

*The Sacrifice of Your Sleeping, Eating,
Going-to-Work, Walking-Around, Everyday, Ordinary Life'
Part 1 - Getting the Real Story
Romans 12:1-2*

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ October 25, 2015 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

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¹I 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. ²Do 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. (Romans 12:1-2, NRSV)

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The other night at home we came across some old photos of me when I was in high school. My kids always seem to enjoy looking at old pictures of me. Not so much because they like to learn about the life of their father but because they find great amusement in the life of their father. They seem to especially enjoy mocking the fashion choices I made when I was their age. No matter how many times I tell my kids that mullets were actually in high style in 1983, and that my mullet was, in fact, the talk of many of my jealous peers, my kids still can't imagine what in the world would possess me to wear my hair like that out in public. And no, I'm not going to show you a picture.

Thankfully, I'm far enough removed from those awkward high school fashion choices so that it doesn't much bother me when my kids tell me that I used to dress like a dork. In fact, I actually take great pleasure in telling them that so do they. They just don't know it yet. For it's only a matter of time until their own teenage children one day come across some old high school photos of them ask them, between howls of laughter, how in the world they could ever go out in public dressed like the way they did.

Fashion, as much as anything, is evidence of the power of culture to shape our lives. Truth is, very few of us choose our clothes purely based on comfort or affordability. The fact that none of us are wearing bell-bottoms, or polyester jumpsuits, or parachute pants, or mullets this morning is evidence that our culture has great influence over how we present ourselves.

It's not just fashion, however. The culture of this world, if we allow it to, has the power to shape and influence us in all sorts of ways. This is the reason for Paul's warning in Romans 12:2 that we not be conformed to this world. Because if you allow it to, the world around you will squeeze you into its mold, influencing not only how you dress, but how you use your money, how you raise your kids, how you relate to your spouse, how you handle sex, how you think about other people who are different than you, and even what you believe about God, and truth, and eternity.

The reality is that our world, this present age, is in rebellion against God, and has been for a long, long time. We live in a world where sin, and death, and selfish pursuit, and injustice, and hypocrisy, and violence, and materialism rule the day. Contrast that to the kingdom which Christ came to usher in, a kingdom of joy, peace, hope, justice, wholeness, right relationship, and life. It's not that everything in the world is bad. Far from it. There is much good and beauty in our world. But there is also much which is not good, much which is at work against the purposes of God. So we must be discerning, Paul warns, else we find ourselves conformed.

“Do not be conformed to this world,” Paul writes, “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.” That word “transformed” here is the Greek word “*metamorphoó*”, from which we get our English word metamorphosis. In Paul's day the word was often used to describe the formation and growth of an embryo in a mother's body. We're talking about the inward and real formation of the essential nature of something or someone. Today I think about a caterpillar which goes into a

¹ I've shamelessly stolen this title from Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of Romans 12:1 in *The Message*.

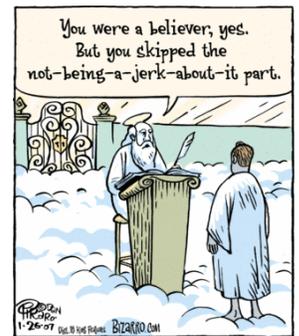
cocoon and emerges some days later as a butterfly. It's still the same creature but one that has gone through a total transformation.

In a similar way, we are to be formed into something altogether different, specifically into people who know, and then live out, the good, acceptable and perfect will of God. Put another way, our lives are to take on the shape of Jesus' life. Paul writes elsewhere in Romans 8:29 that we are to be "conformed to the image of the Son."² You see, to be a disciple of Jesus means to be one who follows Jesus. This means a Christian is not just somebody who *learns* what their teacher *knows*, but *becomes* the kind of person their teacher *is*, not only having Jesus' character but doing the things he did.

If you haven't done so recently, read through the book of Acts, the story of the early church. You will find there men and women who were at one time completely unlike Jesus when he first called them as his followers. But later, having been filled with the Spirit of the resurrected Christ, they became transformed people. In Acts they sound like Jesus, act like Jesus, and even do the same amazing things that Jesus did! It's almost like Jesus had multiplied himself many times over.

I'm afraid we forget this in the church. The primary goal of the Christian life is not to make sure you believe all the right things, or to make yourself into a nicer person, or even to go to heaven when you die. While those are all good things, the *primary* goal of the Christian life is to be transformed into a brand new creation, and not just someday in heaven but today on earth.

One of my favorite cartoon strips is Bizarro and this may be my favorite Bizarro. "You were a believer, yes. But you skipped the not-being-a-jerk-about-it part." Belief is not enough. Our faith must change us or it's good for nothing. James 2:17 makes clear, "Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead." Jesus himself used a simple parable to make the same point: "Everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell – and great was its fall!"³ Even Martin Luther, the great reformer whose life calling was to remind the church that we are not saved by our works but by grace through faith alone, once wrote, "We are saved by faith alone, but not by faith that remains alone." The primary goal of the Christian life is not only to have faith in Jesus but to see that faith transform us to become, in every way, like Jesus.



Here's a hard reality we need to face. Too many of us in the church have never come to a faith that leads to this sort of radical transformation in our lives. Contemporary writer and priest Richard Rohr doesn't pull punches when he writes, "Christians are usually sincere and well-intentioned people until you get to any real issues of ego, control, power, money, pleasure and security. Then they tend to be pretty much like everybody else. [The reason for this is they have been given] a bogus version of the Gospel, some fast-food religion, without any deep transformation of the self; and the result has been the spiritual disaster of 'Christian' countries that tend to be as consumer-oriented, proud, warlike, racist, class conscious, and addictive as everybody else – and often more so, I am afraid."⁴

If you have been a Christian for some time, don't you sometimes wonder why you haven't seen more change in your life? Do you ever wonder why your life doesn't seem to have undergone the sort of transformation we see Christians in the New Testament undergo? Yes, we may know people these days who seem to come to know Christ and then become completely different people, but we assume that they must be the exception to the rule. They are not supposed to be. Again, the primary goal of the Christian life for ordinary, everyday Christians like me and you is that *we* would be transformed to increasingly become like Jesus in every way. Grace is not only a power from God that saves us in one moment but is also a power that can be at work transforming us in and for every moment.

The problem, according to Paul, is that we continue to allow ourselves to be conformed to the patterns of this world instead of making sure we are being transformed by the renewing of our minds. Did you catch that? Paul does not tell us we need to try harder, that we need to grit our teeth and redouble our efforts to live like Jesus. No. We need our minds renewed. We need to think differently. Basically, we need different, better, truer stories.

² See also Galatians 4:19, "My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you."

³ Matthew 7:27 (NRSV)

⁴ Richard Rohr, *Breathing Under Water* (Cincinnati: Franciscan, 2011), xxi.

Cultural analyst Fredric Jameson once said, “Narrative is the central function of the human mind.”⁵ Everything in life is story. Everything! We dream, day-dream, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticize, construct, gossip, learn, hate and love by story.⁶ That means that the stories which take root in our minds will always have a profound influence on the way we live our lives.

There are children, you know, who grow up being told from a very young age that they are failures, that they will never amount to anything and will always be a disappointment. If that is the story you are given about yourself from a very young age do you know how hard it is to learn a different story later in life. It is almost impossible. Or imagine you grow up being told the story that the God in heaven is not happy with you or the way you are living and that you are going to really need to get your act together if you ever have a chance of earning his favor and going to heaven one day. Can you see how that story will lead a person into a lifetime of guilt, and shame, and despair? Many of us were fed stories growing up about ourselves or others or God and those stories are on an endless loop in our minds, influencing everything about us today. As one writer noted, “Our stories shape us without regard to their accuracy or helpfulness. There is a story in your mind that is running (or ruining) your life.”⁷ Do you know what that story is?

The world around us has lots of stories to tell us, powerfully attractive and convincing stories. And if we listen with undiscerning ears we will begin to believe even the inaccurate and unhelpful stories we are told. Here’s a great example. Our world tells us the story about how people who are more accomplished, more successful, better looking, and wealthier are of more value than the rest of us. And immediately you say, “I don’t believe that story.” And then a celebrity shows up at the restaurant where you’re eating, somebody known for their accomplishments, their looks, their money, and everybody in the place, including yourself, can’t keep from gawking. Why are almost all of us so captivated by celebrity if we haven’t believed the story that some people, because of their looks, accomplishments or money are somehow more important in this world?

Here’s another example. So much of the advertising thrown our way these days uses the world’s standard of physical beauty to sell us everything from power tools, to automobiles, to blue jeans to cheeseburgers. And how many little girls in our culture grow up hating the way they look because their looks don’t fit the story of what the world has told us about true beauty? Believe me, the world around us has powerfully convincing stories that, much of the time, are believed without any regard to their accuracy or helpfulness.

With that in mind, do you remember what were the very first words Jesus spoke when he launched his public ministry? In Mark 1:14–15 we read, “**Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.’**”⁸ Jesus is announcing that the kingdom of God is about to break in and write a whole new story for this broken and rebellious world and what’s the first thing he tells us to do? Repent. It’s a word that literally means “to change one’s mind.” Jesus tells us right from the start that a whole new story is begin written by God and we are going to need to replace our old stories with this new story.

Ever notice how so much of Jesus’ teaching was done in stories? He told stories about farmers sowing seeds, and people finding buried treasure in fields, and shepherds going after lost sheep, and fathers welcoming home long-lost sons, and vineyard owners paying their workers ridiculously generous salaries, and Samaritans risking their lives to help Jewish enemies. What was he doing? He’s giving us better stories, right stories, true stories about God, and God’s kingdom, and how God sees us, and what God is doing to renew this whole world, and how we can get in on it. He’s telling us, “Repent! Change your mind! Change your stories! See things the way I see them instead of the way the world is trying to get you to see them. Be transformed by the renewing of your minds!”

The question, of course, is do we believe him? Are we willing to allow Jesus’ stories, as far-fetched as they may seem to be at times, to become our stories? Sadly, too often we are not willing. We admire Jesus. We say we follow and worship Jesus. But then we aren’t prepared to let him teach us and lead us and inform us in every area of our lives. As writer Dallas Willard notes, we are ready to believe what the “latest studies” have to teach us about love and sex, what Warren Buffet has to teach us about finances, what “Dear Abby” can teach us about how to get along with our family

⁵ Cited by James Bryan Smith, *The Good and Beautiful God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2009), 24.

⁶ James Bryan Smith, 25.

⁷ James Bryan Smith, 25.

⁸ NRSV

and co-workers, and what Carl Sagan has to say about the cosmos. In doing so, we lose any sense of the difference between information and wisdom. Then we act accordingly.⁹

Last week, as we looked at verse 1 in the passage we read earlier, we were reminded that in light of the unmatched grace we have been shown by God through Christ our natural response is to offer our very lives, our sleeping, eating, going-to-work, walking-around, everyday, ordinary lives as an act of worship. After what Jesus has done for us, shouldn't we want to follow him even in the most routine moments of our lives? This doesn't happen all at once, of course. We don't just change completely overnight. But as followers of Jesus we are put into a lifelong process of transformation. And God has provided what is needed for this to happen. God's grace, in other words, isn't only the motivation we need to offer our lives, but is also the power available to us to actually offer them up!

But it all begins with getting the real story, the right story. It begins with a faith that says we will consider Jesus our teacher even in our moment-to-moment existence because, as the eternal, all-powerful, all-knowing, all-present God of the universe, he can be absolutely trusted, even when not understood, as a worthy teacher. We must believe the story he tells us about how God loves us no matter what, even delights in us as we are. Then we must believe the story he tells about how God feels exactly the same about everybody else. We must believe his story about how we really can be transformed into radically new people who love and forgive even our enemies, are set free from addictions, freely give away what we possess without expecting anything in return, live completely unafraid of death, find ourselves naturally drawn to the poorest outcasts of the world, and live with deep a peace inside no matter how hard the storms of life rage outside. Finally, we must, of course, believe the story he tells about how one day he will return and finally and forever set all things in this world right again.

A belief in these stories is called faith. And when we truly have faith we begin to be transformed. In other words, true faith always leads to real change. But first we must learn, and then believe, the stories Jesus tells us. We must immerse ourselves in the scriptures, letting God speak to us from his Word and letting his voice rise above all other voices in our lives. Then slowly we will begin to see and believe that Jesus' stories, rather than the ones the world keeps trying to use to conform us, are the true stories which can transform us.

In these coming weeks we are going to walk through the rest of Romans 12 and get a very tangible, practical picture of the transformed life Jesus wants for every person who comes to follow him. Paul will make clear how Jesus wants to make us people of sober judgment and humility, people who find and know our place to serve, people who love good and hate evil, people who stay the course no matter what, people who show hospitality unlike the world has ever seen, and people who love even those in this world who hate us.

This is the life that Jesus wants to give you. And I've got to ask you, do you believe such a life is possible, at least in increasing measure? Do you even want this life in the first place? Not everybody does, you know. If you do, if you're willing to trade the world's stories for his, then Jesus will set you on a path beside himself towards the life you have always wanted but perhaps never before thought was within reach.

Amen.



The Next Step **A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application**

1. What was a bad fashion choice you made in the past simply because you were trying to fit in with the crowd?
2. Read Romans 12:1-2, focusing especially on verse 2. What do you think it means to be conformed to this world?
3. What is one area of life where you feel the world around you trying to squeeze you into its mold?
4. It was stated that the primary goal of the Christian life is to be transformed into the likeness of Christ, to become like Christ in all respects not someday in heaven but even this day on earth. Do you agree?

⁹ Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy* (San Francisco: Harper, 1997), 55.

5. If you are a Christian, do you ever wonder why you have not seen more change in your life, especially when you consider the way the first disciples in the early church seemed to have undergone such radical transformation? If so, how do you account for this?
6. Paul says we must be transformed by “the renewing of our minds”. What do you think this means? How is the mind of a Christian renewed?
7. Do you trust that the “story” Jesus tells is the true story, that he can be trusted to teach us in every aspect of our lives (finances, family, friendships, romance, business, politics, etc.)? Or, are you somebody who believes that Jesus’ wisdom only extends to “religious” matters?
8. How has your mind been renewed by this message?

	<p style="text-align: center;">Table to Table Question <i>A question for kids and adults to answer together</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">What is one thing Jesus wants to change in you? Is he strong enough to do it if you let him?</p>
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