

A Radically Transformed Life

Text: Romans 12:3-21

Series: Book of Romans [#16]

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Introduction

Last week we explored *Reasonable And Radical Transformation* as we looked at the first two verses of Romans 12. The big picture of those verses is that God's great salvation calls for our transformation. We are new creations in Christ who now are in the process of being conformed to His image. The transformation begins by presenting ourselves to God as a living sacrifice. It continues by swimming upstream in this downstream world and allowing God to renew our minds. One radical result of this transformation is being able to see, approve, love and live by God's will, that is, those things which are good, acceptable and perfect.

This is important and exciting. But what does it look like in life? That might not be instantly clear to us. If you have followed the Winter Olympics you probably have heard about and even seen the sport of halfpipe snowboarding. The term halfpipe comes from a surface aqueduct design. In snowboarding, machines cut the halfpipe out of a large pile of snow. The snowboarders go from the top of one side down and up to the top of the other, doing a variety of aerial moves. That's crystal clear, right? Perhaps not. To understand it you need to see it.

In Romans 12:3 Paul begins to help us see what *A Radically Transformed Life* looks like. The picture begins with...

Radically Transformed Perspectives.

The first radically transformed perspective is a humble and realistic attitude. Look at Paul's description, verse 3.

“For through the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith.”

Now drop down to verse 16.

“Be of the same mind toward one another; do not be haughty in mind, but associate with the lowly. Do not be wise in your own estimation.”

It's difficult for us to have a truly humble and realistic attitude toward ourselves. That's one of the results and evidences of being born with a self-centered, sinful human nature.

Personal humility and respect for others are foundational qualities of people who are transformed by God. In Philippians 2 Paul tells us to have the same attitude of humility that

Christ Jesus had as He left heaven, became one of us and gave His life for us (2:5-8). He also repeatedly tells us to live in harmony with each other¹ and to respect each other as equals before God.²

The Holy Spirit produces these qualities in us, but we have a role in the process. Notice a few things about developing and deepening this attitude. In verse 3 Paul tells us to have sound judgment about ourselves. This clear understanding of who and what we are and are not comes as we see ourselves through God's truth in the Scriptures and rely on His perfect perspective, His wisdom which He generously gives us as we ask in faith.³

Then verse 16 pointedly tells us not to be “haughty ... but [to] associate with the lowly.” The word haughty, in its literal sense, referred to a high mountain. Figuratively, it has the idea of being exalted or proud. Back in 11:20 it is translated *conceited*. Look at one more point in verse 10. “Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor.” We'll come back to this verse later, but for now note that this humble and realistic attitude includes devotion to each other in brotherly love, and so not standing in isolation and making comparisons and being critical. As well, it includes being humble and realistic and so being ready and willing to defer to others.

The second part of a radically transformed perspective is a wholesome spiritual life. Many people picture a wholesome life as having a good, healthy diet, getting exercise, keeping a positive attitude, making green choices, maintaining a good balance of work and rest, and avoiding the sinkhole of consumerism, along other things.

What is vital to a wholesome spiritual life? Verse 11 tells us to not be “lagging behind in diligence.” *Diligence* combines the ideas of being speedy and conscientious. A wholesome, balanced spiritual life includes being ready and quick to do things for God, and to do them with thought and thoroughness. Paul continues with the quality of being “fervent in spirit.” To be fervent, literally, means to boil. Paul tells us that a wholesome spiritual life is boiling, overflowing with passion for God, for growing in Him and also in His work. Negatively, it means not to become spiritually complacent or lazy.

The last element in verse 11 is “serving the Lord.” God transforms people to be His servants. We serve Him by making good choices and showing Christ's love in all our life as well as in church roles and ministries. All that we do we are to do as servants of God and for His glory.

Verse 12 gives us three more characteristics, which should be kept together as a unit. “rejoicing in hope, persevering in tribulation, devoted to prayer.” Regardless of what is going on in our lives, we have a certain, glorious hope of God's presence and care here on earth and forever in heaven. Taking joy in this hope enables us to endure the tough times as we are devoted to staying in touch with God through prayer.

Verse 13 looks outward toward others—“contributing to the needs of the saints, practicing hospitality.” God asks us to extend ourselves to help meet the needs others have, especially other believers. As Paul wrote in Galatians 6, “while we have opportunity, let us

do good to all people, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith” (10). Still looking outward to others, verse 15 tells us being wholesome spiritually means being empathetic. “Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep.” It’s often said that it is easier to weep with those who weep than it is to rejoice with those who rejoice. It’s more difficult to miss the medal podium or the top place on it and rejoice with the gold medalist than to console the one who had a bad fall or injury and was knocked out of the competition. That is just as true in our own lives from day to day.

A transformed perspective also has a new operating principle. Go back up to verse 4.

“For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.” (4-5)

There is a sociological principle of progression that starts with differentiation. That is, I notice the differences between myself and others. That moves on through discrimination based on those differences. That continues to prejudice. This is the way people naturally think and act. The new principle pictured here is unity in diversity. A unity not only *despite* our differences but, more importantly, a unity *built on* our differences. God designed our differences, and His intent is that by His grace they draw us together rather than divide us.

Paul draws our attention to this unity through the picture of the church as a body.⁴ Just as the body needs all its parts, so the church needs every person. We may think that we and what we do are not really needed, and that it would not matter if we weren’t around or did not serve God in the church. When we think that we are wrong. Just as the body needs eyes to see, ears to hear and feet to walk, so the church needs all the members God brings into it.

Then there is the point that no part of the body can do a solo act, can pick up and function on its own. A foot can’t walk off and leave the rest of the body behind. The thought is both comical and absurd. Yet, some of God’s people think that way with respect to themselves and the church. There’s a phrase, “I love Jesus, but I hate the church.” Some say that to express trying to get past the organizational stuff in the church they don’t like. But others actually feel that way. You are not in the process of radical transformation if you think the church is not essential to you and you are not essential to the church.

The last radically transformed perspective is to have a correct approach to defeating evil. There are many approaches to facing and defeating evil. In our Sunday School class on *The Story Of The Church*, we have seen some of them. Some people withdrew from the world as a way to try to defeat personal evil or sin. Others pursued the path of poverty and asceticism. As the organized church and governments overlapped, many used the judicial and military power of the state to combat spiritual evil and enforce spiritual conformity.

Look at what God tells us through Paul about our personal battle with evil from others.

- Verse 14. “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.”

- Verse 17. “Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men.”
- Now verse 19.
 “Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,’ says the Lord. ‘But if your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.’ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” (19-21)

God makes it clear in Scripture that we are to be concerned about and work for justice, particularly for others who are poor and vulnerable.⁵ Here God is addressing, as Christ did in the Sermon on the Mount⁶, our response to evil when it strikes us personally. We are not to retaliate, but to bless the ones who persecute us. “Really?” Yes, really. We are not to take God’s role as the judge and avenger over those who say and do bad things to us. How do we overcome their evil? By not allowing it to take hold in us and direct us, but by going beyond it, overcoming it by doing good to and for them.

Now this way is radically different than the normal way, and it is the correct way because it is God’s way. It is a way that is only possible as we submit to and trust God, and then rely on His grace and power. It is a way that does not have my own vindication as its goal, but God’s. It is a way that does not always lead to my vindication and my enemy’s judgment or repentance in this life. It gives room for repentance while trusting God as the final judge and avenger of all wrong. Remember, ultimately, all sin is a transgression against God, who is the Judge. It is God’s way for us to follow. Back in chapter 2, Paul presented the same truth from the other side, from the side of the one who does evil. Verse 4,

“Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and tolerance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance? But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God.”
 (4-5)

People God transforms not only have radically transformed perspectives, but also ...

Radically Transformed Service.

The first thing to get firmly in our minds here is that God gives every believer grace, spiritual abilities for serving Him. Look at verse 6. “Since we *have gifts* that differ according to the grace *given* to us, each of us is to exercise them accordingly.” He made the same point in Ephesians 4.

“... to each one of us *grace was given* according to the measure of Christ’s gift. Therefore it says, ‘When He ascended on high,

He led captive a host of captives, and He gave gifts to men.’”
(7-8)

The apostle Peter also pointed this out in the fourth chapter of his first letter.

“As each one [i.e., each believer] *has received* a special gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.” (verse 10)

Even if you think you do not have any meaningful natural or spiritual talents that can be used in serving God, *you do!* Spiritual abilities are a gift of God’s grace made possible by Christ’s death, resurrection and ascension. No believer has been left out. If you know Christ as your Savior, you have received grace, spiritual abilities for serving Him. The gifts God has given you are by His sovereign choice. So there is no reason to boast, feel slighted or seek gifts that you don’t have.

Paul doesn’t leave us hanging with the general statement, he goes on in verses 6-8 to give us a few examples of these spiritual abilities and how we are to use them. Go to the end of verse 6, he writes, “if prophecy, according to the proportion of his faith.” Prophets in the Old and New Testaments both revealed and preached God’s truth. Paul’s emphasis here was on people receiving truth by direct revelation from God and then declaring it. They were to do that in direct proportion to their faith. Whether you think that the gift of prophecy is active today or whether it ceased when God completed giving us the Scriptures, the standard for all declaration of truth is God’s Word.

Verse 7, “if service, in his serving.” This involves a wide range of ministry. The emphasis is on helping or assisting others. This ministry usually is in the background, not front and center. Then Paul wrote “he who teaches, in his teaching.” This is the ability to instruct, to pass on God’s truth to others. It may be in large gatherings or one on one, in formal sessions or hands-on demonstration and interaction.

Verse 8, “he who exhorts in his exhortation.” This refers both to encouraging and challenging and to urging others on. Next, “he who gives, with liberality.” Some English versions do a bit of interpreting here, adding the idea of giving to the needs of others. Paul’s words are broad stroke—the one who gives is to do so generously. While in the first sense it refers to financial giving to God’s work, it may also extend to giving ourselves, our time and talents. The amount one gives itself is not the measure, but the measure is the quality of giving generously from what one has.

Then, “he who leads, with diligence.” Those who lead in God’s work are not always in a formal position. All people gifted by God to lead are to provide direction and oversight. As we saw when we looked at verse 11, the word diligence combines the ideas of being speedy—or quick to the task instead of procrastinating—and conscientiousness—not being sloppy or hasty, but thoughtful and thorough.

Finally, Paul says “he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness.” Mercy is extending God’s love to those who need but do not deserve it. Because mercy flows from genuine love and

concern, it must be cheerfully motivated and given, never given as an *ought to* or *have to* task.

When we allow God to transform us He gives us radically transformed perspectives, radically transformed service and also ...

Radically Transformed Relationships.

Forty-five years ago the song *What The World Needs Now Is Love* was released and skyrocketed on the charts. It described the need for love as lyricist Hal David saw it, but didn't tell us what kind of love.

Paul gives us a number of qualities of God's love in and through us that is to be the glue of all our relationships. First, this is a love that is genuine. Verse 9. "Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil; cling to what is good." It is love that does not pretend, does not put on an act, does not play games. Genuine love does not love things that are evil, but shares God's righteous anger at evil while it clings to that which is good. As Paul wrote to the church at Thessalonica, "examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good" (1 Thessalonians 5:21). Yes, others, including people we care about, do things at times that don't make them seem loveable. But we are to love them not *just when* they are loveable but *just as* Christ loved us when He died for us.⁷

Then, it is a devoted love. Verse 10. "Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor." Part of this devotion means not having to take the credit and bows for what you have done together. Overall it is an ongoing, never-ending, family kind of love. When we were serving a church in Mt. Hood, Oregon, there was a family that owned two St. Bernards. You would always see the dogs together. Early one morning when the dogs were out and about, one was hit and killed by a vehicle. The other devotedly guarded his companion hour after hour, until at the end of the day the owner came home and went out to the scene. How much greater should our *devoted love* be.

Next there is the quality of generous love. Drop down to verse 13. "contributing to the needs of the saints, practicing hospitality." We've looked at this quality of contributing to the needs of the saints earlier as part of a wholesome spiritual life. It deserves our attention here because helping others when they have needs is an evidence of love that keeps relationships together and strong. A generous love also reaches out to those who don't have needs at the moment by practicing hospitality. A generous love has open arms to share and include others, to make the circle larger, not smaller.

Finally, this love is empathetic. We also looked at this quality noted in verse 15 under a wholesome spiritual life. "Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep." It goes beyond feeling *for* others to feeling and joining *with* them in their joys and sorrows.

Love that is genuine, devoted, generous and empathetic. This is the kind of love that transforms and holds relationships together. It is the kind of love the world needs now.

Another aspect of radically transformed relationships is to be on a perpetual peace mission. Canada has been known around the world for committing money and personnel to peace missions in hot spots. Christians are to be people of peace, actively pursuing peace in all our relationships. Paul writes in verse 18, “If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.” Two chapters later he writes about relationships in the church, “..we pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another” (14:19).⁸

Jesus has given us His peace⁹ and told us “be at peace with one another” (Mark 9:50), and “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God” (Matthew 5:9). This also is part of swimming upstream in this downstream world. The self-focused, self-promoting, self-justifying nature of people leaves a wide wake of discord and fractured relationships. It requires a conscious commitment to allow God to transform our minds and hearts to continually and unceasingly be on a mission of peace in all our relationships.

Conclusion.

And so Paul begins this picture of *a radically transformed life*. The butterfly is frequently used as a symbol of Easter. One of the traditional explanations of the symbol is that the life cycle of the butterfly can picture Christ’s life on earth. The caterpillar stands for His birth and life up to the cross. The cocoon stage pictures his death and burial. The butterfly emerging from the cocoon pictures His resurrection.

The butterfly can also be a symbol of our lives as Christians. The caterpillar can stand for our life before we were saved. The cocoon can stand for our death to self and sin. The butterfly emerging from the cocoon can stand for our being new creations in Christ who are in the process of being radically transformed to be like Him.

As you spend a few moments with God, begin by thanking Him that He has saved you from the ruin of serving yourself and sin to the beauty and joy of serving Him. Thank Him that you are a new creation in Christ and that He is working in you to keep on transforming you to be more and more like Christ. Think through with Him some of the truths of a transformed life that we have seen this morning, thanking Him for what He has already done in you, and facing any areas that the Holy Spirit has brought to your attention this morning that you need to focus on with Him.

¹ Romans 12:16; 15:5; 2 Corinthians 13:11; Philippians 2:2; 4:2.

² Romans 12:10, 16; 14:3, 10; Philippians 2:3.

³ James 1:5-8.

⁴ cf. 1 Corinthians 12:12-27; Ephesians 1:22-23; 4:1-16; 5:23, 29-30; Colossians 1:18, 24; 2:19; 3:15.

⁵ e.g., Leviticus 19:9-10, 13, 15; Deuteronomy 15:7-11; 26:12; Proverbs 22:9; Isaiah 10:1-3; 58:6-10; 1 John 3:16-18, etc.

⁶ Matthew 5:38-42; 7:12.

⁷ e.g., Romans 5:8; John 15:12.

⁸ cf. 2 Corinthians 13:11; 1 Thessalonians 5:13.

⁹ e.g., Romans 5:1; John 14:27.

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