

Transformed and Transforming

Our New Testament scripture is Romans 12:1-8. In the first 11 chapters of Romans, the Apostle Paul gives a great, definitive statement about the Gospel, what God has done for us in Christ. These chapters give us the fullest, richest explanation in the entire Bible about God's gift of saving grace, free and available to all who will accept his gift by faith in Christ, God's crucified and risen Son.

Beginning with the 12th chapter, Paul writes about what we must do in response to God's saving grace. He begins by saying, "I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters...." Someone has said that whenever we come across the word "therefore" in the Bible we should ask what it is *there for*. In this case, Paul connects the idea of what God has done for us with what we should do in response. God has done this for us, *therefore* in response, this is what we should do for him. He goes on in our text to say this is our appropriate response to him as his followers. We are to be, he says in essence, transformed transformers.

Follow as I read Romans 12:1-8:

12 I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. ² Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

³ For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. ⁴ For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, ⁵ so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. ⁶ We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ⁷ ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; ⁸ the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

This year is the 500th year of the celebration of the Great Reformation, which was launched in Wittenberg, Germany in 1417 when the Roman Catholic monk, Martin Luther, nailed his 95 Theses to the door of the church, protesting the state of the church and its need of reformation. The motto of the Reformation, which was adopted by reformed churches like the Presbyterian Church, is "ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda, "translated as "the church reformed and always reforming."

In our text, Paul is challenging those of us who've received the grace of God through faith in Christ, to respond by being "reformed and always reforming," or transformed people who continue to be transformed and who participate in God's transformation of

his church, which is called to be a transforming community in the world. We respond to what God has done for us in Christ by presenting our minds, bodies and souls, all that we are, to him as a living sacrifice. Unlike under the Old Covenant, when dead animals were presented by priests in the temple, we who've been purchased to be God's people are to present our living minds, bodies and souls to him as an act of worship. This is the new spiritual worship that pleases God, who's given his Son that we might be forgiven and transformed by his grace into his worshipers.

The new life in Christ comes about by his undeserved grace and love that comes to us freely, changing our very nature into his children, with now the indwelling Holy Spirit, who begins the process of making us daily become more like Christ. God provides the grace and power to transform us, but we must daily and faithfully receive him and the full presence and control of the Holy Spirit. We still, even after the conversion process begins with our new, resurrection life, must keep on receiving the Spirit into every area and aspect of our lives. As long as we are in these mortal bodies of ours, we experience the downward pull of the old sin nature, which we must resist, by God's help through the Spirit.

We're in a mortal battle against the fallen world, the sin-prone flesh and the devil himself, who opposes our spiritual growth and progress, our usefulness in the Kingdom, and our joy. Apart from our living in daily dependence on the Spirit of God, "this world," as Paul says, will shape us into its mold (2). Possibly before we even realize it, we'll begin to think like the fallen, unbelieving world, and our actions will soon follow.

Some who've received the grace of Christ allow the fallen world to shape them into its mold, their lives showing no distinction from that of immoral unbelievers around them. These are "chameleon" Christians, who, like the little lizard, change colors to camouflage themselves, to be "secret service" followers of Christ. Living with moral compromise, adopting the behavior of friends outside of Christ, forfeits a credible witness for Christ.

As Christ's followers, there's supposed to be a difference about us, in a lovely and attractive way and not an obnoxious way. Jesus was the sinless Son of God, who loved and sought after sinners, people of doubtful reputation who were not the "church-going" crowd of his day. It was his love for and desire to welcome sinners that made him attractive to them, even though he was absolutely sinless and perfectly holy.

When we try to be different from the world apart from the love, presence and leading of the Spirit, we become unwelcoming, intimidating, unattractive and even offensive to those whom Christ would draw to himself. I've known people, even in my high school days, who drove the lost further away from knowing God by their unloving, Bible-thumping, condemning ways of presenting the "gospel," which was really no Gospel at all.

But God's transformed people are still being transformed. We're certainly not perfect yet. We're like the construction sign that reads, "Pardon our dust. We're under

construction to make your life better.” And when we acknowledge our imperfection and confess our flaws, we’re actually increasing our credibility with those we seek to influence for Christ. Being real people with real needs and shortcomings gives hopes to candidates for conversion, that though Christ transforms us, he’s also very patient with us.

I’ve been doing a lot of soul-searching at this stage of my life, knowing I may have very little time left in my mortal body. Career goals and professional achievements are no longer relevant. I realize now my life objective is to let the Holy Spirit transform me into what God has saved me to become. Thanks to a wise, loving wife and a good spiritual counselor, I’m confronting issues about my character that still need God’s transforming grace. All that he’s done for me, as described in Romans 1-11, he wants me now to appropriate by the Holy Spirit into my character. It’s amazing, and almost overwhelming, to realize what still needs to be done in this 72-year-old’s life.

God is showing me ways I have lived unaware of his amazing love and grace toward me, how I have allowed false images of God to turn me into a performance-driven slave of God instead of a glad, willing, and joyful child of a loving heavenly Father. I am now allowing him to show me the origin and wellspring of my flashes of anger, and to teach me to let go of anxious, performance and perfection expectations. He’s teaching me to turn the mundane of life into occasions for joyful gratitude and celebrations of his love. I’m learning that prayer is the practice of his presence and the constant turning of my thoughts “heavenward.” Living in the light of his presence and grace is the way I keep the fallen world, even the fallen ministerial/church world, from shaping me into its anti-Christ mold.

It’s all about a renewed mind, even the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2:16b). With this Christ-shaped perspective on life and the world, we’re certain to live in the “good, acceptable and perfect will of God” (2c). Discovering the will of God is no mysterious treasure hunt. God wants us to know and do his will more than we do. It’s a matter of simply living in his presence each day, seeing things from his point of view, as revealed by Scripture and the indwelling Spirit. I want to offer God a being-transformed life; then I can be one of his transformers.

The being-transformed mind of Christ allows me then to be one of his transformers. And, lest we think we’re God’s great gift to the world, Paul calls us to not think too highly of ourselves, but with the sober assessment of faith ((3). Faith reminds me that God has a lot of gifted and Christ-honoring people, to whom I am greatly indebted for my own spiritual growth and usefulness. My faith relationship with God demands I be in close relationship with other believers in the family of faith. I need them, and they need me, just as in any good family. We’re not to think too highly of our self-importance and our spiritual gifts and talents, nor are we to think too lowly of ourselves. Maybe we’re not to think of ourselves at all except how we can minister to and serve one another in the Body of Christ, the church.

The church is a community of God's people, called to minister to and encourage one another, but also to be on mission together in the kingdom of God. We exist by our mission, as one has said, as fire exists by burning. Some think they can be Christians apart from being a part of the church, but they likely are not effectively serving, nor are they pleasing Christ, who commands us to be a part of his body on earth. This is not just for our sake, but for others, who receive the benefits of our spiritual gifts and talents, which enable us all to be transforming as well as transformed.

Our text is one of Paul's three passages that list spiritual gifts, the others being in Ephesians 4 and 1 Corinthians 12. Study of these various gifts indicate Paul gives categories of leadership, service and teaching gifts, but none of them is exhaustive. There are specific gifts and talents not mentioned in these lists but are being used by God to build and strengthen his church today. And each gift and talent is to be used with the motive of love (that Paul points out in 1 Corinthians 12 and 13) and with a desire to serve and encourage the church in its mission.

When we realize how God loves us unconditionally, we're motivated to share his love with others. And this is how we're to be God's transforming agents. We share and show and do his love, and he does the transforming, whatever our gift(s) might be. I know some of you have the gift of compassion and encouragement, and you use your gift through The Road Home ministry, home and hospital visits to our members, letter and card writing, and emails and phone calls. You send love faithfully. Some use your talents through music, which shares the message of God's love in our worship. Others of you have technical, carpentry and horticultural gifts that enhance our facilities. Every nail you drive says "I love you" to God and his people. By bringing fruit and vegetables to share with our people, you're saying "I love you and want to share with you." When you grow an herb garden to share with MOM you're showing love. Some of you have the gift of giving, and you give generously to the church and special mission causes, beginning with local charities and including special mission offerings. And let's not forget those who prepare our after-worship snacks and covered dishes for our special events. Some of the best and most thankless work is clean-up duty after a meal or fellowship time. But all of this is sharing transforming love, giving witness to the love of Christ.

Paul knew the tendencies in the churches in Rome and Corinth for individuals with more impressive gifts, such as ecstatic speech and prophetic orations, to vaunt themselves into positions of power and authority over others, and so he intersperses warnings about pride, and in then reminds them to have genuine love, vs. hypocritical and insincere displays (3, 9). Love motivates us to give and serve wherever a need presents itself to us. We don't have to take a personality inventory test or do a Greek word study of the listed spiritual gifts to discover our spiritual gift. God will lead us to meet a need, and in the action of willing service we'll discover a gift, and interest and talent we didn't know we had. What's important is our heart of loving service, which keeps the Body of Christ working smoothly and effectively, without petty rivalry or jealousy.

At times it's easier to show kindness and compassion to outsiders than to those closest to us, who may represent a threat to us or who simply irritate us. And so the doggerel goes:

*To live above with saints we love,
O that will be glory!
But to dwell below with those we know,
Well, that's a different story!*

Jesus says that love in the family of God is to be our distinguishing mark as his followers (John 13:35).

And our life of sharing the love of Christ reaches out into the world around us, through our life of prayer and witness, and in our engagement in causes of evangelism and social justice, particularly in our local community. We're a small church, but we serve a big God who gives us his love for one another and for the world around us, including our enemies and those who are against the cause of God's kingdom.

I love what the late Mother Teresa said in reply to someone who remarked about her huge impact on the world through her acts of charity and her spawning scores of ministries of charity around the world. She said in response, "I do small things with big love." And that's what God uses to transform the world and bring his kingdom to earth as it is in heaven. He would use our gifts here at Dale Heights and beyond if we do what we can, even small things, with big love, *his* love.

This is the way we do our part in the kingdom that someday will encompass the world. God will use his transformed and transforming people.