



April 28 & 29, 2018
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*The Good Life:
Transformed and Alive*
Romans 12:1-2

In September we started a journey through the book of "Romans," a letter written by the Apostle Paul. In Romans 1-11, Paul works hard to explain some of the deepest teachings of Christian faith; doctrines with confusing names like justification and sanctification and glorification and constipation....not that last one. But sometimes your brain *feels* that way when you are trying to sort through such deep theological stuff, doesn't it?

But chapter 12 changes all that. If chapters 1-11 were theological...chapters 12-16 are practical. The first half of Romans teaches us **what** it means to be a Christian; the second half teaches us **how** to live as Christians. So, for these next weeks **we are going practical**. What does it mean to really live the "good life?" And I don't mean the prosperous life with the beautiful spouse, beautiful home, beautiful car, beautiful kids and beautiful vacations. I mean authentic life as God intended, a life that is peace-filled, joy-filled and significant. Who *doesn't* want that kind of life?

The first two verses of Romans 12 really are the thesis statement for the rest of the book.

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

Last week we were astounded to watch the leaders of North and South Korea meet in the Demilitarized Zone that separates their countries. They shook hands across the boundary line and then, in a shocking improvisation, North Korean president Kim invited president Moon to step across the line into the North...and he did. Observers were aghast! The two leaders spent 30 minutes together, talking about reunification and denuclearization. The whole world is abuzz...and ought to be. It is the most promising step yet toward ending a war that has simmered for 70 years...a war in which my father fought.

But as encouraging as this is, any sensible person will guard their optimism. These two nations are divided on nearly everything but race and language. One is a democracy, the other a dictatorship. One is prosperous, the other impoverished. One is guided by law, the other ruled by a murderous tyrant. One functions economically and diplomatically as a member of the world community. The other threatens the world community with nuclear war. One has a thriving religious culture, including the largest Christian churches in the world, the other crushes religious expression. The two nations could not be further apart. So, we pray for a reprise of 1989 when the Berlin Wall fell so suddenly and shockingly... but we temper our hopes with a dose of reality.

As vast as the divide between North and South Korea, the divide between God's ways and the world's ways is vaster still. Paul warns us, "Do not be conformed to this world..." Take just about any topic, any

measure of what it means to be human...and you will find that the world's ideas and God's ideas are at odds: **the purpose and meaning of life, sex, marriage, wealth, community, ambition, religion.** As John Stott puts it, "...the standards diverge so completely that there is no possibility of compromise." (*Romans-p 323*)

This summer my family and I will travel to Britain to celebrate Cooper's graduation and Rachel's ordination. (I'm hoping for less trouble getting OUT of Britain than Ellis and Rachel had!) While there, we will visit London...and when we visit London, we will ride the Tube...and when we ride the Tube, we will hear the same warning we always hear. What's that warning? "Mind the Gap!"

Tonight/day, I want us to "mind the gap." In these two short verses, Paul asks a simple question: Do you want to know God's will and purpose for your life? Look at the last line of the text. "...you may discern what is the will of God, what is Good and Acceptable and Perfect." The **Good...Acceptable...Perfect...** will of God. The GAP. Now there might be some here tonight/today for whom that doesn't matter yet. Who are not yet at a point in their spiritual journey where knowing and obeying God's good, acceptable and perfect will for their life matters.

But MOST of us are at least interested in minding the gap between the world's will for us and God's will. SO...how do we do it? Well, in these two verses, Paul makes it simple: We will discern and obey the will of God when we change the way we act and change the way we think.

Right there you might say, "Whoa, hold up there, cowboy. You just spent 11 chapters telling me that because of my sin, I am not capable of acting and thinking the way God wants me to. No matter what, I cannot be good enough to earn God's love and favor. Are you changing your tune, Toone?" Nope. God's forgiveness is ABSOLUTELY an act of his grace and mercy. In fact, that's where Paul starts this passage: "I appeal to you therefore...by the mercies of God..." All those mercies he just described: how God saw us, loved us, called us and saved us and adopted us through the gracious gift of Jesus...because of THOSE mercies, Paul can call us "brothers." In other words, he speaks now to believers who have been forgiven by Jesus and filled with his Holy Spirit. We cannot do the things he is about to ask of us UNLESS we have been forgiven and saved and filled! But **if** we are the brothers and sisters of Jesus, children of God through the Holy Spirit (Paul says) the Spirit...makes it possible for us to live as we were created to live. He summarizes it in two ways.

First, "...present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God which is your spiritual worship." This is temple language. Both Jews AND non-Jews in Rome understood this language. BOTH Jews and pagans had temples where they slaughtered and burned animals in sacrifice to their gods. Five of these words are temple words: "present," "sacrifice," "holy" (you always presented an unblemished, "holy" animal), "acceptable" (that was the word that described the smell of a burnt offering, the aroma that went up to God was "acceptable"); and "worship."

Paul is using temple language...but with one huge difference. What word is different? LIVING! We are to present ourselves as a LIVING sacrifice. Why? Because, with the crucifixion of Jesus, the final blood sacrifice is done! Up 'til then, every blood sacrifice was temporary. But along came Jesus, the one John the Baptist called "The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" When Jesus shed HIS blood, that was the perfect, permanent sacrifice for our sins. It never needs be done again. Instead, we are to offer ourselves up as a LIVING sacrifice.

But notice...WHAT do we offer? Our bodies. We might assume this means "our whole selves." But the word means...literally... your physical body. Your hands and feet and eyes and mouth. This would have been disgusting to his Greek readers because they believed the material body was vulgar; a

necessary evil to house the human soul. But what Paul says is this: I don't want a religion that is just internal. Our faith is an external one, too. The Holy Spirit living in us ought to change the way we behave! It ought to change the way we use these bodies of ours.

And remember, he's not saying that we behave so that God notices us, takes a liking to us and does nice things for us. No...we behave differently BECAUSE God has noticed us, loved us, saved us and filled us with his Spirit. We behave because God is changing us...and because we are so grateful for his salvation

In other words, IF the Spirit of Jesus lives you, he should be taking control of your body parts. Those lips that used to speak foul words or gossip...those lips should begin to speak words of blessing and encouragement. That middle finger so easily lifted in a salute to another driver...or that forefinger so easily pointed in accusation... should be replaced by an open hand of kindness or a calloused hand of service. Those eyes that used to watch TV trash ought to start looking at things more life-giving.

Recently I started watching reruns of "Friends" which I remember as pretty darned funny...and it is. But about five shows in, I realized that EVERY single show had to do with sex. EVERY one. We're not talking about loving intimacy between married couples. This is musical-chairs-sex; who's sleeping with whom this week? I suddenly became disgusted with what my eyes were drinking in...and I'm not watching any more.

We become a living sacrifice when we allow the Spirit to change the way we use our body parts. The ancient church called this the *mortification of the flesh*. Which means, we are allowing the Spirit to kill off the sinful ways we use our body...and begin to redeem it. Let me ask this: which of your body parts most needs to be redeemed by the Holy Spirit? You know what it is. Is it a mouth that speaks or eats or drinks in deadly ways? Ears that listen to toxic things? Sexual parts that continue to behave as if they never met Jesus? If you are in Christ, you now have the power to present those body parts to the Lord as a LIVING sacrifice; to say, "I want to use my whole body in a way that worships and honors you!" How we behave in the Spirit helps us to mind the GAP between the world's ways and God's ways.

So does the way we think. Paul says, "Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed the renewal of your mind..." That word "conformed" in the Greek is *Syschematizomai*. That's a mouthful, isn't it? What does it sound like? Schematic. Paul says, "Don't let the world force you into its scheme!" Another translation says, "Don't let the world squeeze you into its mold." Like this Jell-O mold. If Paul had Jell-O in his day, he might have said, "Don't be like Jell-O! This is the world. This is its mold. And it wants to pour you into the mold so that you will look like, act like, think like, dress like, talk like, behave like everyone else." The world wants us to conform! And the mold...the standards we are being pressed into... are diametrically opposed to the design God has for us. If you stay in this, you turn out like this!

So what is the alternative? If we aren't to be "conformed" what ARE we to be? "Transformed!" The Greek is *metamorphoo*. What does THAT sound like? Metamorphosis. It is the word that describes Jesus on the mountain of transfiguration. Utterly changed. Utterly transformed! And HOW are we transformed? By the renewal of our minds. And HOW do we renew our minds? By what we are doing right here, for starters. By studying God's Word! The Bible...the revealed Word of God...interpreted to us by the power of the Holy Spirit...THAT is how we begin to think God's thoughts and live God's way in God's world. THAT is how we discern God's will...the good, acceptable and perfect will of God. The GAP.

This week I learned that GQ...that magazine to which everyone turns for deep thoughts on literary criticism...published an issue featuring the 21 most overrated books of all time, the books you could

die WITHOUT having read. Guess which was number 12 on GQ's list? Yep, the Bible. I quote from the article:

"The Holy Bible...is certainly not the finest thing that man has ever produced. It is repetitive, self-contradictory, sententious, foolish and, even at times ill-intentioned." (By the way, "sententious" means "pompous and preachy" ...like writers who use the word "sententious.")

Silly us, here we were thinking that this all-time best seller...5 billion copies and counting... IS in fact the best thing ever produced...not by man...but by the Spirit of God. That its message has changed billions of lives. That it is the MOST important book ever written. That by reading and living it, we can discern God's will and renew our minds instead of allowing ourselves to be just one more wobbly, spineless, unthinking blob punched out of the world's mold.

Our kids, especially, are being squeezed to conform. The messages they receive through music and the rest of the media and through group-think education...are exerting tremendous pressure on them to conform. That's why what we celebrate tonight/day is so huge! We welcome 19 young disciples into membership in God's church. 19 young people who are saying, "I am NOT going to allow myself to be poured into the world's mold. I am going to allow the Spirit of Christ to transform me into the unique, beloved, gifted and called person God intends for me to be." These young people you are about to meet are revolutionaries! They deserve to be honored and celebrated. Would you do that as they come forward?