



Moulding a Christian Community

Romans 12:1-8

Text: Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould, but let God re-mould your minds from within, so that you may prove in practice that the plan of God for you is good, meets all his demands and moves towards the goal of true maturity. Rom 12:2 (JBP)

We looked this morning at how our minds are so strongly influenced by the world. We are shaped by the society in which we live in more ways than we would care to imagine. This verse is a challenge to us not to be conformed but to be transformed by having new minds – minds moulded by God's way. I thought I would explore this verse in its own context more fully. I've preached on this a lot of times before and have always done it from the personal commitment point of view. It's the way most people do it.

However, the context of the verse is different. As we look at the words *don't be conformed, but be transformed* we see in the following verses just what the implication of this phrase is. Paul does not throw in verses in isolation. These two great verses are all part of a discourse where Paul is showing how these Roman Christians – mostly Gentiles – fitted into God's great scheme of things and how therefore they should live as God's people.

Once these Gentiles who he writes to were not of God – now they were the people of God. Paul is showing them what sort of people they should be. If you look back into the earlier chapters, there are the great theological chapters 1-8. They tell us in detail the meaning of our salvation – what God has done for us in Christ. Chapters 12-15 are very practical. Interestingly, apart from a few famous words in chapter 10 concerning salvation and preaching, they are often thought of as Cinderella chapters. They are about Israel and the Gentiles. I even read in one place something to the effect that in chapter 12 Paul takes up where he left off at the end of chapter 8, the intervening chapters being an aside. And aside? I don't think so. In these chapters, Paul tells the gentile believers how they got to be recipients of salvation e.g. Romans 10:9 if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. In chapter 11 Paul describes the gentile believers in terms of having been made part of the olive tree of Israel; God having grafted them on.

Chapter 11:17-20 (MSG) Some of the tree's branches were pruned and you wild olive shoots were grafted in. Yet the fact that you are now fed by that rich and holy root gives you no cause to crow over the pruned branches. Remember, you aren't feeding the root; the root is feeding you. It's certainly possible to say, "Other branches were pruned so that I could be grafted in!" Well and good. But they were pruned because they were deadwood, no longer connected by belief and commitment to the root. The only reason you're on the tree is because your graft "took" when you believed, and because you're connected to that belief-nurturing root. So don't get cocky and strut your branch. Be humbly mindful of the root that keeps you lithe and green.

So we as gentile believers have found ourselves grafted on to the same root that nourished Israel. In that respect we are the same, but how do we differ. Chapter 12 verse 1 explores that. The Jews had their worship prescribed for them. They made sacrifices when they worshipped. They made sacrifices of atonement. They also made sacrifices of worship – thank offerings. If we are now grafted on to the olive tree of Israel, what do we do. Well, Paul has just spent chapters 1 to 8 explaining how Jesus has died for us. The atoning sacrifice has been made so that bit's gone. So what about the rest? Here it comes:

1 So then, my brothers and sisters, because of God's great mercy to us I appeal to you: offer yourselves as a living sacrifice to God, dedicated to his service and pleasing to him. This is the true worship that you

should offer.

Let me give you the NIV too:

Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship

That's what reasonable service (AV) or spiritual worship (other translations) means. Service in this context is as in a service of worship, something they as a group do corporately. The most spiritual act of worship for us as believers is the presentation of ourselves as living sacrifices. What sort? Paul points to God's mercy. They have been shown mercy so these living sacrifices are thank offerings. Jesus presented His body for us and He got to be a sacrifice that was killed - we at least stay alive! What makes our sacrifice holy and acceptable? What makes us holy is our willingness to set ourselves apart for God. What makes it acceptable? That we have been prepared to do it - it's our spiritual worship - the thing that makes it acceptable is that giving ourselves as living sacrifices is an act of worship to God.

Therefore, this verse just isn't about their commitment personally to Christ in being prepared to give their all for Him, it actually reflects on the church. If we are living sacrifices then as a church we give our all to God, but as we are doing that, we are also becoming living sacrifices for one another. He died for us, we die for one another as well as Him. And as living sacrifices, we don't die, so that the giving of ourselves to one another and to God is a continual process – a spiritual service of worship. Worship isn't singing, it's the giving of ourselves to God and as a church, the giving of ourselves to one another.

Our sacrifice is to be holy and acceptable to God. Holy we know – it's set apart. We set ourselves apart for God and for one another. We have to be different. What's interesting is the use of acceptable in the next verse too. Which will help us to understand I think of what the implications of set apart and acceptable is. So here's verse 2:

Do not conform yourselves to the standards of this world, but let God transform you inwardly by a complete change of your mind. Then you will be able to know the will of God — what is good and is pleasing to him and is perfect.

Here's J B Philips again: *Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould, but let God re-mould your minds from within, so that you may prove in practice that the plan of God for you is good, meets all his demands and moves towards the goal of true maturity. Rom 12:2 (JBP)*

These words are and aimed at ensuring that they needed to change from where they were before to where God wanted them to be. No long should they be thrust into the world's mould but into God's, having a renewed minds. I think we know from Romans 8 what that renewing of mind involves: we allow the Spirit to do what He desires - that's how we get to know God's good, pleasing and perfect will. This comes well after last week when we saw how the Spirit of God is given to us to make that change – to enable us to have that inward change that transforms us.

I was interested in the bit about God's will. Here's verse 2 again in the AV *And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.*

The translators correctly spotted that the Greek word for acceptable (euarestos) appears in verse 2 as well as verse 1. Other translations don't always translate it consistently so we miss the connection. The word means well pleasing, or acceptable. The sense is that our sacrifices in verse 1 should be holy and pleasing to God and also in chapter 2 we should be transformed so we know what the pleasing will of God is. Here's the connection. How do we make our lives together pleasing to God, by doing His will? God calls our thinking and acting together to be moulded to be according to His will which is pleasing. His will is pleasing to us just as our sacrifice is pleasing to Him. If I wanted to sum up verse 2 in a rounded way, then the Message puts it all together in quite a nice way:

Message: Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you.

So what sort of people does being transformed make us? What does a transformed church look like. We get some idea from the rest of the chapter.

And because of God's gracious gift to me I say to every one of you: do not think of yourself more highly than you should. Instead, be modest in your thinking, and judge yourself according to the amount of faith that God has given you.

The first idea about transformation that this verse gives us is that we change from self-importance to recognising that we are who we are and what we are according to the measure of faith that has been assigned to us. It's a logical development from where we were last week. How do we know and understand who we are in Christ? By His Spirit within us. Therefore, before we think of how good and important we are, remember it is God who put us where we are. In fact in this passage faith and grace get mentioned 3 times:

Verse 3 according to the amount of faith that God has given you.

Verse 6 in accordance with the grace that God has given us.

Verse 6 according to the faith that we have

So in verse 6 where these phrases come together, we see how this works. It is by the grace of God we are given gifts, and it's according to the measure of faith God has given us that determines how effectively we are able to use them. It comes back to what we just read in chapter 11. We are grafted on to the olive tree; connected to the root. It's through that root that we receive the nourishment. Without it, we shrivel and die.

So God has made us part of a body, not to stand as individuals and has only given us the means to exist as part of the body. Now that's an interesting turnout isn't it? There are so many people that think that their faith can be personal and they don't need church. No, we are made to be part of the body. We are not personally referred to as the bits grafted in. It seems to be in terms of branches. We are a people grafted in. We need all the leaves and shoots on the branch to grow and thrive. In fact the Church, the body of Christ in one sense therefore is a branch, a whole new graft put on to the root that began with Israel. If you grow rose trees you'll know that usually the fine strain of roses that are bred have feeble roots, so they always take something with strong roots like the wild rose, chop the top off an graft the better strain on to it instead. That's rather the implication of what happened to the church. The bad foliage was removed and the new growth grafted on. It's another picture of the body. This whole idea goes counter to another world view that we mentioned a little this morning – that of individuality.

Roman society was much like ours strongly biased towards the furtherance of individual ambition – often at any cost. It had been a conquering nation and that wasn't done by respecting others! In verse 2 Paul calls them to no longer be conformed to that because ultimately it was a selfish and self-seeking way. Their transformed life should be one of humility. It was an idea writ large to the Roman colony in Philippi too if you remember. Why is humility so important? Because God has not made us to be personally strong, exalting us as individuals. He's made us in Christ to be interdependent.

We are not important because God has given us everything to make us a rounded and polished individual. No He's given us enough grace and enough faith so that we grow to be part of and function in a body of people. God has not saved us to be islands, but to function as part of a body. We are made to be part of one another, all connected to the root, that is Christ. We can't do without one another. We can't grow in Christ without one another. We can't achieve maturity in Christ without one another.

This is an important idea. It's one thing to talk about personal faith and personal freedom, which I'm doing of a Sunday morning. But we need to ask ourselves the question: freedom for what? The answer is not freedom to be a better individual alone, but freedom to be part of God's people: to recognise that we grow and thrive because we are part of a body, dependent upon the nourishment of God and upon one another. Christians don't thrive and grow in any other way. We grow together as a church in maturity towards God.

Let's realise that this evening. Let's celebrate that God had given us one another and let's repent of times when we have been less than loving to one another, thinking we were better or could do better ourselves. Let's covenant with one another to build one another up – in Jesus name. Amen

How do grow together – we'll explore the next few verses next time.

Prayer.