

Not Conformed But Transformed

Romans 12:2

January 13, 2019

Introduction:

One of my all-time favorite Disney movies is *Beauty and the Beast* – and let me be clear I'm referring to the animated film from 1991, not the bloated, live-action mess of a movie they remade a couple of years ago. The movie begins with a cruel and selfish prince who coldly rejects a haggard old woman seeking shelter from a storm. In response, she casts a spell over the castle, transforming the prince into a hideous beast. It's a curse that can only be broken if he learns to love another and earns her love in return.

Years later, the Beast does find love with the heroine of the story, Belle, and as he lay dying, she professes her love for him. This breaks the curse and suddenly his body is magically transformed from a beast into a handsome young prince once again. Now one of the things I like about the movie is how these transformations in the story make sense: the prince who acted beastly at first is then transformed into a beast, whereas once his heart was softened to learn love and kindness and gentleness, the inner transformation of his character is reflected in his transformed appearance externally.

This is a fitting metaphor for what God does for us. God changes us from within and then calls us to have our outward actions be transformed into the new creations we've become in Christ. This morning, our passage invites us to seek out that transformation, to make real in our daily lives the inner change he's brought about in us through the gospel. Our text today invites us to stop being conformed to the world and instead be transformed by the renewing of our minds that we might reflect Christ through our obedience to God's will.

So if you would, please join me in opening your Bibles to Romans 12. Much like last week, we're going to examine only one verse this morning, v. 2. You can find our passage on pg. 947 of the pew Bibles if you don't have your own Bible with you. We'll be focusing solely on Romans 12:2, but since v. 1-2 go together, let's read both as we get started today. So please follow along as I read Romans 12:1-2. 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."**

Last week we discussed v. 1 and how we were to worship God in light of his mercies by offering our bodies as living sacrifices to him. Now in v. 2 Paul begins to unpack how that ought to look in our lives. So how do we worship God as living sacrifices? What should we do or not do in order to live lives holy and pleasing to God? Paul presents a couple of ways we can worship God in v. 2 by giving us something to avoid and another that we're to strive to do. So let's dive into it by first considering what it is we're to avoid. So then our first point this morning is this...

1. We worship God by not being conformed to the world

The first thing Paul says in v. 2 is, “**Do not be conformed to this world...**” This is a broad statement that can have many applications, but in short it means don’t look like those who are in the world. As a Christian, you’ve been set apart, called to holiness and righteousness. Therefore you should act, speak, and think differently than those who do not know Christ. Don’t be like them; be like Christ.

This word “**conform**” made me think of playing with Play Dough back when I was a kid. I remember I owned a set that had various plastic molds that came with it. You would pack the Play Dough into the mold tightly and when you pulled it out, it would take the form of whatever object the mold was. You could make a fish or giraffe or all kinds of things. The Play Dough would conform itself to the shape of the mold.

That’s a good metaphor of how we ought to think about ourselves. We aren’t to allow the world to mold us into its shape. We must not be conformed to the sinful thoughts, attitudes and behaviors of the unbelieving world around us. Now this doesn’t mean we can never be around unbelievers who might influence us. Scripture tells us avoiding unbelievers would be impossible. Paul himself said this in 1 Corinthians 5, “*I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people - not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world.*” So this isn’t a demand that we shun unbelievers.

Nor does it mean we have to avoid every kind of “worldly” entertainment. This is not a call to throw away your television or stop going to movie theatres or refuse to play or watch sports or never look at the internet again. I know some people go this route, but I don’t think is what Jesus had in mind where he told us for be in the world but not of the world. This isn’t a mandate to wall yourself up in a monastery and cut yourself off from the rest of the world, completely avoiding any involvement in culture.

I think what we’re looking at here is the difference between *mindful engagement vs. thoughtless entertainment*. Let me explain what I mean. When watching a movie or reading a book or having a conversation, we should be giving thought to what message is being conveyed. Mindful engagement means we have a critical mind to think through what ideas or values are being affirmed around us. It’s not an avoidance of people or ideas that go against God, but rather of being mindful of what’s being said instead of uncritically embracing it. To shut off your mind and not give any critical thought to what your eyes and ears are taking in is thoughtless entertainment. Unfortunately that’s what too many of us do, especially when it comes to the media. We watch movies and TV shows as a form of mindless entertainment, when instead we should be carefully thinking through and evaluating the messages and values they’re sometimes subtly (and sometimes not so subtly) proclaiming.

So let me give an example by picking on a highly popular Disney movie that will make me instantly unpopular with all the young girls sitting here right now. A few years back the movie *Frozen* became an enormous hit. And not only was the movie a hit, one

song from the film become hugely popular, the song *Let It Go*. It was everywhere for a while there: you couldn't escape it. Now I can understand why the movie and the song were huge hits - it was a fun movie and a catchy song - but there was something in the lyrics of the song that were troubling to me. A couple of the lyrics go like this:

*It's time to see what I can do; To test the limits and break through
No right, no wrong, no rules for me; I'm free.*

Can you see the problem there as a Christian parent? This declaration of complete independence from rules or any binding morality really shocked me. I remember sitting in the movie thinking to myself, "Wait... Did Elsa just turn into the villain of the film?" She hadn't, but that's the dangerous part of it. The hero of the film was now espousing in song a view that's exceedingly popular in our individualistic culture - be who you want, decide what is right and wrong for yourself - but that's not anywhere close to Christian morality. So here was a popular film and song that was introducing and enforcing a value system that would over time serve as another brick in the wall of worldly, godless thinking in the minds of children that mindlessly digested it as harmless entertainment.

And I'm not picking on *Frozen* as an exceptional case. Rather its just one of numerous examples I could use of how an uncritical acceptance of a film or television show can slowly over time cause us to be conformed to the world. The values of the world are often communicated through subtle means and if we turn off our minds when it comes to our entertainment options, we run the risk of allowing the world to shape us into its image. As a result, we need to be thoughtfully engaged with the world around us. Ask yourself: what values does this movie embrace? What does this television show teach about God and sin and happiness and morality? We can't disengage from the world, but we ought to engage our minds in what the world communicates to us because otherwise we can too easily uncritically begin to embrace it.

Let me give another example of how being conformed to the world can happen almost effortlessly. Twenty years ago, virtually no one supported the idea of gay marriage. Even President Clinton rejected it back then, signing into law the Defense of Marriage Act in 1996. So how is it that in less than twenty years our culture became convinced that this was an acceptable thing, such that gay marriage was made legal in 2016 and now anyone who believes in traditional marriage is considered a homophobe? How did this happen? It wasn't because people were reading books on ethics and thinking through well-reasoned moral defenses of it. Allow me to give you some answers why the public's options changed so quickly. *Brokeback Mountain*. *Will & Grace*. *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*. It was the media that changed our views: it came through television shows and movies. It was because people uncritically embraced the pro-homosexual view presented to them and over a very short period of time their views conformed to it. That's how this works.

So we need to hear this call to not be conformed to the world and recognize that if we aren't careful, if we aren't critically engaged with the world around us, especially the entertainment we take it, it has the power to subtly, but surely, change us. We need to be mindfully engaged and not thoughtlessly entertained. But speaking of our minds,

that's the next thing Paul was us to be concerned with when it comes to worship. The flip side of avoiding being conformed to the world is being transformed by having our minds renewed. So then, we worship God first by avoiding being conformed to the world and now the second aspect of worship is this...

2. We worship God by being transformed by the renewal of our mind

While we're not to be conformed to the world, that doesn't mean we merely avoid doing those things that would be considered worldly. In other words, being a Christian isn't taking our list of things we used to do and adding the word "not" in front of them. You can find people who avoid all kinds of worldly behaviors but haven't been transformed.

Being transformed includes not being conformed to the world externally but is far deeper than that. It's about experiencing an inner transformation that changes you at the very core of your being. Let's go back and think about Play Dough for a moment. I could take it and mold and conform it into the shape of a fish for example, but it still remained Play Dough. It didn't turn into something different. It never was transformed into a fish or a lump of gold or a snowball or anything else. It always remained what it was.

So as Christians, we're to be transformed from the inside out. It's not enough to merely not look like the world externally: we need to be transformed internally. We're to be someone different. And this is what Scripture tells us actually happens to us through the Holy Spirit. When we come to faith, we're born again, and an inner transformation takes place such that Scripture says that anyone who is in Christ is a new creation; the old has gone and the new has come! Or if I can borrow a phrase from a famous song from *Beauty and the Beast*, "There's something there that wasn't there before." God places a love for Christ in you that wasn't there before through the power of the Spirit that begins to change you, to transform you, so that you begin to live differently.

The veracity of my coming to faith in college was demonstrated by the transformation that first took place inside of me. I had a love for God that wasn't there before. As Keith Green once sang, "You put this love in my heart." The inner transformation that came from God's love resulted in me being a transformed man. It was the power that worked in me from the inside out and in turn directly impacted my external behavior. It's like what Jesus talked about regarding knowing a tree by its fruit. I started bearing good fruits of righteousness instead of the bad fruits of sin because I was no longer a bad tree. I had been transformed from a bad tree into a good tree by the power of the Holy Spirit.

This inner transformation is what will happen to anyone who is in Christ. It's the undeniable evidence of salvation: God doesn't save a man and then leave his nature unchanged, allowing him to remain captive to the power of sin. It transforms him. But while it is something that *will* happen, it's also something we're called to participate in. Our passage says our transformation is something we ought to actively seek out. Paul says, "**Be transformed by the renewal of your mind.**" It's our responsibility to rely upon the power of the Holy Spirit to bring about this inner transformation by our own willing participation in it.

So what does this mean to be “**transformed by the renewal of your mind**”? Back in Romans 1:28, Paul told us because of our sin, God had given us over “to a debased mind to do what ought not be done.” We were once darkened in our understanding and so the purpose of the renewal of our minds is to reverse this so that instead of continuing to reject God, we might better understand his will and obey it.

If we don’t properly understand God with our minds, then it will be difficult to honor God with the rest of our bodies. What we think affects what we do. This is why Paul’s letters put theology ahead of practical instructions. We need to think correctly about God first and that then serves as the grounds for how we should then live. Theologians state this as *orthodoxy before orthopraxis*, “right belief before right behavior.”

So your mind matters. An essential aspect of worshiping God is having your mind renewed so that the old sinful and erroneous ways of thinking are replaced by thinking that is informed by the truth of God’s Word. So how do you do this? How are you to go about being “**transformed by the renewal of your mind**”? Let me give you a few ways this can happen in your life.

First, you need to be in the Word of God on a regular basis. You need to allow God’s revelation of himself to soak into your mind. Sometimes it will help correct erroneous thinking, such that we come to intellectually understand God more accurately. Other times it will help to change our attitudes. When we’re anxious, it will remind us to trust in God’s good and sovereign hand. When we’re puffed up in pride, it will call us back to humility. When we’re angry and bitter, it will help to soften our hearts and remind us of Christ’s forgiveness towards us. Your mind will never be renewed if you never open your Bible and spend regular time reading, thinking, and praying over it. God’s Spirit works through God’s Word to transform God’s people. So you need to avail yourself to it. Be in God’s Word on a daily basis. Make it a priority in your life.

Second, we need to be under the regular preaching and teaching of God’s Word in the local church. We need people who give of themselves to study the Bible to help us grow in our minds. There’s a danger to simply reading the Bible in isolation, because we can sometimes read our own errors back into it. Our hearts are deceptive, and we can ignore or explain away inconvenient truths that are presented in Scripture. So we need to hear it preached and taught by someone who isn’t us, who has gone through the rigors of Bible college or seminary, to help correct us in areas we might overlook or misunderstand. A pastor shouldn’t tell you what you want to hear or be there to just confirm what you already think you know: he should tell you what you need to hear, and that means sometimes challenging your views and correcting your thinking. The pastors and teachers God has placed in your life are given to you to help your mind be renewed by encouraging, challenging, rebuking, and instructing you in God’s Word.

Third, we can have our minds renewed by the discipline of reading good books. While this was not much of an option for people five hundred years ago before the invention of the printing press, it’s a gift of God available to us now that we all should take advantage of. We live in an unparalleled time where nearly everyone is literate and thousands upon thousands of good quality Christian books are readily available. I can say that without a

doubt a significant portion of my intellectual growth as a Christian has come through the reading of books. By reading men and women smarter than I, and learning from their experiences and insights, my mind has over the years has been transformed by the books I've read. I would be an intellectually impoverished Christian were it not for the numerous authors like C.S. Lewis or John Piper or Timothy Keller or Martin Luther or D. A. Carson and others who've had an indelible impact in my understanding of Christianity.

Every *Tolle Lege* book we do here has this goal in mind: to help you worship God better by being transformed through the renewal of your mind. To be honest, it disappoints me to see so few of you taking advantage of the books I recommend. I'm trying to point you to books that would renew your minds, but they will do you no good if you never read any of them. Since I started *Tolle Lege* in 2012, I've invited you to read 32 books. If you would have picked up and read each of them, you would have over thirty fantastic books on your shelf that you've read that God could have used to renew your mind. So if you've been reading them, thank you. If not, then you've missed out on a wealth of opportunity to be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

So here's my challenge to you as we enter into this new year. Avail yourself of the means by which God can renew your mind. Read your Bible on a regular basis. Use a Bible reading plan to read through the Bible in a year or pick up one of the *Tabletalk* devotional booklets in the lobby to help you dig into Scripture each day. Be present at church each week and attend a Discipleship class and allow yourself to learn from and be challenged by those who teach the Word of God to you. And finally, don't ignore the *Tolle Lege* books. Turn over a new leaf this year and commit yourself to read the five books I put forward for us to read together. Turn off the TV at night for a half hour and do a little reading. The books we do for *Tolle Lege* are meant to help transform you by the renewal of your minds, but they won't help you unless you read them.

But the renewing of our minds is not an end unto itself. It's not gaining of knowledge for knowledge's sake. There's a purpose in this that's described in the second half of v. 2. The transformation God wants to take place in us through the renewing of our mind is so that we can discern his will and live our lives according to it. So our third and final point this morning is this...

3. We do this so we can live according to God's will

The last half of v. 2 provide us the reason we're behind the renewal of our minds. Look back in your Bibles at v. 2 once again. **“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.”**

God wants us to discern his will and by that I think it includes a few things. It includes first understanding it, second approving of it, and third, obeying it. For example, let's say a person is driving down the road and sees a speed limit sign that says, “Speed Limit 25 miles per hour.” Provided he can read, he'll understand what the law expects of him, that on this road he shouldn't drive more than 25 mile per hour. There is no guesswork necessary about the speed limit. It's clearly posted.

But Mr. Automobile Driver might not approve of it. He may think it's ridiculous to have to go so slow on this road. He can't imagine why in the world he has to puddle along at a snail's pace. So he decides he's not going to obey it and drives on down the road at 45 miles per hour instead, keeping a lookout for any cop cars as he does so.

When it comes to God's will, we need to do more than merely understand it. Many people understand quite well what God's will is and nevertheless don't approve of it and therefore don't obey it. That's why the renewal of our minds is not merely an intellectual pursuit. Some people in the social sciences think our problem is a lack of education. If people would just know better they would do better. Socrates famously said, "To know the good is to do the good" but I beg to differ. Our minds need not only knowledge of the good but a change in our wills, our heart attitude, so that we can approve of it and put it into practice. The renewal of our minds needs to result in agreeing that God's will for us is the best, even if we don't always understand it. It needs to turn understanding into action, to a changed life of willing obedience.

But let me add here that this passage also reminds us that we sometimes need to use our minds to discern God's will because it isn't always evident what we ought to do. I don't think we need to reason though whether God would have us steal money or lie on our taxes or cheat on our spouse. The Ten Commandments make it crystal clear what God's will is for us on those kinds of matters. But what about whether to take this job or that job? What school to go to? Who to marry? How much you should spend on a car or house? Those are much more difficult because we can't point to a passage in the Bible that clearly tells us, "Thou shalt not work here or purchase this item."

I don't think God lays out his will for us in every situation we face because he wants us to use our sanctified minds that are being shaped by God's Word and God's Spirit to think through things. We don't need to beg God to give us some supernatural sign to help us make every life decision. Setting out the fleece isn't meant to be normative for us! This passage calls us to have our mind renewed so they we can use our reason and intellect to discern God's good and perfect will in the everyday corners of our life.

But let me add that it's important that we invite other godly men and women to help us discern God's will, especially when it comes to important decisions in our life. I say this because we can still, in our sinfulness, deceive ourselves about things that we really want. For example, couples in a dating relationship can blind themselves to the fact that this person may not really be a good match for you, even if they are a Christian. It's easy to deceive yourself into overlooking the serious problems in the relationship simply because you want to be married, no matter what the cost. You're better able to discern God's will for your relationship when your parents and close friends who know you well are given a voice to honestly tell you what their concerns are. A wise person has many counselors who can help advise them.

In light of this then, we need to have a renewed mind because that is what helps to transform us from those who once rejected God's will for us to those who willingly and joyfully obey it. Knowledge for knowledge's sake is never the goal of a Christian. We want to have our minds renewed so that we can have our lives transformed.

Conclusion

So as we close this morning, I would invite you to do far more than hear this sermon. Do something with it. Act on it. If you've been conforming yourself to the world, allowing it to shape you rather than you shaping it, then make the changes necessary to pull you away from those things that are having an undue influence upon you.

But also, seek to be transformed by the renewal of your mind in 2019. Maybe that means you turn off the television more often and replace the garbage that you've been letting into your head with a good book instead. Commit yourself to reading the five *Tolle Lege* books we'll have this year. Take the gift of literacy and affordability given to you by living in the time and place you do to renew your mind through reading good theological books that will benefit your soul. And if you haven't been attending our Discipleship classes on Sunday morning, now's a good time to start. We just finished the Gospel Project and we're starting into new subjects. Stop sleeping in or hanging out in the lobby: come and let your mind be challenged by being part of a Discipleship class.

And finally, nothing is more basic to your Christian life than God's revelation of himself and his will as found in the Bible. If you've been neglecting it, make 2019 the year you turn it around and discipline yourself to be in the Word daily. There are so many wonderful tools available to help you read consistently and aid you in comprehending what you've read. Make it your goal to drink deep from the well of God's Word on a regular basis so your mind can be renewed and your life transformed as you surrender yourself to joyful obedience to the Lord who saved you.

Please bow your heads with me now as I close out our time together in prayer. Let's pray.

This sermon was addressed originally to the people at Grace Fellowship of Waterloo, IA by Pastor Rob Borkowitz. Copyright 2019.