

Romans 12

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[0 : 00] Well, perhaps Christmas has already grown a little bit cloudy in your memories. I think, like me, I imagine many of you are lost in the haze that is late December through to early January.

But throughout the Christmas season, my wife finds me, and these are in her own words, to be a bit of a grinch. And I've decided over the years to not shy away from that, but really to lean more into it.

In fact, I like being the Christmas Grinch so much that I tend to extend it beyond the festive season to New Year's and the making of New Year's resolutions.

In the words of, who I think is the greatest songwriter of this century, on New Year's Eve, with thunderous praise and lofty adoration, a second passes by, and yet nothing changes.

So often, if we're honest, is our experience of the resolutions that we make at the end of the old year and at the start of the new. This is our experience as the year goes on.

[1 : 10] It does intend to bring the change that we envisioned, the new selves that we hoped we would become or imagined we could be.

Maybe that hasn't been your experience this year. We are, after all, not even a week in. But with time, it is typically everyone's experience.

In the long run, the transformation, the change, the renewal that we hope for seems to elude us, to be frustrated.

But we keep making these resolutions, don't we? We set ourselves new ambitions and we pursue them. We don't only hope for better years, but I imagine most of us hope to become better selves, better people.

We aspire for change, and these are good longings. In a word, we all desire renewal. We all desire to be transformed, to be changed, to become something different to what we know ourselves to be.

[2 : 20] And yet, these are frustrated hopes. This is very well illustrated at New Year's Eve with the making of resolutions. And as the year goes on, but also, I think, perfectly described in Cormac McCarthy's novel, No Country for Old Men.

If you haven't read it or watched the film, then make that one of your resolutions this year. Now, at one point in the novel, the main character, his name is Llewyn Marcy, picks up a young hitchhiker.

And he learns as they speak that she's on her way to California. She's going to Hollywood, where she believes you can be or become anyone or anything.

Moss says this to her after a silence. After hearing this and hearing of her aspirations and her dreams, he says that you think when you get to California, you'll sort of start over.

And she says to him, that's precisely what I'm hoping for. To start over. To turn over a new leaf. To become a new person. A sentiment that we can all agree with.

[3 : 33] But to this, Moss replies. He says, it's not really about knowing where you are. It's about thinking that you got there without taking anything with you.

You see, your notions about starting over, in fact, anybody's notions about starting over, in reality, you don't. You can't. That's what it's about.

But every step you take is forever. And you can't make any of it go away. None of it.

Like I said, the New Year's Grinch. I'm here. Put another way, our hopes of new beginnings and starting anew will always be frustrated.

Because, as Lewin Moss notes, Cormac McCarthy's character notes, every step that we take is forever. We can't do away with them.

[4 : 37] And so every step literally, metaphorically, brings us to the point and to the person that we are. And we can't simply shed that off and become someone else.

Everything you have done comes with you. And it makes you who you are. And so the question then is, what do we do with these longings for renewal?

Is it even possible to change, to become someone who is renewed and transformed? Can we be renewed and made new?

Can we be different? Can we ever truly change? The two verses that I read for us just now, indeed, the message of the Bible, centered and rooted in the gospel, answers that question with a resounding yes.

But how that change comes about is perhaps slightly different to the ways in which we imagine it will. I have three short points for us this morning.

[5 : 47] Three unconventional, we might call them, or unusual means of transformation. And the first is that there will be no transformation apart from the mercy of God.

Look at our passage. Look at how it begins in verse 1. I urge you, Paul writes, brothers, sisters, I urge you in view of God's mercy.

And now I really hate doing this sort of thing, but I do think that translations other than the NIV, which most of us have here, do a better job of rendering that verse.

Because Paul doesn't say in view of God's mercy, but actually he says it is by God's mercy that I urge you. That is, God's mercy is the means of transformation and not simply the thing that motivates transformation.

This is where Paul starts. By the mercies of God, I urge you. And why does he start there?

[7 : 00] And the short answer to that question is, he doesn't. Because you would have noticed we're reading from Romans 12 and not Romans 1. In fact, the whole book has been one long explanation of these mercies of God.

An exposition of the grace of God that meets people in need of transformation. Systematically, starting in Romans 1, Paul sets out to demonstrate that what we know deep down about ourselves, whether we admit it or not, that we desperately wish we could be something other than ourselves, that we could be changed and different.

He sees this. He acknowledges that only we discover again and again at every turn that we cannot. That our resolutions fail. That they're forgotten. That they're frustrated.

And ultimately that they don't bring the renewal that we hope for. This is actually the writer's experience himself. If we went back to Romans 7, Paul said this famously perhaps, I do not understand what I do.

For what I want to do, I do not do. And rather what I hate, I end up doing. There is no new year, new you.

[8 : 21] Until you confront the real you. Until you confront yourself. This is Paul's experience. In order to understand and to be transformed by God's mercies, we must first account for the fact that we are in desperate need of those mercies.

As Cormac McCarthy's character put it, you don't start over. Every step you take is forever. And you can't make them go away. None of them.

This is who you are. This is who I am. And every decision has brought me to this point. Every decision I've made in my life.

Those that have hurt others. That have torpedoed myself. The myriad of ways in which I've acted selfishly. And with no concern for my neighbor. The various ways in which my life hasn't amounted to my better and best instincts and hopes.

Of course the Bible takes all of those things and bundles them up in a very unpopular word, the word sin. But as it's been said by so many people, who can deny that reality?

[9 : 40] Truly, what arguments can be made against the fact that we know how we ought to live, and yet we live in other ways? We know how we ought to treat people, and yet we don't extend them our love.

Earlier in Romans, Paul lists some of the ways that this sin is expressed. And listen to them. In Romans chapter 1, he says, Greed, envy, strife, hatred, malice, deceit, slander, gossip, insolence, boasting, arrogance, lovelessness, infidelity.

This is no abstract description of the world out there, as Paul lists these things, but rather what's in here, what's in the human heart.

And friends, you will never be transformed, whether it's this year, the start, the end, and for the rest of your life, you will never be transformed without first confronting that.

And so learning in the process of the wonderful mercies of God. My favorite author, she writes this, There is no way to abandon this guilt.

[11 : 10] There is no decent way to disown it. All the tangles and the knots of bitterness and desperation and fear, they have to be pitied.

In fact, no better, she writes, Grace has to fall on them. Indeed, grace is just another way of referring to these mercies of God, the mercies that Paul urges us to be transformed by and through.

We can, friends, we can be renewed, remade, transformed, and changed forever, but only, only if we acknowledge, only if we realize and confront the fact that we desperately, desperately need something more than superficial fix.

That we need something to change at a fundamental and foundational level about who we are, how we see ourselves, and how we see God. That God is the one who reaches out to us in mercy and grace because we desperately need him to.

That is where transformation begins. Indeed, that is the only means of true and lasting transformation. Everything else won't last. Everything else is simply window dressing.

[12 : 30] We have a great, great need because we have a great, great sin against others, against the Lord who made us.

And in God's mercies, we learn that we have a great and greater Savior, a more merciful and gracious God. And so it's at the cross, we sang about it this morning, we'll remind ourselves about it through confession later, it's at the cross that we're confronted both with how serious our disobedience is and the ways in which we've lived, and at the same time we're shown, demonstrated, wooed by the love of God.

We can't have one without the other, but both together give us a great hope, not only for a life with the Lord, but to become and to be transformed and changed into new people.

The cross is the dazzling center. Paul speaks about the mercies of God, and they are myriad, and yet at the center stands the cross, the great love that God shows to sinful people like you and me.

And it's to the cross we must go. As people with empty hands to receive that tremendous and terrific love. This is the starting point, and without it there will be no true and lasting transformation.

[14 : 04] It is what we might call the fountainhead of any other change, and also, as this happens, of our next two points.

And so secondly, the second means of being transformed truly is that we present ourselves to God. Have a look in verse one.

Aren't you glad we're only doing two verses? Paul writes, by the mercies of God, that is empowered by God's love and grace, a love that doesn't reject us, but redeems and forgives us.

He says, by that, we are to offer our bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God. This is your true and proper worship.

The image that Paul uses here is the one of the Old Testament sacrifice. Only, as you'll notice, he calls on us, a little bit oddly, to be living sacrifices.

[15 : 15] And by doing that, he's expanding on the image that would have been so common in the Old Testament. He exhorts us to carry out lives that are pleasing to God in every sphere and place and way.

Not merely to carry offerings to the temple to make a sacrifice, but to give our lives up as sacrifices and in service of him.

The exhortation, then, for us is the same. John Calvin wrote this. He said, man dies to himself that he may begin to live with and to God.

That is, through and by the mercy of God, we hand ourselves over. We give ourselves up. We admit that we can't save ourselves, that we need God's mercies, and in doing so, we find a terrific, a wonderful master and Lord.

One who can lead and change and transform us. But this transformation, this renewal, these aspirations to be made new will always be frustrated, will always be hamstrung as we run back to our old masters and lords, as we seek to serve ourselves, as we give in to our desires, as we act and continue to act in the ways that are described in Romans 1.

[16 : 53] Earlier in Romans, Paul uses this language of offering that we read there in verse 1. In chapter 6, three times, he says that we ought not to offer ourselves, not to present ourselves or our bodies to sin, but rather by drawing on the mercies of God, we're told that we can not only possess the wonderful assurance of God's forgiveness, but can also live in ways that are increasingly pleasing to God and good for others, less centered on ourselves and our sinful desires.

And Paul frames this whole thing as worship, holiness, something that we would not be ashamed to offer up to God and to give to Him.

This we read at the end of verse 1 is our true and proper worship. This, we're told, is fitting with the new identity that we gain by the mercies of God.

As I prepared this sermon, looked at some of the commentaries, and no fewer than three of them that I read quoted this. And again, people are always like, is this really famous line?

I'd never heard of the line or the second century Stoic who said it, but Epictetus, he apparently wrote this, these famous words, and I'm sure you all know them, right? He said, if indeed I were a nightingale, I should be singing as a nightingale.

[18 : 22] If I were a swan, indeed I would sing, he says, as a swan. But as it is, I am a human being, and therefore, I must be singing hymns of praise to God, and I exhort you to do the same, to join me in this same song.

The reason that that expression, that quote, is so great is really twofold. The first is that Epictetus actually uses the same word that Paul does in verse 1 when he describes us as reasonable or rational beings.

But secondly, his analogy of the nightingale and the swan is very apt. You see, that quote is saying, look, if you profess to be this thing, indeed, if you draw on these mercies from God, well then, can you show it to me in your life?

The nightingale sings its song. I don't know anything about birds, so, I mean, but I assume it's a very distinct song. And the swan, too. And the point being that the Christian, the one who professes Christ as Lord, ought to also then be distinct in how they live.

This is your spiritual or reasonable worship, says Paul. The Christian, or to make it their aspiration daily, then, to glorify and worship God.

[20 : 00] And the application of this verse is really plain. Those of us who call ourselves believers, who follow after the Lord Jesus, who know that great and merciful love of God, must ask ourselves if our lives are given to worship of Him.

I mean, just pick up those words that Paul uses in verse 1 to ask yourself this question. Do you pursue holiness? The counterpoint there being, do you put sin to death and away?

do you strive after integrity and purity and character in all of life? And finally, is my life pleasing to God from public to private, at home and at work, in my relationships and when I'm alone?

See, by identifying worship with all of life, we must ask ourselves if our faith gives shape to the rest of life, to the decisions we make, not only about what I do with my Sunday mornings, although that is important, but with the rest of it.

What this brief section in Romans does so well in the words of the late John Stott is how it integrates our creed, what we believe with our conduct and how we live.

[21 : 38] That quote from that philosopher illustrates that well. The nightingale must sing its song and likewise the swan, the Christian too, in all of life should worship his or her God.

This theology of mercy as we saw in the first point, in those first few words of these two verses is the foundation for a life of faith.

Not a moment, not a decision, but a series of decisions to give ourselves up as sacrifices to God. Living sacrifices that are pleasing and holy.

and so I must ask myself, am I working to apply this gospel then to all of life? To how I work?

To how I use my spare time? To the way in which I treat others, whether they're family, friends, or strangers? Christ. Another way to ask these questions and apply this point is simply to examine your life as to whether there is anything distinctly Christian about it, apart from a few weekly fixtures.

[23 : 03] I urge you, verse 1, I urge you, brothers and sisters, by God's mercy, to offer your life as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God.

This is your true and proper worship. Finally, then, our third point, carrying on in verse 2, so do not conform to the pattern of this will, be transformed by the renewing of your mind, and then you'll be able to test and approve what God's will is, his good, pleasing, and perfect will.

This final point is in many ways the obverse of the second one. It's inseparable from it. Not to mention the mercies of God.

See, if it's our ambition to worship God in all of life, and then that worship is reasonable, as we read at the end of verse 1, well then, as Paul writes, our minds and our thinking, our desire and our will, needs to be transformed.

It needs to be changed. Again, this doesn't simply happen. Crucially here, the mind that's mentioned in verse 2 isn't merely our intellect or our thinking, though again, that is part of it.

[24 : 18] Commentator, I think it's his last quote here, one commentator, Colin Cruz, he's no relation to Tom, I checked, he says that the mind here includes how we think, it includes our attitude and how we perceive the world and ourselves.

ourselves. It is also the results of our thinking, both our opinions and our desires.

Have a listen to how Paul says it in Romans chapter 1. He says, because people did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, God gave them over to depraved minds so that they do what ought not to be done.

In short, and to flip that verse over, how we act, how we live, is always an outworking of what we believe on some or other level.

Our attitudes guide our actions. There is a consistency between how I live and to what I think truly matters, to what I really believe, to what I think is true.

[25 : 44] And so this final point sets up a challenging contrast for us to consider by way of application. There are, in the end, Paul says here, really just two forces that will steer, shape, and guide our lives.

He gives them to us there in verse 2. There is the world and there is God's will. And so the question I must ask myself is which of those dominates my outlook?

Which of those is seen in the ways in which I live? Which of those am I being conformed to more and more as the years pass by?

Because that's really the image that Paul gives us here. One of being molded and conformed, a long form transformation and renewal to becoming something and someone.

There's been a lot of talk in recent years about the growing hostility towards the church and that the world is now less hospitable to the Christian faith.

[26 : 59] Of course in some ways this conflict is maybe more pronounced today and a little more public with the rise of social media but as one theologian wrote over a hundred years ago now he said that's not really the case.

He said in the end if you care his name is Herman Bavinck he said in the end the battle of every age comes down to the question of authority and autonomy.

The question on the agenda in every age writes Herman Bavinck is whether there is some authority some law or some will to which the human is bound.

and so again the questions for us are does or do I think God has the right to tell me how to live?

Those who have experienced the mercy of God his great grace would be quick to say yes and so then the work becomes to ask how how is that will?

[28 : 22] How am I being conformed to it in those areas of my life that I've already mentioned? The gospel preached outside of the church the gospel preached in every age but perhaps particularly in ours is one that celebrates autonomy and the individual and kicks against authority.

Personal happiness today is the central tenet of that gospel and in some ways funnily enough it's exactly what Paul is addressing in the first century.

Do not conform he says to the pattern of the world. You are not your own he says to the Romans to us but rather by the mercies of God be transformed by the renewing of your mind and then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is his good his pleasing and his perfect will.

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