**“Transformation“**

**Sermon Series *The Fifth Gospel***

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**First Presbyterian Church – Winston-Salem, NC**

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**(Romans 12:1-8)**

**Introduction.**

**(S)** Did you hear the story of the chicken and the pig? They were walking down the street one day when they saw a sign outside a grocery store which read, “Bacon and eggs desperately needed.”

The chicken turned to the pig and said, “I’ll give them the eggs if you give them the bacon.”

“No way,” said the pig

“Why not?” asked the chicken.

And the pig replied, “For you it’s just a contribution, but for me it’s total commitment!”

When I think of that joke, I’m reminds of the words of Paul here in Romans 12 when he writes: *“Therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, I urge you to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God; this is your spiritual act of worship” (Rom. 12:1).* Too many Christians today are only willing to give an egg or two here and there when what God asks for is our total commitment and complete sacrifice.

This is what I want to talk to you about this morning – offering your whole self to God as an act of worship so you can experience His spiritual transformation and power.

**I. Conformity to the World.**

**(S)** Romans 12 begins with the word “therefore.” When I was in seminary, our professors taught us that whenever you see the word “therefore” in Scripture, you need to ask yourself, “What is the therefore is there for.”

For eleven chapters in the book of Romans Paul has written at length about the mercy of God. He has said that when humanity was lost in its sin and we were enemies of God, He opened a way of salvation to us through the gift of His Son. Jesus died on the cross, He took our place, and He paid the penalty for our sin. It’s in light of this awesome mercy of God that Paul now urges his readers to live a life worthy of their calling in Christ, and the apostle gets very practical in the remaining chapters in the book. He also offers some compelling advice on how to experience spiritual transformation so we can become the people God wants us to be. It begins with a subversive resistance to the way the world encourages us to think and live.

**(S)** Paul says, *“Do not be conformed to the pattern of this world…” (Rm. 12:2).* The word which is translated “conform” is the Greek word *suschematizo.* It means to fashion, pattern, or style after something or someone. The dictionary defines it as “to be similar or identical, to be in agreement or harmony with,” or to “act in accordance with.” J.B. Philips paraphrased this verse to say, “Don’t let the world squeeze you into its mold.” I like that.

I think this is one of the biggest problems confronting people today who are serious about following Jesus and want to be transformed into His image. It’s all too easy to get sucked into everything the world seems to offer, and we need to be careful. This world is temporary and headed down the wrong path, and those who chase after its pleasures and its treasures can easily fall prey to its illusion and lose out on what really matters most, the kingdom of God and the abundant life God offers us in Christ.

**(S)** Two patterns are held up in this passage by way of contrast: the pattern of the world, and the pattern of God’s kingdom. Paul tells us that we need to recognize the pattern of thinking and behaving which characterizes the world, and we need to reject it. By contrast, the followers of Christ should embrace the values of God’s kingdom, His will for our lives, and the Holy Spirit’s efforts to build in us the character of Christ.

N.T. Wright says the surrounding culture tries to brainwash us every single day, and it tries to persuade us in a thousand subtle ways. Think about how all of us are tempted to conform to the world in our how we think and how we behave. For example, the world says: **(S)**

* The measure of a person is the car they drive, the job they have, and the house they live in. Their value is determined by the power they wield, the wealth they accumulate, and how physically attractive they are.
* Go ahead; everybody’s doing it. You don’t want to be the only one who is left out, do you?
* It’s okay to be a religious person; just don’t say there’s only one truth or only one way of salvation. Many paths lead to God and religion is a private matter, so keep it to yourself.
* If you love me, you’ll agree with me.
* It doesn’t really matter what other people say (or even what God says for that matter); you’ve got to find your own happiness and be true to yourself.
* The end justifies the means. You’ve got to elbow your way to the top, and it doesn’t matter if you have to shade the truth or cut corners in order to get there.
* As long as it doesn’t hurt anyone, it’s okay. After all, what’s the harm?

These are some of the lies our culture tells us, and the world is always trying to squeeze us into its mold.

I was surprised when Cyndy and I were dating how many people, even Christians, expressed disbelief when they learned that whenever Cyndy visited me in Winston-Salem during our courtship, she stayed with friends, or she stayed in a hotel. And I did the same when I visited her in Roanoke. People would say to us, “Really? At your ages? In this day and time? You mean you haven’t slept together?” No, we didn’t. Scripture says that sex is supposed to be reserved for marriage.

Whenever you decide to be serious about following Jesus, it means you’re going to travel down a road that will often be lonely, and it will be at odds with the values and the life choices of most people in the world. They will look at you strangely, and they will think you are odd, outdated, and archaic. And the world is relentless is trying to squeeze you into its mold.

**(S)** I recently read that an exotic pet store owner said that one of the most popular pets today for an aquarium is a shark. They discovered that if a baby shark was placed in an aquarium when it is young, it would slow down its own growth in order to fit the environment. And a fully mature shark in an aquarium might end up only 6 inches long. The confines of its environment cause the shark to remain small, and the limits of the aquarium essentially squeezed the shark into its mold. But if that same shark was released into the ocean when it was young, it could grow to 8 feet long.[[1]](#endnote-1)

**(S)** Conformity is like gravity. The pull is always there, always pushing you down, and constantly exerting its influence on you. How are you conforming to the world and allowing it to squeeze you into its mold in the way you think and the way you behave? How have you compromised your faith in Christ by trying to fit in and just go along with the crowd? In what ways has your life become indistinct from everyone around you who don’t know Jesus, and the life Christ wants you to live can barely be seen in your character and how you act? Jesus invites us to explore and experience a radical transformation in the power of His Holy Spirit. Don’t conform. Be transformed!

**II. Transformation in Christ.**

**(S)** The transformation of the disciple and the process of sanctification is the means by which God brings our lives more into conformity with the character of Jesus and produces in us the fruit of the Spirit and a life of holiness. This is a work of God in our hearts as we yield our lives to Christ, and it isn’t something we can manufacture on our own. It’s a gift of God's grace that comes from the Holy Spirit as we cooperate and collaborative with God in the process of transformation.

The apostle Paul puts it this way in our passage, *"Do not conform any longer to 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” (12:1,2).* The word that is translated “transformed” is the Greek word *metamorphoo* from which we get our English word “metamorphosis.”

**(S)** The obvious example that comes to mind is the caterpillar which is transformed into a butterfly. For a time, it is one thing. But then it becomes a wholly different thing through the process of metamorphosis – transformation. The caterpillar isn’t beautiful, but the butterfly is. The caterpillar crawls on the ground, but the butterfly flies on gossamer wings. Gardeners don’t like caterpillars, but they plant special bushes to attract butterflies. So it is by the grace of God and the work of the Holy Spirit that we who were one thing (conformed to the ways of this world) can be transformed into something wholly different – people who begin more and more to think and act like Jesus.

Paul urges his readers to present their bodies to God and to renew their minds according to the truths of Scripture. These are the two keys to the process of transformation Paul gives to his readers. Holy living involves the body, mind, and spirit, and God expects a radical change in how we behave and the way we think.

What God offers His people isn’t merely self-improvement. It’s radical transformation. It isn’t simply an offer to make good people a little bit better and smoothing out the rough edges of their basically pure lives and hearts. Rather, it’s a matter of transforming sinners into saints and babes in Christ into mature disciples. But this kind of transformation doesn’t take place overnight. It’s a lifelong process, and there are no shortcuts to the transformation of sanctification.

**(S)** John Stott wonderfully sums up what Paul is saying here in his commentary on Romans. There he writes, “You can become a Christian in a moment, but not a mature Christian. Christ can enter, cleanse, and forgive you in a matter of seconds, but it will take much longer for your character to be transformed and molded to His will. It takes only a few minutes for a bride and a groom to be married, but in the rough-and-tumble of their home it may take many years for two strong wills to be dovetailed into one. So when we receive Christ, a moment of commitment will lead to a lifetime of adjustment.”

**(S)** To grow in grace and experience the transformation of Christ, we need to develop a training mentality. John Ortberg has said that spiritual transformation isn’t a matter of trying. Rather, it’s a matter of training. We are to adopt the same attitude toward becoming like Christ an athlete has toward training for a competition, a musician toward mastering an instrument, or a soldier preparing for battle. Becoming like Jesus is our vocation or our calling in life. We’re to place all our lives at the disposal of the God who gives us strength to serve Him.[[2]](#endnote-2)

For a long time, whenever I heard a message about following Jesus, I always thought in terms of trying really hard to be like Christ. So after hearing a sermon about patience, for example, I would wake up Monday morning determined to be a more patient person. Have you ever tried to be patient with a three-year-old? I have, and I’ve learned it isn’t a matter of trying; it’s a matter of training. If I try to live the Christian life in my own strength, I just end up exhausted and defeated. Maybe you feel like that today.

**(S)** Spiritual transformation isn’t a matter of trying harder but of training wisely. This is what Paul means when he encouraged his young protégé Timothy to *“train yourself in godliness”* *(1 Tim. 4:8).*  This thought also lies behind Paul’s advice to the church at Corinth when he wrote, *“Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever” (1 Cor. 9:25).* This is why we talk about spiritual disciplines or practices a great deal here at First Pres. It’s about training in the Christian life.

I was fascinated to learn the back stories of many of the athletes who competed in the Olympic games this summer in Tokyo. The dedication and sacrifice of these athletes was remarkable. I had to ask myself, “Do I have the same dedication to follow Jesus that an Olympic athlete like Allison Felix has for her sport?” If you want to experience a life that is truly transformed, it requires training, not just trying.

**III. What Transformation Looks Like.**

**(S)** What does transformation look like, and how do I go about it? Paul write,*“Therefore, I urge you brothers and sisters, 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” (12:1).* When Paul refers to believers in Rome offering themselves as living sacrifices as an act of worship, he makes reference to the sacrificial system which was central to Jewish worship in the Temple in the first century.

Part of worship for the people of Israel was the sacrifice of an animal, often on an altar. Now, some of the offerings in the OT were called “sin offerings,” in which blood was shed and a worshipper asked for forgiveness. But for Christians Jesus is our sin offering, isn’t He? That’s what the whole book of Hebrews in the NT is all about. Therefore, the offering Paul is writing about in this passage isn’t a sin offering. It’s a second kind of offering which was common in worship at the Temple at the time of Christ. It was called a “whole burnt offering.”

**(S)** A whole burnt offering was a special animal you would take from your flock which had no defect or blemish and was offered to God as a sacrifice to be consumed with fire. Why was that required? It’s because an unblemished animal was valuable and expensive, and in presenting such a valuable animal to God as an act of worship, it showed that all you possessed and all you were was at God’s disposal. You weren’t giving God the leftovers. You were giving Him the best you had to offer. It represented your complete and total consecration to God.

**(S)** The term “living sacrifice” is deliberately paradoxical because sacrifices in the OT were dead. That’s part of what it means to be a sacrifice. When Paul said to the Romans, “God wants you to be a living slain thing,” it was meant to be a jolt and to shock them. It was a way of saying you have to continually be in the rhythm of dying to your own interests and living for God instead. Isn’t this what Jesus meant when He said, *“Take up your cross daily and follow Me”?*

The problem with living sacrifices is that they keep crawling off the altar, don’t they? The old sacrifices in Jewish worship were no problem. You killed the animal, and that was it. They burned the offering, and it was over. But a living sacrifice means every moment of every hour of every day you have to deliberately, consciously, intentionally, and perpetually offer yourself to Christ. It’s constant, and it’s an everyday affair.

**(S)** I recently read where Tim Keller said you’re not living the Christian life unless you put to death the idea that you have a right to live as you choose. He said that’s a radical statement to make in America today because there has probably never been a culture in the history of the world that is more averse to the very essence of what it means to sacrifice oneself for Christ.

As followers of Jesus we don’t belong to ourselves; we belong to Christ. And our calling is to be living sacrifices every single hour of every single day. It feels like a death, but on the other side of it is abundant life in this world and eternal life in the next. That’s why it’s a living sacrifice. It’s a sacrifice that leads to life.

**Conclusion.**

**(S)** There is much more I wish we had time to study in this passage about what Paul says regarding humility and the way we’re supposed to use our gifts for the benefit of others. That will have to wait for another day. As we close, I want to tell you a story about the rippling impact of transformation.

Boris Nicholayevich Kornfeld was a surgeon who worked in a hospital in a prison in the former Soviet Union. He wasn’t on the staff of the prison. He was one of the prisoners himself. But his skill was so great that the Soviet authorities decided to put him to work in the prison hospital. We don’t know what crime Dr. Kornfeld committed, but he became a political prisoner in a Russian gulag deep in Siberia in the early 1950s.

Dr. Kornfeld met a Christian while in the gulag whose quiet faith and frequent reciting of the Lord's Prayer attracted the doctor's attention and interest. One day, while repairing a guard's artery which had been cut in a knifing incident, Dr. Kornfeld seriously considered suturing the artery in such a way that the guard would bleed to death slowly a little while later. But then, appalled by the hatred and violence he saw in his own heart, he found himself repeating the words of this Christian prisoner, "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us."

Previously, he had been a self-righteous Jew, like Saul in the Bible, but gradually he came to see the sin in his own life, and his life was transformed there in the gulag by the grace of God. The Christian inmate who had witnessed to Dr. Kornfeld was transferred to another gulag shortly thereafter, and he didn't tell anyone about his newfound faith for quite some time. But his life would never be the same again. He experience a spiritual transformation.

Dr. Kornfeld began to refuse to go along with some of the standard practices of the prison camp, and one day he even turned in an orderly who had stolen food from a dying patient. From that day on, he knew his life was in danger.

One day as the doctor was examining a patient who had been operated on for cancer of the intestines, he began to describe to the patient what had happened to him. Once the tale began to spill out, Kornfeld couldn’t stop. He told his whole story of coming to faith in Christ and the difference God made in his life well into the night.

The young patient awoke early the next morning to the sound of running feet. For, you see, during the night, while the doctor had slept, someone had crept up beside his bed and dealt eight blows to his head with a plasterer's mallet, and Boris Kornfeld was dead. The orderlies carried the still, broken body of the doctor out of the hospital ward.

But Dr. Kornfeld's testimony didn’t die. The patient thought about the doctor's last, impassioned words, and as a result, he, too, became a Christian. He survived that concentration camp, and he went on to tell the world what he learned there. The patient's name was Alexander Solzhenitsyn. Solzhenitsyn went on to write many books that were smuggled out of the gulag and printed in the West, the first being published in 1973. They were some of the first stirrings that marked the beginning of the end for the Soviet Union. Horror upon horror was revealed to a world that was shocked by the inhumanity of the Soviet system which had murdered 65 million of its own people in the gulags.[[3]](#endnote-3)

But the great Russian author was quick to acknowledge that the problem lay not only in Communism. The problem lay in every human heart. Solzhenitsyn once wrote, "It was only there on rotting prison straw that I sensed within myself the first stirrings of good. Gradually it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between parties either – but right through every human heart – through all human hearts."[[4]](#endnote-4)

Have you experienced that kind of transformation in your life? I read this week a wonderful quote: “Every saint has a past, and every sinner has a future.” Don’t let the world squeeze you into its mold, 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. And present yourselves as a living sacrifice as a spiritual act of worship today and always. Amen.

1. Charles Simpson in *Leadership Journal,* Winter 1986, p. 40. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Greg Ogden, *The Essential Commandment,* p*.* 129. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Adapted from Charles Colson, *Loving God,* pp. 27,28. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Source unknown. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)