

1. Personal Transformation

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[0 : 0 0] Well, let us bow our heads and we'll pray together. Let's unite our hearts in prayer, even though one voice leads the prayer.

Let's all assent gladly in our hearts and as we join in with the Amen at the end, let's express our united desire to know the Lord and to bring our requests to him.

So let us pray. Dear God, our Father, we thank you so much for gathering us together here this afternoon. We thank you for each other's company.

We thank you that as we live the Christian life and trust you and look to you, we're not alone. We have the fellowship and company of many believers who belong to many churches.

And we thank you for all that unites us and all that we share in common. As we put our hope in the Lord Jesus, our only Savior. And we thank you so much, dear Father, that what you do to each of us is to restore our souls.

[1 : 0 6] As King David put it in the 23rd Psalm, you restore my soul. You make me walk in right paths for your name's sake. And we thank you for your gracious and loving power which enables our souls to be restored.

We think of the way, dear Father, in which you take the battered and shabby thing that is ourself. And by your power and grace, you remake us.

You change our thinking and our living. You change our values. You fashion us because you're so kind to be more and more like the Lord Jesus Christ himself.

So that our humanity comes increasingly to resemble his. And we think of the great promise in the Bible that when eventually we shall see him and you face to face, we shall be like him.

Like Christ. Our minds thoroughly, deeply, totally transformed. And the shadow of sin and everything from which we have been redeemed, totally gone.

[2 : 1 6] And there we shall stand before you, made perfect because of your grace and kindness towards us. And so even today, dear Father, continue this gracious process, we pray, of refashioning us and remaking us.

And we pray that as we read the Bible and think about the teaching of the Apostle Paul, you will bless us through his words. And we ask it in Jesus' name.

Amen. Amen. Well, let's turn to Romans chapter 12. And if you have one of our visitor's Bibles, you'll find this on page 947.

Page 947. And my plan, God willing, is to be here for four Wednesdays. And we'll look through this whole chapter, Romans 12, and I think we should be able to get to the end of it.

And I've given the series of sermons the title, Lives Made New. So today we'll be looking at verses 1 and 2. And then over the next three Wednesdays, we'll look at verses 3 to 21.

[3 : 24] That's the plan. So let me read. I'll read roughly the first half of the chapter from chapter 1. That's from verse 1 down to verse 13 today. So Paul writes, 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.

For by the grace given to me, I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.

For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.

Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them, if prophecy in proportion to our faith, if service in our serving, the one who teaches in his teaching, the one who exhorts in his exhortation, the one who contributes in generosity.

[4 : 59] The one who leads with zeal, the one who does acts of mercy with cheerfulness. Let love be genuine.

Abhor what is evil. Hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. Do not be slothful in zeal.

Be fervent in spirit. Serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope. Be patient in tribulation. Be constant in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints.

And seek to show hospitality. Amen. This is the word of the Lord, and may it be a blessing to us. Now you'll see I've taken for my title for today, the two words, personal transformation.

And all of us know that to become a Christian, and then subsequently to grow as a Christian, is going to involve personal transformation. But just what we may not be quite so clear about, is how this takes place.

[6 : 01] And how this personal transformation takes place, is not quite as I used to think of it when I was a young boy. When I was a youngster, I was taken to church regularly by my parents, to the local Anglican church in the south of England where we lived.

And I also went to our school chapel, just about every day of the week during school terms, because I went to a traditional boys' school in England, and formal Church of England services were part of the school furniture.

And we used to have to go to chapel and submit to all that. And what I was given as a youngster, both at church and in the school chapel, was much more a diet of good advice than a diet of good news.

And I got the impression that Christianity was really just a set of rules. And that personal transformation would come about if I obeyed the rules. If I was prepared to be a good boy, and obey lots of moral rules.

A bit like the school rules. Can any of you remember any of your school rules? We had to learn ours, not off by heart, but we had to learn them. I can still remember some of them. Especially the ones that I found particularly difficult to obey.

[7 : 08] Boys shall not smoke, or possess smoking materials, for example. Boys shall not kill the school cats. Boys shall not grow moustaches. Most of us couldn't actually do that at the time. Boys shall not drive their cars across the school lawns, and so on.

Now my impression was, that Christianity was a little bit like that. Keep the Ten Commandments, my boy. Polish your shoes, wash your neck, take a cold bath at six o'clock every morning, and all will be well.

Now the Bible, delightfully, is not like that. It's not just a rule book for life. Now certainly, it contains the Ten Commandments, and plenty of moral instruction besides them.

But the Bible's way is to give us good news, before it gives us good advice, or good commandments. It teaches us the good news of what God has done for helpless sinners, before it then gives us good advice, and good commandments, about how we're to live.

And it's the good news that comes first, which enables us to follow the good advice, which comes second. Now that's exactly what we find in Romans, and it's exactly what we find in these first two verses of Romans chapter 12.

[8 : 18] And you'll see that there are two strong commandments here, strong bits of what I'm calling good advice. The first one comes in verse 1, present your bodies as a living sacrifice.

And the second comes in verse 2, be transformed by the renewal of your mind. But those two great commands are based on the good news, which Paul hints at, at the beginning of verse 1.

I appeal to you, brothers, therefore, by the mercies of God. It's because of God's prior mercy to us that we're able to respond in the way that Paul is asking us to here.

In fact, Paul uses, you'll see, the plural word, mercies, because God's mercy has many facets and many splendors to it. So let me try and open up these first two verses under three headings.

And first of all, we'll look at the origin of personal transformation. And that, as I've suggested already, is the mercies of God. Now, in the first 11 chapters of Romans, Paul unfolds at some length the mercies of God.

[9 : 28] So when he says to us here in verse 1, I appeal to you, brothers, by the mercies of God, what he means is, on the basis of everything that I've been explaining to you in the foregoing chapters. So what has Paul been saying in chapters 1 to 11?

I'll try and summarize it very briefly. He starts this great letter to the Romans by saying that the human race is in a perilous condition. In this way, we lack righteousness.

That is our problem. We're sinners. Every last one of us. In fact, the Apostle Paul rubs our noses in it by telling us that there is not one human being, not one, who can truthfully say, I am righteous in the sight of God.

Paul says, all are corrupt. All have turned away. And because of our sinful rejection of God and our insistence on living for ourselves, God's wrath rests upon us.

God is angry with the human race. But, says Paul, God was not content to send us all to perdition, though that would have been perfectly justifiable.

[10 : 38] In Jesus Christ, let me just say, if there are any here who are not Christians, listen carefully here because this is the good news. What God has done in Jesus Christ is to provide the solution to our problem.

What God did was to take his son Jesus who willingly cooperated and he put him forward as the propitiation of our sins, the propitiation of God's own anger.

We deserved to die to be condemned. But Jesus died instead of us, in our place, as our substitute. God laid upon him the penalty which we deserved.

And in this way, God graciously and freely justified us, giving us a new status of righteousness in his sight so that we're now acceptable to God, not because of any effort or hard work or merit on our part, but purely because of the gracious intervention of Jesus for us.

So Jesus has done for us what we could never do for ourselves and that's why we rightly call him our saviour or our rescuer. But this position of being put in the right with God and declared righteous in the sight of God, that's not the only thing that God has done for us.

[11 : 52] Paul goes on to explain that once we've put our faith in Christ, God then gives us the Holy Spirit who begins a work of transformation from within and he makes us his children so that from now on we call him Father.

We have the family likeness, like father, like son, like father, like daughter and our hearts begin to be changed and all this is done for us and it's quite beyond and outside anything we've deserved.

What we have deserved is wrath and rejection and what we've received is grace and mercy. Now, if you're a Christian, you know these things, you've known them for a long time and you rejoice in them and quite frankly, if you're a Christian, you're amazed to think that God should have had mercy upon one like you and you'll have often said to the Lord, what have I done to deserve all this?

That's the question we ask and the answer is nothing. John Newton, of course, expressed that amazement in his famous hymn, Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me.

Paul himself in his letters is sometimes autobiographical and he says similar things. So, for example, in his first letter to Timothy, he says this, Formerly, I was a blasphemer, a persecutor and an insolent opponent, but I received mercy.

[13 : 18] A great saying. Now, the truth about Paul is that he had been a kind of religious terrorist. As a young man, he hated Christ and he hated Christ's people so much that he got Christians locked up for their faith and even put to death.

And he says this about himself in Acts chapter 22, I persecuted this way. This way means the Christian faith and Christians. I persecuted this way to the death, binding and delivering to prison both men and women.

Both men and women. He even had Christian women locked up and thrown into prison and shackled. But, says Paul, God had mercy upon me, reached out his hand to me, turned my life right around, made me a new creation, forgave me and justified me.

So, of all people, Paul knew what it is to have had mercy shown him by God. So, with that in mind, let's look again at Romans 12, verse 1. I appeal to you, therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God.

In other words, because of this wonderful, amazing weight of mercy with which God has dealt with us, because of all that, let us respond accordingly and live accordingly.

[14 : 35] So, this command in verse 1 to present our bodies to God and the command in verse 2 to have our minds renewed, these commands don't just come at us out of the blue without any basis or reason.

Paul gives them to us because God has been so merciful to us. Paul's logic is this. God's mercy leads to man's gratitude.

Lord, we say, have you shown us all this mercy? Have you rescued us from the jaws of hell and brought us forgiveness and peace? If you have, then what can we possibly do but live for you from now on?

That's the logic of what's going on here. So, that's the first thing. The origin of personal transformation is the mercies of God. And let me say this again. For any persons here who are not yet Christian believers, this is the thing for you to think about.

At the moment, you're under the wrath of God and his condemnation. But he has shown extraordinary mercy to the human race. And if you will but throw yourself upon his mercy and come to Christ, you'll be rescued.

[15 : 43] Gospel means gospel. It's good news to those who respond to it and come to Jesus. It really is good news. So, there's the first thing, the origins of personal transformation, the mercy of God.

Now, second, and we'll look at these two commandments in my second and third points. Second point, God asks us to present our bodies as living sacrifices to the Lord.

Now, why should he write of bodies? Why not just our minds or our spirits? Well, the answer is that the human being does everything physically.

Every person here is here in the body, aren't we? We're not disembodied spirits. Even our thinking is a physical process, isn't it? Our brain is as physical as our hearts or our legs. My brain is physical.

It won't function. It functions with difficulty in the best of circumstances, but it won't function normally unless it has regular food and drink and exercise and sleep. Yours is the same.

[16 : 44] Everything we do is physical, isn't it? The good things we do are physical. So if you write a check out for a good cause, that's a physical activity. Or if you send a loving letter or card or email to a friend, that too is a physical activity.

And the bad things we do are physical. So stealing money or goods involves our hands, getting drunk or committing adultery. These are physical activities. So if the mercies of God have no effect upon the way we use our bodies, there's not going to be any personal transformation.

We can't get away from the fact that we're physical beings. And that's why Paul appeals to us to present our bodies, everything we are, to God. But just look at the way he expresses it.

It's a striking phrase. Present your bodies as a living sacrifice. Now just imagine in your mind's eye constructing an altar.

Not the sort of thing we do. We don't need to now, do we? But imagine yourself constructing an altar rather as Abraham did in the mountains of Moriah when he took his young son Isaac up in the mountains to sacrifice him.

[17 : 54] So imagine you've built yourself a stone altar. Let's say it's about this high. And having built your altar, you then get up on it yourself and lie out flat on your back full length looking up into the heavens.

So you haven't taken a goat or a lamb. You've put yourself on top of this altar. And there you are looking up to the Lord. Nobody then comes to you with a knife to cut your throat and slaughter you.

Because, as verse 1 puts it, you're to be a living sacrifice, not a dead one. So there you are on the altar with all your faculties very much alive and alert and your mind is engaged.

And you say to God as you look up to heaven, everything I am, Lord, is yours. I hold none of it back. My hands are yours. My feet are yours.

My head, my heart, my tongue and all the words that my tongue says. Every aspect of my life as I lay myself upon this altar belongs to you. My financial life is yours.

[18 : 58] My life at work is yours. My domestic life, my family life, my sex life, my leisure hours, all my hours. I lay it at your disposal. You've often told me in the Bible, Lord, that you are mine.

And I am asking you and telling you now, Lord, that I too am yours. I'm on the altar. Now here's a thought, friends. All of us, I imagine, will go to bed this evening, perhaps at 10 or 11 o'clock or whenever your bedtime is.

Just think of yourself. It's quite a good moment, isn't it, when you finally, your head hits the pillow. It's a great moment, isn't it? Why not tonight, as you lie yourself down on your bed, say to the Lord, almost as if you're lying on an altar, Lord, I'm yours.

I want to be a living sacrifice. Everything that I am, every part of me, is yours. Why not try that? The founder of the Salvation Army was a fine Christian man called William Booth, who died 100 years ago in 1912 at the age of, I think, 83.

And shortly before his death, apparently somebody asked William Booth why God, how it was that God had used him so greatly in the course of his life. And he replied, the reason God has used me is that Jesus Christ has had all that there is of William Booth.

[20 : 24] Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, says Paul. And look at the end of verse 1. This is your spiritual worship. And that phrase can also be translated, this is your rational service.

In other words, this is the only reasonable, logical way to live your life. It makes sense at every level to present your body to God as a living sacrifice. It's the only right way for any human being to live.

Any other way of living, any other form of life, will twist and demean our humanity. So if I worship some idol rather than the true God, if I worship, let's say, money or success or alcohol, I shall become as weak and pathetic as the idol that I worship.

The only reasonable way to live life is to present our bodies, everything that we are, as a sacrifice to the Lord who made us for himself. It's only as we present ourselves to him that we discover the real stature and dignity of what it means to be a human being.

To grow as a Christian is to be made more deeply human until we're prepared for heaven itself. So there's the first thing. Present your bodies as a living sacrifice.

[21 : 40] Now second, Paul says, be transformed by the renewal of your mind. So the real personal transformation of becoming a Christian and then growing as a Christian involves the mind as well as the body.

We have the body in verse 1, the mind in verse 2. And that phrase, the renewal of your mind, suggests that until we really begin to appreciate the mercies of God, our minds are rather like a worn out, broken down old machine which is dropping to pieces and needs to be thoroughly refurbished and renovated.

So let's look at the detail here in verse 2. Paul says, do not be conformed but be transformed. So what is it that we're not to be conformed to?

Paul says, do not be conformed to this world. And the word that Paul uses is actually the word age. What he means is do not be conformed to the spirit of this age or the values of this age, this transient ephemeral atmosphere and culture in which we live.

So Paul is saying be non-conformists as far as the world is concerned. Don't allow the fashions of secular culture to shape your thinking and your values. So for us today we need to ask this sort of question.

[23 : 04] Is it fashionable? Is it according to the spirit of this world to pursue wealth and riches? Is it? It is, isn't it? So Paul is saying don't let's follow that fashion.

Let's be unfashionable. Well let's ask this question. Is it the fashion today to make an idol of physical fitness and bodily shape? Well Paul is saying be unfashionable.

is it the fashion to wear fashionable clothes or to buy glossy magazines which are full of those glossy photographs of beautiful clothes? Well let's be unfashionable Paul would say to us.

Is it the fashion to live for food and all the latest exotic gastronomic recipes? Well Paul would say to us let's be unfashionable. You could multiply the things that we're tempted to live for and to idolize in the modern world.

There's a great desire for so many things isn't there? For sleek cars for electronic communication gadgets sexual freedoms privatized morality you can go on naming things all these things press themselves upon us day after day and seek to shape and mold our thinking.

[24 : 15] I guess these things are most obvious for us when we're teenagers. I can remember still when I was a teenager I remember that I so wanted to look just right didn't you when you were a teenager?

You wanted to look just right I wanted to have just the right sort of clothes and the right hairstyle and I needed to listen to the right sort of music I even wanted to develop the right kind of swagger as I walk down the street you know when you're 18 isn't it silly but when you get older there are different pressures upon us still to conform to the spirit of this age not quite the same ones as when you're 18 when you're 58 or 68 it's different but there's still pressures we find it so hard to be willing to be different but Paul's message in verse 2 is don't fit in don't resist the temptation be a non-conformist as far as the standards of this transient age go this age is simply not worth conforming to with its silly pathetic idols this age is destined for the scrap heap but says Paul do something infinitely better be transformed by the renewal of your mind so when a person becomes a Christian and many of you you know this so well a reconstruction job begins to take place on the whole way in which you think your mental furniture is moved around in a radical way isn't it and that reconstruction job involves dismantling all the old ways of thinking and rebuilding the mind so as to fit it for God and for the age to come now until we become Christians our minds inevitably are geared and fitted to this age we're men and women of this world we worship the idols of this world and we wrap our souls around them as if they were the most important things but when we come to Christ all that trashy and worthless stuff begins to be seen for what it really is and it's the

Bible that then begins to nourish our souls and our minds it's the Bible that begins to reshape and reconstruct our thinking the Bible is full of power and its power is to reshape the inside of our heads so the Bible prepares us even as we're still citizens of this world to be citizens of the world to come the Bible teaches us to value what God values to value for example loyalty and hard work and truthfulness and friendship and the spirit of service and even more than teaching us these essential godly values the Bible teaches us the story the historical story of our salvation how God prepared through long ages and many centuries to come to our rescue and how finally at just the right moment he sent his son to bear sin's penalty for us to die for us and to rise again as a demonstration that the power of death was then broken the great story of the

Bible means nothing to the secular mind to those who are not Christians it just sounds like a fairy tale doesn't it like Mother Goose or Father Christmas but for those who have been nourished by the Bible for a long time this great story of the Bible how God has intervened to save us that is the thing that really matters that story about the coming of Christ about his death his resurrection his ascension into heaven and the promise of his return it's that story that true story that you and I will rejoice in even as we lie dying imagine yourself on your deathbed it's a good thing to think about what will you be thinking of then what will you value it's that story of the coming of Christ even as your body falls to pieces you'll be able to rejoice in that now this renewing of our minds it's a glorious process and friends part of the good news is that it never stops it's not as though you get to a certain age

I've been a Christian 10 years or I've been a Christian 20 years and this process of mental renewal stops not at all God continues to refit our minds for the age to come right the way through this life and if a person becomes a Christian rather late on in life in their 60s or 70s or even older the reconstruction job begins at a rather late point but it's just as real it's amazing how much an old mind can be renewed rather late in the day and you'll have known people who have become Christians late on in life don't be shy to come to Christ in your later years it is never too late for anybody and let's look back to verse 2 because Paul tells us the consequence of this renewal of the mind he says be transformed by the renewal of your mind so that by testing you may discern what is the will of God what is good and acceptable and perfect you see what he's saying he's saying that the more our minds are renewed and reconstructed the more we will be able to discern

[29 : 19] God's will to discern what God wants for human beings now Paul is not talking here about knowing if God wants me to work at this job or that job or if he wants me to live in this town or that town or to marry this person or to marry that person not God's will in that sense it's almost like reading a horoscope when you put it like that what he means is knowing God's mind being able to look with godly understanding at people and situations and the life of the world coming to understand what God wants for human beings if they are to live wisely and happily and not to end up in trouble or misery well friends we'll pursue this God willing further next week and I think we'll take verses 3 to 8 next week but I trust that just looking at these two verses which might be described almost as the fountainhead of all Christian morality these two verses the fountainhead of Christian ethical teaching and so on I trust that this gives us a view of the great changes and the happy changes that begin to come to men and women as we live our lives against the glorious backdrop of the mercies of God it's a glorious thing for us to be able to present our bodies as a living sacrifice to the Lord and it's a glorious thing to have our minds progressively renewed as we learn to shun conformity to the things of this world well let's bow our heads and we'll pray together now God our Father in heaven we thank you again for your mercies which we have not deserved and we pray for each person here each one of us we're all so different and yet these great principles we know apply to us all give us the grace we pray to present our bodies as a living sacrifice to you day after day and by your grace and mercy help us to shun conformity to the spirit of this age and to be increasingly transformed so that we're fitted for heaven and that even in this world we can begin more and more to show what you value and thus to know your will to discern what is good and acceptable and perfect and we ask all these things in Jesus name

Amen