the pattern of this world, of this age.

2. What we are to be

Paul then goes on to say what we must be. He says, "But be transformed"

Now I am sure that even the youngest of us here will know what "metamorphosis" is. It is the process whereby an animal changes from one form to another totally different form. One of the most striking examples of metamorphosis in nature is the butterfly. As I am sure you will know, a butterfly starts off as an egg. Then it becomes a caterpillar that crawls around on plants and eats leaves. Then it spins a shell for itself and goes into the form of a chrysalis. Then it emerges from the chrysalis in the form of a beautiful butterfly that flies through the air.

The word "metamorphosis" is the English form of the Greek word that Paul uses here to describe the way in which our lives are to be transformed. It is used in two other places in the New Testament. Firstly, it is used to describe how Jesus was changed on the Mount of transfiguration. You remember how Jesus went up a mountain with Peter, James and John, and we read in Matthew 17.2, "There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light." The other place it is used is in 2 Corinthians 3,

where the apostle is speaking about how in Christ we are able to see the glory of God. Unlike the people of the Old Testament who had to put a veil over the face of Moses because the glory of God in his face was too bright, for us the “veil” is taken away, and we are able to see glory of God in the face of Christ. Then he says in verse 18: “And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect [or contemplate] the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.” Christ was gloriously transformed. We are gloriously transformed as we behold his glory. That transformation must show itself, says Paul here, in our lives.

There has already been a transformation in your heart if you are a true Christian. A new man has been born within you. “If anyone is in Christ he is a new creation; the old has gone the new has come” (2 Corinthians 5.17). But the new man that there is on the inside must be seen in a transformation in our outward behaviour. Bitterness should be transformed to forgiveness; aggression transformed into meekness; pride transformed into humility; hatred into love; self-centredness to having consideration for the needs of others; impatience to patience; greed to contentment; rudeness to politeness; loss of control to self-control; drunkenness to sobriety; laziness to hard work; dishonesty to honesty; sexual immorality to chastity; lawlessness to being law-abiding; ingratitude to God should be changed to thankfulness; foolish and sinful speech to upbuilding and helpful conversation; swearing and cursing should be transformed to praise; lying changed to truthfulness; misery turned to joy; idolatry to the true worship of God; fear of speaking of Christ to boldness; anxiety changed into peace

If you are a Christian, let me ask you, what is the whole point of knowing the truth about God? The whole point is that your life might be different. In his first letter to Timothy, Paul urged Timothy to stay in Ephesus that he might command certain men not to teach false doctrines. He says, “The goal of this command is love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.” Paul also tells us that “If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, but have not love, I am nothing.” (1 Corinthians 13.1).

3. How this will happen

We learn, thirdly, how this transformation will take place. Paul says, “by the renewing of your mind.”

Notice how we are not conformed to this age and instead transformed to be like Christ. It is not by going into a monastery or becoming a hermit. This was the mistake of many professing Christians in the Roman Catholic system. They thought, "There is so much evil in the world. I want to be pure. I shall retreat from the world." The problem is that the world followed them into the monasteries, and they become places of debauchery and corruption. No, the change needs to come from the inside. When Jesus was about to die he prayed for believers. One of the things he said was "My prayer is not that you take them out of the world, but that you protect them from the evil one." (John 17.15)

Nor is the answer to live in a sort of time warp. This again is a mistake that many have made. They say, "The modern world is so evil and so corrupt. If only I could go back to the seventeenth century, the time of the Puritans, and things could be like they were then." So they dress and speak as if they were in the seventeenth century. But if you read the works of people who lived in those times, they are constantly saying how evil and corrupt their age was. The answer is not to go back in time, but to know God in our present day.

The way to be different, says Paul, is to be renewed in your mind, in the way you think. The mind plays an absolutely crucial part in the way we live as people. In Proverbs 23 verse 7 we read, as the old King James Version puts it, "For as he thinketh in his heart, so is he." In Paul's letters there are constant admonitions to think in a Christian way. For example, in Ephesians 4.22 – 24, which in many ways is a parallel with this passage, Paul says, "You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by deceitful desires, to be made new in the attitude of your minds, and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness".

To be renewed in your mind is an ongoing process which involves considerable effort on our part. What we would prefer would be "zapped" with an instant cure for sin, so that we might be effortlessly perfect. But this is not the method that God uses. He has laid down that we are to grow in our understanding, and that as our minds are changed so our lives will be changed. He does not want robots, but those who willingly and gladly obey him because they understand how right and good it is to do so.

How does the renewal of the mind change our behaviour? Let me give you an example. Take the sin of bitterness. Somebody hurts you in some way. You know that as a Christian you should not be bitter, so you say to yourself, "I must

not be bitter” and you try to forget what has happened. But then something happens to remind you of the hurt that has been caused, and the bitterness comes back. How do you overcome this? By a renewed mind. You remember the truth of God’s Word that you are a forgiven sinner, and that however bad someone else has been to you, that you owe a much bigger debt to God. You remember that everything that happens in your life, even the evil done to you by others, has been ordained by God who reigns over everything. You remind yourself that you are someone who has been loved with an everlasting love, and that God is working all things together for your good. As your mind is changed to believe and to remember these truths, you find that bitterness cannot remain lodged in your heart. That is one example, but the same process can be followed with all sins and temptations.

So how are minds are transformed? Through the Word of God, heard and remembered, and applied to our hearts by the Holy Spirit.

How do we receive the Word of God? Here are some ways:

- Through hearing the Word preached. This is the most important way that we receive God’s Word. “Faith comes from hearing the message” (Romans 10.17). This is why we meet together. Sometimes people say to me, “I don’t see why church is important. Surely we can pray and read the Bible at home.” Yes, you can pray and read the Bible at home. But what you cannot do at home is sit under the “live” preaching of the Word of God. There is no substitute for it. As God’s Word is preached in the power of the Holy Spirit God directly engages the heart. You might say, “I can listen to tapes and CDs at home, or to Christian radio stations.” Yes, but there is a difference: if you are listening to a sermon on a CD you can switch it off at any time. You cannot do that if you are in church. Also, if you are listening to a CD or cassette you are most likely to be doing something else at the same time, so it will not have your full attention. Let me ask you, if you meet with God’s people only every few weeks, can you afford to miss a Sunday? Or if you meet with God’s people once a week, can you afford to only come once? If you do not attend the midweek meeting, can you afford to miss the midweek Bible study?

- Through studying the Bible with others. If you are in a Christian family, have family devotions together on a daily basis. If you are not in a Christian family, get together with friends to study the Bible and to pray..

- Through listening to good sermons. I have just said that listening to sermons on tape or CD is not a substitute for “live” preaching, but doing so is a very good supplement to such preaching.
- Through reading good Christian books
- Through personal Bible reading.
- Through Bible meditation. Having heard God’s Word and received it we need to “chew over” it and constantly think upon it until it becomes part and parcel of our mental outlook.
- Through mental discipline. Remember, you are being constantly bombarded with false ideas from every quarter, ideas which, if not countered, will lead to the ruin of your life. We need to be constantly guarding our minds, and stopping false ways of thinking and replacing them with good ways.

On top of all this, we need to pray for the work of the Holy Spirit to apply the Word of God to our hearts. It is not just a matter of having our heads crammed full of Bible knowledge, but of that knowledge working its way through to the core of our being and emotions. This is the work of the Holy Spirit, and we need to pray for ourselves and others that God may give us the “Sprit of wisdom and revelation that you may know him better.” (Ephesians 1.17)

4. The result

Finally, Paul speaks of what will happen to us if we do allow our lives to be transformed in this way: “Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is, his good, pleasing and perfect will.”

He says that then we will know the will of God, and not just know it, but prove in our own lives how good and pleasing and perfect it is.

Many Christians today go through a lot of anxiety about knowing what God’s will is, particularly when they are faced with decisions about things like where to live, what to study, and what career to pursue. If you are concerned about what God’s will for your life is, I can tell you here and now what it is, because the Bible tells us. Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 4.3: “It is God's will that you should be

sanctified.”

God wants you to be holy. It does not really matter very much if you live here or there, or if you marry this person or that person, or don't get married at all, or if you have this job or that job, or go to this college or that college, as long as none of the options you are considering involve disobedience to the God's Word. What matters is that you do not sin. You sin when you disobey what God has revealed in his Word, or go against principles that you can legitimately deduce from his Word. God's will is that you should not sin. That is God's will for your life.

Now see what God is promising in this verse. If you refuse to allow yourself to be conformed to the pattern of this age; if you are instead transformed by the renewing of your mind; then you will “test and approve what God's will is.” The word that is used in the Greek is the word that is used for the testing of metals, and also that is used to describe how God tests our faith in our lives. Paul says that if our lives are transformed in the way he has spoken of in this verse then we will “prove” God's will in our lives. In other words, our lives will be a living demonstration of the will of God worked out.

What a wonderful thing, that we should be enabled to live according to the revealed will of God! Of course we shall never be sinlessly perfect as long as we are in this body, but the hope is held out before us of our being very largely conformed to the will of God, if we will obey what this verse is saying.

Moreover, we will prove God's will to be “good, pleasing and perfect”. To whom is the will of God good, and pleasing and perfect? God or man? I think that here the apostle must mean that we shall experience in our own lives what a wonderful thing it is to obey God's will. The Bible tells us that there is no pleasure, no delight, no thrill, which is comparable to that which is gained from obeying God. Sin, it is true, gives a temporary pleasure, but leaves behind it an awful sense of misery. By contrast, obedience to God, for the believer, is a sheer delight, with no miserable after-effects. Psalm 119.14 – 16 says, “I rejoice in following your statutes as one rejoices in great riches. I meditate on your precepts and consider your ways. I delight in your decrees; I will not neglect your word.”

All this is only possible if you are a Christian. Are you born again? Do you know your sins have been taken away? If not, come to Christ, and receive from him

forgiveness of sins and a new heart. Perhaps you are a Christian. If so, have you seen that the only way to be truly happy and contented is to submit to God and to be transformed in your life. May God move each one of us to hear and receive his Word.

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