

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, February 26, 2017**

### **CONFORMED OR TRANSFORMED? (3)**

**Romans 12:1-8**

#### **TWO SMALL STONES**

Os Guinness, the author of many books and one of the foremost Christian thinkers of our day, grew up in China, a country ravaged by two centuries of European and American “adventuring,” as he calls it, and then by World War II and a brutal civil war leading to the Communist take-over in 1949. His parents were medical missionaries in Nanjing, which at the time was the nation’s capital. But there were few good schools to attend, so at the age of five Os found himself heading off to a boarding school in Shanghai.

You can imagine the angst in his parents’ decision to send him off at that age, and the angst Guinness must have felt at such a tender age. It was the first time in his life he had been away from his parents and on his own. So, to give him a constant reminder of the “North Star” of the faith at the center of their family life, his father searched for two small, smooth, flat stones, and painted his life motto on one and the life motto of his mother on the other. For many years, Guinness says, those two little stones were tangible memos in the pockets of his school uniform. In his right-hand pocket was his father’s motto, “Found Faithful,” and in his left-hand pocket was his mother’s, “Please Him.”

Both of those stones were lost in the chaos of escaping from China when Mao Zedong and the People’s Army eventually overran Nanjing, returned the capital to Beijing, and began their iron and bloody rule of the entire country. But, says Guinness, “I have never forgotten the lesson of the little stones. Followers of Jesus are called to be ‘found faithful’ and to ‘please Him’ always, everywhere, and in spite of everyone and everything.” (Os Guinness, *Impossible People*)

To be found faithful to God and pleasing to Him are noble, worthy aspirations for you and me and everyone who knows Jesus as Savior and Lord. To be found faithful to God and pleasing to Him means that we must no longer be conformed to the pattern of this world and the way it thinks and acts. Instead, we must be transformed by the renewing of our minds, so that we may be able to test and approve what is the good, pleasing, and perfect will of God (Romans 12:2).

#### **METAMORPHOSIS**

I have mentioned more than once J. B. Phillips’ famous paraphrase of the first part of verse 2: “Don’t let the world around you squeeze you into its mold.” Listen to more of how Phillips renders verses 1 and 2: “With eyes wide open to the mercies of God, I beg you, brothers (and sisters), as an act of intelligent worship, to give [God] your bodies as a living sacrifice, consecrated to Him and acceptable by Him. Don’t let the world around you squeeze you into its mold, but let God re-mold your minds from within.”

In the New Living Translation, verse 2 reads: “Don’t copy the behavior and customs of the world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think.”

We have talked the last two Sundays about the call in verse 1 to present our bodies to God as a living sacrifice, which is, in Phillips’ words, “an act of intelligent worship.” It is our “reasonable service” to God (KJV) – the most reasonable thing in the world, in view of the astonishing mercies of God to such undeserving sinners as us. We have talked as well about the warning in verse 2 against conforming to the world, the warning to not copy the behaviors and customs of the world (NLT), to not let the world squeeze us into its mold (JBP) or to become so well-adjusted to our culture that we fit into it without even thinking (MSG). We talked last Sunday about some of the ways we may be tempted to compromise with the world in our beliefs and behaviors in order to fit in and go along with the world around us.

The command, “Do not conform,” or “Do not be conformed,” is not the only command in verse 2. It doesn’t stand alone. In contrast to the negative stands the positive: “Be transformed.” How? “By the renewing of your mind.”

It may not surprise you that the Greek verb meaning “to transform” is the word *metamorphomai*. Sound familiar? Of course, it does. It is the word from which we get “metamorphosis,” which means transformation, the process or end result of changing (or being changed) from one thing into another.

The same word used by Paul here in Romans 12:2 to describe the spiritual transformation in the life of a Christian is used for the process by which a caterpillar becomes a butterfly. And the transformation that takes place in the life of a Christian is no less miraculous.

Another word for this process of spiritual transformation in our lives as followers of the Lord Jesus is *sanctification*. Sanctification is the process by which we are, over time, being molded and shaped into the likeness of the character of Jesus Himself. It is the process God uses to make us more and more like Him.

It is in essence a complete “remaking” of our nature (John Ortberg, *The Life You’ve Always Wanted*), a process that requires us, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to “put to death” everything that belongs to and is characteristic of our unredeemed sinful nature, and to “put on the new self,” which increasingly reflects the character of our Creator and Lord (Colossians 3:5-10). One way to picture it is to think of getting rid of all your clothes that are stained or torn or frayed or hopelessly out of style, and getting an entirely new wardrobe consisting of the clothing of a Christ-like character. In this wardrobe you will find what Paul calls “the fruit of the Spirit” in Galatians 5: the desirable qualities of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). In Colossians 3, Paul says we are to clothe ourselves with such God-pleasing virtues as compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forbearance (bearing with each other), forgiveness, thankfulness, and above all, love. Love for God. Love for our neighbor. Love for one another in the body of Christ. Love for the people in your life who are easy to love. And love for those who are hardest to love. Love for people you don’t have it in you to love,

unless God performs a spiritual metamorphosis in you that involves the renewing of your mind and, through it, the re-making of your nature.

This process of sanctification, or being transformed, is no DIY project. You can't do it yourself. There are a lot of projects you may be able to tackle around the house. You may have do-it-yourself projects at home, here at the church, or to help out a neighbor. That is all good. But spiritual transformation is not a DIY project. No matter how hard we try, we cannot do it on our own. As Jerry Bridges points out, "It is the work of God the Holy Spirit in us by which our inner being is progressively changed, freeing us more and more from sinful habits, and developing over time the virtues of Christ-like character" (Bridges, *The Discipline of Grace*, 96).

But here is the thing: Unlike salvation, which is totally the work of God from beginning to end in a person's life, the process of sanctification is a cooperative venture between God and each one of us. Yes, sanctification is the work of the Holy Spirit in us. But we are not passive in the process. We participate in the process by our response to the Holy Spirit in joyful obedience to His provision and leading, and through our regular use of the means, or spiritual disciplines, that are instruments of sanctification in us.

To quote Bridges again, "We are both *dependent* and *responsible*" (Bridges, *Transforming Grace*, 116). We are totally dependent on the Holy Spirit. *And* we are responsible to "keep in step with the Spirit" (Galatians 5:25), to obey God's Word, to follow His leading, and to do what He instructs us to do.

The process of spiritual transformation, Paul says, involves "the renewing of your mind" (12:2). But why do our minds need to be renewed? What is the connection between your mind and your spiritual well-being? The problem with our mind is that, like every other part of us, our mind has been affected by the fall. When Adam and Eve fell into sin, and sin infected all of creation, including the whole of the human race, the mind – the way we think – was affected, too. The result, says John Piper, is that our minds do not naturally treasure God above all things. Our minds, he says, have a bent that opposes God, a mindset that is hostile to the sovereignty and supremacy of God (Piper, *The Renewed Mind and How to Have It*, Sermon preached on August 15, 2004).

Look at the world today, or in any generation, and you can see that this is intuitively obvious, even if many people refuse to believe it.

Why does your mind need to be renewed? Because if it is not, your growth toward spiritual maturity as a follower of Jesus will be severely stunted, if you grow at all. And because if it is not, you will, to one degree or another, waste your life and produce little or no spiritual fruit.

If spiritual transformation takes place by the renewing of your mind, how does the renewing of your mind take place? What are the means God uses to renew our minds? There is really nothing mysterious about this.

## **THE WORD OF GOD**

First of all, not surprisingly, God uses the Bible. In Colossians 3:2, Paul urges us to “set (our) minds on things above, not on earthly things.” One way to set your mind on heavenly, holy things, is to regularly read and meditate on God’s Word. Paul expresses it this way in Colossians 3:16: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.” In other words, fill your mind with God’s Word and thoughts about Him. Feed your mind from the riches of the Bible every day. Don’t be legalistic about it, because it is not about checking a box or performing a duty. It is about valuing God and His Word enough to let Him speak to you through it.

To be transformed by the renewing of our minds and to appropriate the grace of God available to us, says Jerry Bridges, “we must become intimate friends with the Bible” (*Transforming Grace*, 177). Most people have only a few truly intimate friends in their lifetime, friends with whom you can be really real, and with whom you can share your darkest secret and deepest pain. Whether you have such friends in your life or not, any of us can develop an intimate friendship with the Bible and with God Himself by saturating our minds and hearts with the truth and wisdom and ways and will of God revealed to us in the Bible. We can become intimate friends with the Bible by setting aside time regularly – daily – to cultivate this relationship with God and allowing God to speak to us.

Psalm 1 spells out the practical spiritual benefit of an intimate friendship with God’s Word. In the space of just six verses, it describes two kinds of people, two roads, two ways of life, by contrasting the person who takes delight in God’s Word, on the one hand, with “the wicked,” who are like dust in the wind, because they pay no attention to God’s Word. The one who is blessed of God is the one whose “delight is in the law of the Lord” and who “meditates on His law day and night” – which is to say, consistently and habitually.

For the Bible to become your intimate friend, it is not enough to simply read a passage, close your Bible, and then forget about it. Meditating on God’s Word can be a tremendous aid in the renewal of your mind. To meditate on God’s Word is to give sustained attention to a particular verse or passage or chapter, thinking about its meaning and application to your own life. The person who does this consistently will grow strong, like a well-nourished tree planted by a flowing stream, and bear good fruit month after month.

Jesus uses a different word-picture to make the same point at the end of His Sermon on the Mount with the analogy of the two houses, one built on a solid rock foundation, and the other built on a foundation of sand. Building your life on the foundation of Jesus and His Word means that when the storms and stresses and suffering and disappointments of life come into your life – and they come, in one way or another, into every life – the “house” of your life will stand, because you have built on the sure foundation of the Word of God. But if you neglect God’s Word, if you choose not to pursue an intimate friendship with the Word of God (and the God of the Word), you may well find that the foundation on which you have built your life, whatever it is, will let you down when the tough times come.

So, if you are serious about being transformed into the likeness of Christ by the renewing of your mind, bring yourself under the transforming influence of the Word of God. Spend time in the Bible every day. Store up its message in your heart (Psalm 119:11). Set your mind on things above, not on earthly things. And “let the Word of Christ have the run of the house. Give it plenty of room in your (life)” (Colossians, 3:16, *MSG*).

## **PRAYER**

A second means God uses in the work of transformation or sanctification in our lives is prayer. Our minds are renewed in the things of God as we read and meditate on God’s Word, and as we spend time in the presence of God in prayer. Prayer is both a privilege and a discipline. It is an incredible privilege to “approach the throne of grace” (Hebrews 4:16) with all of our cares and concerns and requests, along with our expressions of praise and thanksgiving and trust. Prayer is also a discipline that is not dependent on how we feel at a particular moment. As Bridges says, it is “a tangible expression of our dependence on God” (*The Discipline of Grace*, 140). This dependence on God and His grace is something we should never lose sight of, not even for a second.

For many of us, prayer doesn’t come easily or naturally. Maybe because we feel inadequate, or because the words we want are sometimes hard to find. Maybe we think we need to try to impress God, or others, with the length or spiritual depth of our prayers. Jesus made it clear, again in the Sermon on the Mount, that this is the farthest thing from the truth. He said we should not pray in order to be seen or heard by others (Matthew 6:5). Nor should we keep on babbling, thinking that the longer our prayers, the more likely it is that God will answer them (Matthew 6:7). The purpose of prayer is not to impress God, but to commune with God, to grow deeper in love with God, and to become more like Him.

The thing to remember about spiritual disciplines, of which prayer and Bible reading are just two, is that they are really about relationship. They are about our relationship with God, who desires to be in relationship with us. These disciplines or practices are not ends in themselves. They are means to an end. They are means God uses to draw us closer to Him, to help us grow in grace. They are means God employs for our sanctification. For our transformation.

## **THE CHURCH**

A third means God uses to aid in our sanctification is the church. By which I mean the ministry of the church in its varied parts and the benefit of our relationships with one another in the family of believers. In one way or another, everything we do in the life and ministry of the church is meant to contribute to our sanctification. It is true of our worship together, which is one reason that in Hebrews 10 we are urged not to give up (or slack off in) meeting together, but to encourage one another by making corporate worship and fellowship a priority in our lives. Worship, classes, small groups, ministry teams, fellowship events, service projects – all of these, in one way or another, can be used by God in our spiritual transformation by changing the way we think, encouraging us to press on in living as followers of the Lord Jesus, and encouraging us to encourage and love one another as we journey together toward heaven.

What Solomon says in Ecclesiastes 4:9-10 applies to a variety of circumstances and relationships. I often use it at weddings. But it applies just as much to our relationships as people who are in the process of being transformed by the renewing of our minds. Listen to what Solomon says:

Two are better than one,  
because they have a good return for their work.  
If one falls down,  
the other can help him (or her) up.  
But pity the one who falls  
and has no one to help him (or her) up.

We need each other. And God has given us each other, to come alongside, to support and encourage, to challenge and comfort, to teach and model and love, to walk together through all the ups and downs and ins and outs of our days here on earth. So, do not neglect or discount the value of the “one another” nature of the Christian life. Do not neglect or discount the value of church, all of our failings and shortcomings notwithstanding. Invest yourself fully in the life and ministry of the church in order to benefit others, and watch what God will do in your life to draw you closer to Him.

If you want to be “found faithful” and “pleasing Him” at all times in all things in all ways, don’t let the world around you deceive you or squeeze you into its mold, but be transformed – let God re-mold you from within – by the renewing of your mind. Day after day after day.

Lord, let it be so in us. To the glory of Your name. Amen.