

Not Conformed, but Transformed

Romans Series

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Bible Text: Romans 12:1-2

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Our Scripture reading today comes from Romans chapter 12 and I am going to read the first eight verses although we are only going to be studying the first two verses today.

Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect. For through the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith. For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, each of us is to exercise them accordingly: if prophecy, according to the proportion of his faith; if service, in his serving; or he who teaches, in his teaching; or he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness.¹

God begins this passage with the words, “Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God...”²

Any time you see the word “therefore” you know that it refers back to something else. Because of this I can now say something new. And we need to understand what Paul is referring to here.

Now I am convinced that he is referring to everything that he has said up to this point through the first 11 chapters of the book of Romans, but primarily to chapters one to eight where he talks about God’s wonderful and gracious plan of salvation.

¹ Romans 12:1-8.

² Romans 12:1.

He is saying, “Therefore, because of all that we have said, because of all of the wonderful gifts that God has showered upon us, because of all the blessings that we have in our salvation in Jesus Christ, because of all of these things, I have some exciting things to say to you, my brothers and my sisters.”

He goes on to say, “Therefore, I urge you...”³

Now that word “urge” has the idea of emphasizing how very important what he is going to say really is. You wouldn’t use the word urge or encourage or exhort unless you are talking about something very serious.

If I were saying to you, “Well, I suggest that you do such and such...” well, what that means is that you can go ahead and do it if you want. If you don’t want to, that is ok. This is just a suggestion.

But if I, with a very bold tone in my voice said, “I urge you to do this. I exhort you to do this,” then I am talking about something that is very, very serious in your life. And that is the idea that the apostle Paul has here. He uses this word and similar words in many other passages, just a few.

In this same book of Romans in chapter 15 he says, “Now I urge you, brethren, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God for me.”⁴

He is saying, “I need your prayers. I urge you. I encourage you to pray for the things that I am doing in my service to the Lord.”

In 1 Corinthians he says, “Now, I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ that you all agree and that there be no divisions among you.”⁵

One of the problems in the Corinthian Church was that they were so divided. They actually had a group in the church that said, “I am a follower of Paul.” And there was another group that said, “I am a follower of Apollos,” and another group that said, “I am a follower of Peter.” And then there was a group—and I bet they just held their heads up high as if they were so proud and they said, “I don’t follow any of them. I just follow Christ.”

But there was no sense of unity among them. And so he says, “I exhort you that there be unity.”

In 2 Corinthians he says, “Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.”⁶

³ Ibid.

⁴ Romans 15:30.

⁵ 1 Corinthians 1:10.

⁶ 2 Corinthians 5:20.

So when we read this passage in Romans chapter 12 we need to be aware of the fact that Paul is referring to something that is extremely important in the Christian life. It is not just something that we can pass over. It is not just something that we can say, “Well, that was interesting. Now let’s go on to something else.” Here is something we need to ponder. Here is something we need to work on. Here is something we need to apply daily to our lives. That is what the apostle Paul was saying.

And he goes on to say this. Listen to the words. He says, “I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God...”⁷

In other words, I want you to think of what God has done, how merciful he has been, how gracious he has been and it is on the basis of all of that that I am challenging you today.

Now, how merciful has God been? Well, you know, if we understand aright the teachings of the Word of God, we find that he has been incredibly merciful to each and every one of us. Though we would be viewed as vile sinners, though we would be viewed as those who have rejected the Lord Jesus Christ at one time in our lives, that we rebelled against God and finally have come to know him because of his grace and his love. We realize that that mercy that he exercised was something so very special in our lives. By the mercies of God.

Well, what does he want us to do?

He says, “...to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice.”⁸

I would imagine that those who read this in that day were at first a little confused when they heard that. You see, sacrifices didn’t live. If you remember in the Old Testament there were times when those who believed sincerely would take an animal and the animal was sacrificed. Well, when the sacrifice was over that animal didn’t get up and run away. It was dead. It was burned on an altar.

We can look, for instance, at that very important day in the life of the Jewish people in that time and, in fact, in the lives of religious Jewish people today that that time that is called Yom Kippur or the Day of Atonement. Let me just read a little bit from Leviticus chapter 16 to give us an idea of what we are talking about here.

Beginning with verse 11 we read:

Aaron shall present the bull as a sin offering for himself, and shall make atonement for himself and for his house. He shall kill the bull as a sin offering for himself. And he shall take a censer full of coals of fire from the altar before the LORD, and two handfuls of sweet incense beaten small, and he shall bring it inside the veil and put the incense on the fire

⁷ Romans 12:1.

⁸ Ibid.

before the LORD, that the cloud of the incense may cover the mercy seat that is over the testimony, so that he does not die. And he shall take some of the blood of the bull and sprinkle it with his finger on the front of the mercy seat on the east side, and in front of the mercy seat he shall sprinkle some of the blood with his finger seven times.⁹

And then it says, “Then he shall kill the goat of the sin offering.”¹⁰

Now we can go through all of this and we find that the animals that came there probably smiling and happy and having been fed well, they don’t leave as living animals. They are taken to be sacrificed to God that they die as a symbol of what really should have been the punishment laid upon each and every one who has come to worship. The sacrifice is the sacrifice of death.

And you will remember that when Adam first sinned God had said to him, “In the day that you eat of this tree,” what will happen? “You will surely die.”

And I am convinced that from that very day death began to come upon the peoples of the earth and so we experience it today. If I look in the mirror and then I examine a picture of myself 30 years ago, it is two different people. We change and our bodies begin to deteriorate and some day each one of us—unless the Lord comes first—will die and we will find ourselves in the presence of the Lord.

But to pay for sin God instituted those sacrifices and they could be taken to the altar. The animal can be killed and burned on the altar and God covered the sins of the people as he awaited the one true sacrifice, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now, with this in mind, how could it possibly be that the people of Israel could understand what it meant that we are to be presented as a living sacrifice? As I said, sacrifices didn’t live. But we are to be living sacrifices.

Now think about this for a moment. If we are to sacrifice ourselves and yet be alive, that must mean that we have a 100 percent commitment to doing the will of God, that just as that animal was committed 100 percent to God, that we must be committed 100 percent to God. That animal died and the sacrifice was acceptable to the Lord. We live and if we live for his glory, that sacrifice will be accepted by God.

We are to present our bodies as living and holy sacrifices.

In Romans chapter six, a passage that we studied some time ago, we read this.

Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its lusts, and do not go on presenting the members of your body to sin as instruments of unrighteousness; but present yourselves to God as those

⁹ Leviticus 16:11-14.

¹⁰ Leviticus 16:15.

alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God.¹¹

What is he saying here?

He is saying that in the past we presented the members of our body—and that means the parts of our body, our hands, our feet, our eyes—we presented them to unrighteousness. How did we do that? Well, we looked at things we shouldn't look at. We had our feet take us to places where we shouldn't go. We had our hands grasp and do things that should not be done.

But God says that now as believers we are to take those same members of our bodies and commit them to doing the things that God would have us do.

And do you know that he is happier with that than with the burnt offering? He says this in one of the psalms, in Psalm 69. It reads like this.

I will praise the name of God with song
And magnify Him with thanksgiving.
And it will please the LORD better than an ox
Or a young bull with horns and hoofs.¹²

What is he saying here? He says, “Oh, yes, God commanded the sacrifices. Those were important. You took the animal to be sacrificed. But God is more pleased when we sacrifice our lives and remain alive.”

You see, this person even back in Old Testament times is saying that when he praises God in his singing, which we did today, when he magnifies God with thanksgiving, God will be more pleased than he is with the sacrifice of an animal.

“Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God.”¹³

The sacrifice is something that God will accept. Well, you know, we could give unacceptable sacrifices, couldn't we? Now what would an unacceptable sacrifice be? Do you know the person who says as he goes into the church and the offering is about to be taken and he begins to think of all the things that he has to do and he says, “Well, you know, I think I can afford to put a dime in the offering.”

And so he gives a pittance of what he is able to give. That is an unacceptable sacrifice.

Oh, I am not saying that he has to put everything he owns in that offering. No, that is not it. But the offering should be a sacrifice.

¹¹ Romans 6:12-13.

¹² Psalm 69:30-31.

¹³ Romans 12:1.

But that is not only the issue with money. You see, our time is a valuable asset. I consider my time more valuable than any other possession that I have. And as I get older and older and knowingly closer and closer to the time that I will leave this earth and be with the Lord, every day becomes valuable for use in his service. And I ask myself—and I trust that you do, too, ask yourselves—how much time out of my day am I giving to the service of God one way or another? How much time am I giving?

Every one of us has 24 hours in a day. Sometimes I would like to have 25, but it doesn't happen. Twenty-four hours. That is what I have. What am I doing with those hours for the glory of God?

And is what I am doing something that lifts up the name of the Lord Jesus Christ? Is it acceptable to God?

In Romans chapter 15 we read, “To be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles...”¹⁴ Paul says that was his calling. “...ministering as a priest the gospel of God, so that my offering of the Gentiles may become acceptable.”¹⁵

And then a beautiful, beautiful comment by the psalmist in the 19th Psalm where we read, “Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart Be acceptable in Your sight, O LORD, my rock and my Redeemer.”¹⁶

I haven't done that... this much here, but I have on many occasions prayed those words as a prayer before preaching. Why? Because I want the words that come from my mouth and the thoughts that are in my mind to be those things that honor God. And, in a special way, those who preach the gospel need to have that as a gift from God, that those words that are spoken will truly glorify the Savior. But you need that, too.

What words do you speak from day to day? Now, I don't mean what words do you speak on Sunday in church. It is very, very easy to be holy in church. That doesn't take much effort at all. I mean, a whole hour? I mean, it is easy.

But what about Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, all the days of the week? Are we still pondering the things of God and speaking words that will glorify and uplift his name?

God says to us that we are to present our bodies as living sacrifices that are holy and acceptable to God.

The next verse, the second verse, I think, is just astounding. Because in this verse God is telling us how to do what he commanded us to do in the first verse.

¹⁴ Romans 15:16.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Psalm 19:14.

He says—and listen to the words—“ And do not be conformed to this world.”¹⁷

Do you know what it means to be conformed to something? One of the hobbies that I had when I was a few years younger was that of making jewelry. And I think I did a pretty good job of it. My wife sometime can show you some of the jewelry that I made for her. And I can remember what was involved in making some of that jewelry.

One of the things we did was a process called the lost wax process. And what we did was we would take a piece of wax, hard wax and we would make on it the form of the jewelry that we wanted. Oh, it could be a ring or it could be something else, whatever it was. We could either buy the form already made or out of wax or we can make it ourselves. And then it was put into a pipe and that pipe was then filled with a substance that would harden like plaster of paris, but not exactly the same thing. And then it was put into an oven until it hardened.

But the same time that it was hardening, the wax was melting and the wax would come out and inside this tube there was a form in the shape of the wax that we had once put there.

That form was conformed to the image of what we had made.

We took the pipe, then, and we put it in a centrifugal force machine and we put either silver or gold right next to it—whatever we were going to make this piece of jewelry out of—and pressed a button. I couldn't swing it as fast as it needed to be swung. Pressed a button and it would swing around very, very quickly and the gold or silver would be forced into it. And it would fill up that whole cavity that was being left by the wax that had melted. And when we were finished we could take it out when it had cooled down. And there was the piece of jewelry in a rough form. We still had some more work to do. But there was a piece of that jewelry conformed to the image that we had made.

God says that we are not to be conformed to the image of this world. And when it says “this world” it is talking about the evil of the world.

We look around us and we see people doing things that are strictly against the will of God. In fact, we see it everywhere around us. And to some extent we all find ourselves encouraged in one way or another to join in in all that the people of the world are doing. They will invite us. “Oh, come out with us. Look at what we are going to do.” Or they will say to us, “Oh, you don't have to be so holy today. Let's go out and do this or do that.” And there is this tugging and pulling to make us conformed to that image, to make us like the world.

God says we are not to be conformed to this world. We are not to be like the world of evil in which we live. But he says, instead, we are to be transformed.

¹⁷ Romans 12:2.

Now what does it mean to be conformed. Well, in Exodus chapter 23 it says, “You shall not follow the masses in doing evil.”¹⁸

In Leviticus chapter 18 it says, “For whoever does any of these abominations, those persons who do so shall be cut off from among their people. Thus you are to keep My charge, that you do not practice any of the abominable customs which have been practiced before you”¹⁹

And I could read one passage after another, but going to the New Testament the Lord said this to us. We read in chapter 17 of the book of John, in the middle of that prayer that the Lord Jesus prays to his Father he says, “I have given them Your word; and the world has hated them, because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world.”²⁰

That needs to be a description of us, that we are not of this world. This is not our home. We may live here now, but we are transients in this world on the way to a place that God has prepared for his children, where there will be no sin, where there will be no corruption, where, instead, there will only be loving God, honoring him and lifting him up.

That is why Paul said in terms of our relationship with the people of the world, he says this in 2 Corinthians:

Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness? Or what harmony has Christ with Belial, or what has a believer in common with an unbeliever? Or what agreement has the temple of God with idols?²¹

And then he says to them, “Therefore, COME OUT FROM THEIR MIDST AND BE SEPARATE,” says the Lord. ‘AND DO NOT TOUCH WHAT IS UNCLEAN; And I will welcome you.’²²

“Be not conformed to this world.”²³

But he goes on to say, “But be transformed.”²⁴

Now the word “transformed” is a Greek word from which we get our English word metamorphosis. You know what a metamorphosis is. It is a complete and total change. It is what happens, for instance, to a caterpillar when it turns into a butterfly.

¹⁸ Exodus 23:2.

¹⁹ Leviticus 28:29-30.

²⁰ John 17:14.

²¹ 2 Corinthians 6:14-16.

²² 2 Corinthians 6:17.

²³ Romans 12:2.

²⁴ Ibid.

I don't like caterpillars particularly. I think they are rather unattractive things, aren't they, really? I mean how many of you would like to just carry around a bunch of caterpillars? I mean, they are not really that attractive.

I can remember, of course, you know, I would never do this, but I can remember when I was a young boy that one of the things that some of the boys in our class in school would like to do would be to pick up a caterpillar and put it in a girl's hair. You ladies, I mean, you can imagine. You know, little young boys do things like that sometimes.

Ok, well, they are not likable creatures, but we find that they find themselves in a cocoon and then over a period of time there is a massive change. And all of the sudden they come out and they are multi colored, beautiful, attractive and we want to look at them. We want to examine them. We want to see the change that has come.

God says, "That is what I want from you. That is what I want."

And he says to us, "I have really done most of the work. In fact, I have done it all. All I need you to do is to follow."

Listen to this. God does the work. In Psalm 51 he says, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, And renew a steadfast spirit within me."²⁵

It is God who does that.

2 Corinthians chapter five. "Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come."²⁶

God did that. God made us to be new creations in Christ Jesus.

And then in Colossians chapter one:

And although you were formerly alienated and hostile in mind, engaged in evil deeds, yet He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death, in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach²⁷

That is what God has done. He has given you a new life in Christ. He has given you a new nature, a nature that is beyond the nature that we had before.

But there is something that we must do.

In Ephesians chapter four we read this.

²⁵ Psalm 51:10.

²⁶ 2 Corinthians 5:17.

²⁷ Colossians 1:21-22.

“...that in reference to your former manner of life...”²⁸ It is before you knew Christ. That is when you were a caterpillar, not a butterfly.

“...you lay aside that old self,” that old nature:

...which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit, and that you be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and put on the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth.²⁹

What is he saying to us? He is saying, “There is something for you to do. I have given you a new nature. But that old nature is still there. And you have to purposefully put aside the old nature, pick up the new nature and put it on and do the things that honor God.”

The picture that I have in my mind when I think of this is walking into the house after a hard day’s work. Maybe you are a mechanic or someone who gets filthy in the work that he or she does and you walk in the house and you just absolutely look terrible and you say, “Well, I need to get these garments off.” And then you sit down for a moment and you say, “Nah, it is all right. So what if I am a slob. So what if it is dirty. Who cares?”

That is not the way we really want to be. We take off the old dirty garments and we put on the clean. And God says that is what he want us to do. When we find ourselves desiring to do the things that are evil and that old nature crops up we have to put it aside. And we have to put on the new nature to actively pursue living for God, to actively pursue the change that is to exist among us. We are to be transformed or, to make up a word, metamorphosize by the renewing of our mind.

As we study the Word and obey the Word our mind changes. The focus that we have becomes more on honoring God than on serving worldly lusts. And what is the purpose of this? Oh, he says it in the last part of this verse.

He says, “So that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.”³⁰

How do we do that? It is by reading the Word of God, but not just reading it. You know, I can read the Bible and say, “Well, gee, that was interesting,” and just put it down. That doesn’t do me any good.

But when I read it with a purpose of obeying it and doing what he says, then the change takes place. Then my mind is renewed and my actions become that which glorifies the Savior.

²⁸ Ephesians 4:22.

²⁹ Ephesians 4:22-24.

³⁰ Romans 12:2.

And we read about this so beautifully in the Psalms where in Psalm 19 we read, “The law of the LORD is perfect, restoring the soul; The testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple.”³¹

And we could go on and on.

God says that his Word makes changes in our lives. It restores the soul. It does all of these things.

In the 119th Psalm—and I highly recommend you read it. It is a very long Psalm, but one that talks about this very topic—just a couple of verses.

I shall delight in Your commandments, Which I love. And I shall lift up my hands to Your commandments, Which I love; And I will meditate on Your statutes.³²

Do you see? God says, “Think about them. Ponder them. Read the Word with the idea of obedience that there might be a change.”

And God tells us what that change is going to be like. It is the fruit of the Spirit. It is the dramatic change that takes place when we study and love the Word of God.

The Bible tells us:

All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.³³

And what is the result? The fruit of the Spirit.

In Galatians we read:

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.³⁴

We need to look into our own lives and say, “Does that describe me?”

Well, none of us will perfectly fit into that mold, but where we see deficiencies we need to strive as we pray to God for his power to live more according to what we read here, to be gentle and loving and self controlled and patient and joyous, peaceful and so on.

³¹ Psalm 19:7.

³² Psalm 119:47-48.

³³ 1 Timothy 3:16-17.

³⁴ Galatians 5:22-23.

May it be that our lives will be lives lived in that way for his glory.

Now if I have been saying all this and it doesn't seem to mean much to you, maybe it means that you have never come to know the Savior. If you don't know him, I challenge you to trust in him even in this hour that Jesus might be glorified.

But if you are a child of God, be not conformed to this world. But, my friend, be ye transformed, changed, that what we do, each one of us, will be acceptable to God as living sacrifices to him.

Let's pray together.

Our heavenly Father, you have given to us the blessings of everlasting life and a new nature in Christ. Enable us, dear Lord, to live in such a way that your name will be glorified, that people will see us and say, "What a remarkable person," and then realize that it is not us, but it is the Lord Jesus.

Help us to serve you in just hat way I pray in Jesus' name and for his sake. Amen.