

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, February 12, 2017**

CONFORMED OR TRANSFORMED?

Romans 12:1-8

The Word of God comes to us this morning from Romans 12, which marks a major turning point in Paul's Letter to the Romans. Turn with me in your Bible and follow along as I read verses 1-8. Let us give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God's Holy Word.

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We have come a long way on our "Journey on the Romans Road." The doxology at the end of Romans 11 marks the conclusion of the sustained, powerful theological exposition begun by Paul way back in chapter 1. The beginning of Romans 12, as I said a moment ago, marks a major turning point in the Letter to the Romans. Here we turn from the doctrinal to the practical, from exposition to exhortation, from theology to life, from orthodoxy (right belief) to orthopraxy (right living), from the gospel to day-by-day Christian discipleship. From here (12:1) to Romans 15:13, Paul focuses our attention on the implications of the gospel and how to please God in everyday life.

THEREFORE

Verse 1 begins with the word "therefore." You know what you're supposed to do when you come across the word "therefore," don't you? When you see the word "therefore," you should always ask: "What's it there for?"

When used properly, the word "therefore" always refers back to something that has come before and connects it with what comes next. In this case, here in Romans 12, the "therefore" points back to the treasure trove of the gospel, to all the doctrines of grace Paul has laid out in chapters 1-11, which he summarizes in 12:1 as "God's mercies."

MERCY

For 11 chapters, John Stott says: "Paul has been unfolding the mercies of God," emphasizing that "the gospel is precisely God's mercy to inexcusable and undeserving sinners." God has demonstrated His mercy toward us in giving His Son to die for us, in justifying us freely by His grace alone through faith alone in His Son Jesus Christ alone, in sending the Holy Spirit to be with us and to live in us, and in making us His children (Stott, *The Message of Romans*, 320).

"Mercy," without a doubt, is a word that carries a lot of theological weight with Paul. It plays an especially prominent role in Romans 9-11.

Look at Romans 9:16, for example, where Paul says: "It" – referring to election or God's sovereign choice of one and not another, such as Jacob and not Esau his brother – "does not

depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy." Not on what we have done or can do, but on who God is and His sovereign grace and mercy.

A little later, in 9:23, Paul speaks of "the objects of (God's) mercy" – meaning *you* and *me* and *everyone* who calls on His name in true repentance and faith – whom He chose and prepared in advance for glory." If you are trusting in Jesus and Him alone for your salvation, you are the object of God's mercy.

Then, in 11:30-32, he speaks of God's purpose and plan to be merciful to Jews and non-Jews alike, to all who will avail themselves of His mercy through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

The essence of mercy is to be spared the judgment or punishment you deserve. Human nature being what it is, we want mercy when we have done something wrong or have wronged someone in some way. On the other hand, justice is what we want, even demand, when someone has wronged us or treated us unfairly, or when we think our rights have been violated.

Justice is about getting what you deserve, whether good or bad. Mercy means you don't receive the sentence you justly deserve. Grace means you receive some gift or blessing you don't deserve. It comes free of charge to people who don't deserve it and never will. Like me. And you. So, as you can see, mercy and grace are two sides of the same coin. Both are undeserved gifts. Both are rooted in the character and love of God for us, the love of God manifested to us in the incarnation, life, ministry, suffering, death, and resurrection of our Savior and Lord Jesus Christ.

All the mercies of God to us in the gospel form the basis for the appeal Paul makes, starting in Romans 12:1. "In view of God's mercies," he says – in view of all God has done for us and for our salvation – "I urge you" – I beg you (Jerusalem Bible), I beseech you (KJV), I appeal to you (ESV) – to do what? "To present (or offer) your bodies as a living sacrifice" to God, "holy," which means set apart for God, and "pleasing to (Him), which is your spiritual act of worship."

A LIVING SACRIFICE

In addition to what we have noted regarding the mercies of God, there are a couple more things to observe here in verse 1. First is Paul's reference to "living sacrifices," in obvious contrast to the animal sacrifices of the Old Covenant, in which animals were killed, cut in pieces, and then placed on the altar. In Christ the Old Covenant and its ways are history. Because of the once-for-all sacrifice of the Lord Jesus on the cross for us, no more animal sacrifices are needed or desired. What God does desire, though, is that we, His people, offer our *selves*, our *lives* to Him as a whole and in every part, nothing held back, as a way of continually expressing the gratefulness of our hearts for all He has done for us, and the dedication of our whole beings to Him.

Your calling and mine is to be a living, breathing, loving, praying, serving, worshiping, witnessing sacrifice *for life*. For as long as you live. You know what the problem with living

sacrifices is, don't you? The trouble with living sacrifices is that they – we – have a tendency to slip off, or fall off, or crawl off the altar. In our weakness, we decide that being a living sacrifice is too hard. Or we take our eyes off Jesus and allow ourselves to be seduced by some temporary pleasure or phony promise the world dangles before our eyes. We choose to indulge ourselves in some way in the pleasures of sin for a season (Hebrews 11:25) rather than the blessing of God.

If you belong to Jesus – if you trust Him and Him alone for your salvation as He is offered in the gospel, if you are a true follower of Jesus – then you are meant to be a living sacrifice. With God's help, determine to stay on the altar of loving devotion to the Lord. If (or when) you fall off or crawl off the altar and go your own way, turn around and come back. Confess your sin and get back up on the altar. Renew your commitment every day to be a living sacrifice, set apart for God and pleasing to Him. Got it?

SPIRITUAL AND REASONABLE

The second thing I want you to notice is the phrase “your spiritual act of worship.” That is how the NIV translates it. The ESV is very similar. In the Greek it is *logiken latreian*. *Latreian* means “service” or “act of worship”, which are essentially synonymous with one another. *Logiken*, though, has two distinctly different meanings. It comes from the word *logikos*, which is the origin of our English word “logic.” So, one meaning of *logiken* is “logical”, “rational”, or “reasonable.” The other meaning, the one preferred by the NIV and the ESV, is “spiritual.” There is no question that the offering of ourselves as living sacrifices is a *spiritual* act of worship. It is the worshipful response of our lives to the God who made us and saved us and loves us, and who continually showers us with His mercy and grace. If, as Jesus told the Samaritan woman at the well, true worshipers worship the Father “in spirit and in truth” (John 4:23-24), then the offering of our bodies and selves as living sacrifices is an ongoing, continuous, spiritual act of worship.

If we translate *logiken* as “reasonable”, as the King James Version does, it becomes our “reasonable service” or our “reasonable act of worship.” Then what Paul is saying is: “In light of what God has done for us in the saving work of Jesus, the thing that makes the most sense – the only *reasonable* or *logical* or *sensible* thing to do – is to give ourselves to God as living sacrifices, set apart for Him and pleasing to Him in all we do.” It is a spiritual act, yes. But it is also the most reasonable thing in the world.

Don't ever let anyone – don't let “the world” – persuade you that you're crazy to follow Jesus, or that you're a fool to take the moral and ethical standards of the Bible seriously. If the gospel is true (which I believe with all my heart), then you and I are crazy to *not* believe in Jesus and follow Him. It is *not* foolish to deny yourself and follow Jesus. It is foolish *not* to. Believing the gospel and becoming a living sacrifice, putting the two together, is the smartest thing you will ever do. Not the easiest, maybe. Jesus didn't promise it would be easy. He didn't promise there would be no temptation or opposition in this life. But He did – and does – promise His presence, His power, His grace and mercy and love, at every moment. *For* every moment. Giving yourself to God as a living sacrifice is the smartest, most reasonable, and most spiritual thing you can ever do.

CONFORMED TO THE WORLD? NO.

Paul then goes on in verse 2 to say that to be a living sacrifice, set apart for God and pleasing to Him in everyday life, you and I must no longer conform to the ways and ideals of the world around us – that is, to the ways the world thinks and acts. We are not to conform to “the spirit of the age,” which is really all about self. It is all about personal autonomy, personal fulfillment, personal happiness. It places the fulfillment of one’s personal desires above everything else.

Someone once asked C. S. Lewis which of the world’s religions leads to the greatest happiness. Lewis answered: “While it lasts, the religion of worshiping oneself is best” (Lewis, *God in the Dock*, 33-34). In other words, if you want momentary, very short-term feel-good happiness, worship yourself. Indulge yourself. But understand that this kind of happiness is fleeting and will not last.

“Do not conform” – or “do not be conformed” – “any longer to the pattern of this world” (12:2a). You have probably heard J. B. Phillips’ famous paraphrase of this verse: “Don’t let the world squeeze you into its mold.” Does this have any relevance for life in the world today? You bet it does. Why? Because the world and its ways exert such a powerful influence, constantly conspiring to lure us into its trap and to squeeze us into its mold, so that there is no difference between the followers of Jesus and non-believers in the way we think and live and act.

The Message paraphrase goes like this: “Don’t become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking.”

In his book *Respectable Sins*, which one of our small groups has been studying, author Jerry Bridges addresses a lengthy list of the sins that Christians tend to ignore or tolerate in our lives. One of these sins comes under the general heading of worldliness, which Bridges defines as “a preoccupation with the things of this temporal life: accepting and going along with the values and practices of society around us without discerning if they are biblical.” The key to understanding this, he says, lies in the two words: *going along* (Bridges, *Respectable Sins*, 214).

Conforming to the pattern of the world means adopting the dominant attitudes of the world toward money, possessions, work, career, politics, power, success, sex and morality. When Christians (and even churches) turn away from the Bible’s teaching on marriage and sexuality in order to give its approval to same-sex marriage, it is an example of “going along”, of conforming to our culture, and allowing the world to squeeze us into its mold.

This is an area in which it is easy to take aim at the speck in the eye of those whose sins we find particularly distasteful, while ignoring the plank in our own eye, meaning the “respectable” sin(s) we tolerate in ourselves while at the same time judging others (cf. Matthew 7:3-5).

To give another example, think of the way the whole mentality of consumerism has infected not only our culture but the church as well. This consumer mentality encourages Christians to go “church-shopping,” to look for a church that will “meet my needs,” rather than a place where I can give of myself to serve God’s purposes and reach out to unbelievers with the message of the gospel. When “what’s in it for me?” becomes the dominant factor in choosing whether or not to get connected to a particular church, we are conforming to the pattern and ways of this world.

BE DIFFERENT FOR CHRIST’S SAKE

The bottom line is that Jesus wants us to be different from the world. He calls us to be different from the world around us. He does not want you to be different from the world around you simply to call attention to yourself. Some people make themselves different from others in order to get attention or to make some kind of statement. That is now what Jesus is talking about. He wants you to be different from “prevailing culture”, from “the pattern of this world”, for *His* sake. He wants you to be different for *Christ’s* sake. In order to please God. In order to point people to Him.

You and I are called to live differently from the world around us. Not *conformed* but *transformed* – changed from the inside out through the renewing of our minds by the power of the Holy Spirit who is at work in us.

QUESTIONS TO THINK ABOUT

The questions I would ask you to reflect on today are these:

Are you a living sacrifice, set apart for God and pleasing to Him?

Have you fallen off or crawled off the altar in order to do your own thing?

In what questionable or outright sinful ways have you conformed your life to the prevailing culture, to the world that worships at the altar of personal happiness?

Are there sins in your life, respectable or otherwise, that you need to repent and renounce?

In what area(s) of your life is God calling you to be different and to live differently from the world and its ways?

Next Sunday, the Lord willing, we will talk in more detail about the ways in which the world seduces us and lures us to compromise and conformity. And we will talk about the strategic means God uses to transform us by the renewing of our minds.

Until then (and always), keep these three imperatives front and center in your life:

1. Offer your body, your self, your life as a living sacrifice to God. It is the most reasonable thing in the world to do.

2. Do not conform and do not allow yourself to be conformed to the world and its ways that are in opposition to or competition with God.
3. Be transformed – allow God to transform you through the renewing of your mind by the work of the Holy Spirit in your life.

Lord, let it be so in us, now and forever. Amen.