

January 2, 2012

We're resuming our study in the book of Romans today by looking at just the first 2 verses of Romans 12:

ROMANS 12:1-2

¹I 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. ²Do 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. (ESV)

These brief verses are nothing less than a call to a transformed life through our commitment to Jesus Christ. If you are committed to Christ, in other words, your life *will* be transformed. Now Paul takes about 3 chapters to lay it out, but he *starts* with the summary statement – these two verses. "This is what commitment as Christian looks like." I want to break these two verses down by focusing on certain words as we move consecutively through the text:

- The *Basis* of Commitment (v. 1a) "Therefore"
- The *Character* of Commitment (v. 1b) "Living Sacrifice"
- The *Demands* of Commitment (v. 2a) "Do Not Be Conformed"
- The *Effects* of Commitment (v. 2b) "Be Transformed"

So let's look first at the Basis of our Commitment by looking at the word "therefore."

Many of us, when we were young Christians, have heard pastors – you've certainly heard me say this – say that "Whenever you read the New Testament, and you get to the word, 'therefore,' ask yourself, "what it is it there for?"

And right here in v. 1 of chapter 12, you have a "therefore." Some translations will even start the verse with that word: "*Therefore*, I urge you brothers..."

On the face of it, the "therefore" simply seems to be a call for action – "Now that you know this, here's what I want you to do." But let's go a little deeper. Because this is one of those "therefores" that is also at the foundation – it's at the level of the deep structure – of the entire bible. Folks who have been around Hope for at least a few years will remember this, but if you haven't, it's critical that you know something about this deep structure. Because if you don't get it right, you won't get the *gospel* right.

In the book of Romans, chapter 12 marks the place where Paul moves from the doctrinal, to the practical. From credenda (that is, a creed, or "what we believe") to agenda (How we should then live). From exposition to exhortation, from proclamation to instruction.¹ Or ***from the indicatives to the imperatives***.

The **indicatives**, you'll remember, are what God has said and done – they are the divine initiative – and that the **imperatives** are the human response, how we should then live. And they are *always* in that order.

¹ From *keygma* (proclamation) to *didache* (instruction).

And the reason this foundation, this basic pattern, is so essential is that it makes the difference between Christianity and every other religion in the world.

If you ignore the indicatives – God's fore-loving us from all time, his electing love, his great work of saving you – and exclusively emphasize the imperatives, you risk turning Christianity from a faith of grace and rescue from the guilt and power of sin, into a religion of mere ethics and morality. A religion concerned *not* with showing how a gracious God reconciles guilty sinners to His son, but a religion *exclusively* concerned with having us do 7 steps or 10 practices or some other spiritual plan that is some kind of "works of the law."

But even more than that, if you dismiss the indicatives, you'll forget who you really are. Really!

Look, if *all* you grew up with led you to believe that you were worthless, good-for-nothing, and would never amount to anything, chances are pretty good that you'll live up to those very expectations, or die trying to prove them wrong. But if you were raised, say, in some kind of royal family, you may look at life very differently, and therefore conduct yourself very differently.

Well, to put it plainly, Paul has been explaining that we have been baptized into Christ. Whatever we were before that event defined you:

- your parents,
- your genealogy
- your hometown,
- your education,
- your class, or
- who you know

... these things no longer have the priority in defining who we are. WE have been *baptized* into Christ. This isn't some Christianized version of building up *our own* self-esteem – no this comes from *him!* We've been baptized into him. We've been given a new name, a new identity, we wear his robe, we share his life, we're in his family, we're predestined to be conformed to Christ's image, called into union with him, justified by Christ's righteousness – not our own – and are already seated with Christ at the right hand of the father.

This means that FIRST AND FOREMOST, we are not Americans, or members of a particular ethnic group, or Republicans or Democrats, rich or poor, or old or young. First and foremost, *we are baptized Christians*. That is the indicative. It indicates who we are, and how we got here. We are no longer slaves but sons. No longer enemies, but friends.

So that when Paul says "therefore," what he means is, "If that's true, the way we relate to God and to this world must necessarily change. Truth has consequences."

If an orphan, who has been a thief, is now adopted into a prestigious family, there will simply have to be new habits and new practices that will have to follow from that new identity. That's the imperative.

So, one last time: Grammatically, an indicative is a description of "how things are." With the bible, it's a word we've long used for those portions that tell us about our status before God.

The imperative is grammatically a command. We even have imperative moods in the Greek language, for those of you linguists. It's a "do this."

If you lose this distinction, you lose all sense of scripture. And here's how it works:

I've had people knock on the door of my home – with Bibles that are very similar to the ones you hold in your hand – and the message has been 1st) "DO THIS (an Imperative!), and then 2nd) "you will live" (the indicative 2nd).

We call this legalism. Religious legalism. What is legalism? It is preaching or presenting the "laws" or imperatives of the Bible *as if* they were the Gospel. As if the to-dos were "good news," and the real gospel of grace as if it were the law.

You must NOT reverse the order. Reversing the order of the indicative and the imperative always turns grace into law and death. That's why Paul begins here, "I appeal to you therefore, brothers, **by the mercies of God...**" In other words, God's mercy isn't the goal that we must now earn, but rather *it's the starting point*. It's not something we win or earn if we offer our bodies as a living sacrifice, but the very thing that makes it *possible* for us to do what is totally contrary to our nature. And it's only the gospel that gives this power – only the gospel has the power to change our minds about ourselves and about others.

Friends, the gospel is "You LIVE! Here is your status in Christ," *first* (indicative is always first!), and *now* that God has chosen you from before you were born and given you eternal life in Christ, **NOW**, live in a way that befits this new status. Do you see the difference? Every other religion in the world says, "Do this, and you will live," Christianity says, "You live, now do this." It makes *all* the difference.

And when he is finally done – when Paul finally finishes his closely-reasoned, very powerful, intricately constructed and profound explanation of the gospel...when he finally finishes explaining that radically sinful humanity was radically lost, but God provided a radical righteousness through the radical person of his Son, which made a radical new life possible – **he breaks out with a spontaneous burst of doxology**. He breaks into praise:

³³ Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!

³⁴ "For who has known the mind of the Lord,
or who has been his counselor?"

³⁵ "Or who has given a gift to him
that he might be repaid?"

³⁶ For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.

When it's in this order – First, God Does – that this whole carefully developed expression of the righteousness of God that is now made available to everyone by faith, then you get this burst of praise as a result of all that he has set forth in those first 11 chapters. Reverse that order – you have to give God praise, and hope that as a result, God will save... well, there won't *be* any spontaneous praise. Because the praise and worship will have become a law.

The Bible moves from Doctrine, to Doxology, and THEN to Duty. In that order.

Isaac Watts put it this way

*Love so amazing,
so divine,
demands my soul,
my life, my all.*

- **And this takes us to our second point, the *Character of Commitment*.**

So, what *is* the imperative? Paul says, "Therefore, I appeal to you brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as *a living sacrifice*..."

We're going to focus on those words, "a living sacrifice, but first, that word "appeal"... it isn't strong enough. Some translations say "urge." The older versions use "beseech." Here the New Living Translation gets it right: "I *plead* with you." The apostle, given *all* that God has done for us in his supreme grace, is begging us to offer our bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, "which is your spiritual worship (or as it says in your footnote, your "rational" or "reasonable service"). And, we should add, *show forth therefore, a heart of sacrifice*.

And this is not the sacrifice of a dead animal on an altar. In fact that would be blasphemy. That would be sacrilegious. Because the perfect sacrifice has been offered once and for all to God. There is no sacrifice of merit that we could possibly offer to God, and there is no sin offering we could offer that could add anything to the merit of the one that has been made for us by Jesus at the cross. So it can't mean that you're making your own sacrifice of atonement because in Christ we *already have* peace with God.

So why does Paul call for an *ongoing* sacrifice? It is, I think, a *thank* offering. Our reasonable response of thanks is to present our bodies – which for the Greek meant more than skin and bones – it signified everything we are. Our totality – the bible doesn't separate body and mind – in a moment will talk about the commitment of the mind, too.

But there is something interesting about this sacrifice. The Old Testament sacrifice was where the sacrifice was completely burned. Totally consumed. And yet this sacrifice is described as "living ... holy ... pleasing." The believer isn't killed as the Old Testament sacrifices were, but remains alive. We are to be *living* sacrifices in the sense of "a new life." We are also to be "holy" in that we have renounced sin and are set apart to God. Finally, we are to be "pleasing" sacrifices not because we deserve to be accepted, but because in Christ, we become an offering that is true to God's specifications. We're covered in HIS righteousness.

You see, the sacrificial *system* is already over – Christ died, once and for all. And yet it's not *entirely* over. The last sacrifice that is still in effect is the sacrifice of response that you give in response to the good news. There are no more sin offerings, no serial offerings, nothing dies. But *you*... an offering of *yourself*. Body *and* soul. That is, your *life* is to be given to God. You can now COME BEFORE GOD AT HIS THRONE because you are IN Christ.

A pastor I know had lunch with one of his congregants who had recently come to the end of his first year as chairman of his company. And the conversation went something like this. My pastor friend asked, "How's it been going?" And the man paused and said, "Oh, it's been going okay. The company is doing well and I'm proud to be part of it." And the pastor picked up on the CEO's hesitation. "Why just... 'pretty good'?"

"Well," the man said, "I've only just realized what my problem's been. Everybody in the company has a clear idea of how they want the chairman to act, what sort of meetings they think they need, and so on. I've done my best to live up to their expectations. I've gone out of my way to learn the procedures they have in place.

But just these last weeks I've realized that I've gone too far. I've let their expectations dictate the shape of my work, of how I spend my time. Now I need to turn it all around.

Look, any wise executive will want to listen carefully to those who know more about the company than he or she does. To this extent this illustration doesn't quite fit what Paul is saying. But it does in this all-important point: his appeal now is that we should refuse to let "this **present age**" *dictate* to us how we should think and *what* we should think. That's sacrificing to the culture. No, we are to be transformed; we are to be a living sacrifice where we set the pace, and we work out what sort of people we should be, because we have surrendered all to God.

I want to say this, particularly to the younger people here ... I'm thinking...28 or below: If you give your body – and now I, David Rowe, not Paul, AM talking in particular about your body – if you present your body to God as a living sacrifice, you WILL be considered a fanatic. If your life is a waking, walking, thinking, acting, talking, sacrifice forever, as a response to the mercies of God, you WILL be considered a religious fanatic. Because you will be "sold out" for Christ. You will be – and this is the one biblical obsession that is not only allowed but commanded – you will be living the magnificent obsession. You will be focused on the glory of God which will dictate the entire course of your life. Now, people today consider fanaticism an irrational form of human behavior. And there IS a kind of fanaticism which is an irrational form of behavior. The bible calls it idolatry. Worshipping things that ought not be worshipped.

One person described a fanatic as "someone who, having lost sight of his goal, redoubles his efforts to get there." And the point is that fanaticism is a misdirected zeal. Real fanaticism is an irrational zeal.

But is there any way you can be *too* committed to the honor and glory of God? No. What is irrational is to not give the reasonable, rational response to this message. How you can sit in your chair and consider the extremes that God has gone to save you...and then just sit here for a bit, yawn, and go home.

But everything is upside down. You know, you can yell, jump, scream, and stamp your feet at an Eagles game, and you're a fan. But do those things in gratitude for what God has done on the cross in the life and death of Jesus, and you're a fanatic. But there is nothing irrational about a heart that beats with passion for God – it would be irrational to do otherwise.

- The *Demands* of Commitment (v. 2a) "Do Not Be *Conformed*"

For this next point, we move to verse 2: 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.

Now the specific call to be a living sacrifice has a two-pronged appeal: "Don't be one thing, but be another."

The pre-fix con means...to be "with." So to be conformed means to be integrated with the structures of this world. The patterns, the shapes and the styles of this world. And by the way, when the bible says this world, it doesn't mean this geographical location. The word translated here for "world" is actually "age." In other words, do not be conformed to the styles, patterns and shapes of this present age which is characterized primarily by those who are outside the covenant community. It's what we would call today the "secular culture." And Paul says, *don't* conform to this secular culture.

Are you aware of how powerful the pull and the tug of conformity is to the culture around you?

Think – it's unpleasant for some of us – but go back and remember your junior high school years. Because back then, the worst thing that could happen to you would be to be considered "out of it." For your hair to look funny, to not have the right sneakers, to be stuck or pasted with into some sub-group that everyone else thinks of as "weird" ...it's devastating. Why? Because the need for acceptance, the need to constantly conform in a culture that is all about style, is enormously powerful in the human heart.

There are two reasons we need to talk about this. The first is that this power, this pull of the culture, is so great that it can cause us to compromise, and bring shame and dishonor to Christ. You need to have people around you who can tell you where the culture has a hold on you. Where it tends to rule you. Those places where you act first, and the mind – really stopping to *think* about it – comes second.

For those of you over 30... look at your high school yearbooks. Who looks good? The people that look good – this is weird – are the geeks. The guys who wore suits and ties. The girls who dressed in a classic black dress on photo day. Who looks bad? The guys and girls who conformed to the style of that moment, and had the mutton chop sideburns, the cowl neck sweaters and the mullet. That's just a picture of conforming. Now God doesn't care about your haircut. But style isn't neutral. When your goal is primarily about fitting in, that means your agenda is determined by the values and the structures and the patterns of this present age.

But secondly, on the other hand – and particularly for you parents – it is very important to remember that there is something that is basically human, endowed to us by our creator, which is the need to be involved with people. To be IN the world. In just a few verses down, in v. 18, Paul is going to say that he endeavors as much as is possible, to live peaceably with all men. What we're saying is, we have to guard against, fight against assuming a posture of non-conformity, simply for nonconformity's sake.

Do you see the two errors? The first is the error of determining that whatever is in vogue is good. That all change is change for the better. That all change is evolution and never de-evolution. But the second error is to assume that all secular cultural movements – just because they are secular cultural movements – must necessarily be wicked. Because when you do that – like the Amish, let's say, but we do it, too – you trivialize the gospel. Because you'll begin to think you CAN do it. If I avoid the dance hall, the saloon, texting after 9pm, and get software to keep me off bad websites, then I'm okay. Then I am not worldly. The idea is that whatever the world does is wicked, and if I am going to avoid wickedness, I have to do the opposite.

If the world goes to movies, I won't. If the world dances, I will not dance. I will prove to the world how utterly irrelevant I am. Friends, nonconformity can be as vicious a trap as conformity. The Pharisees were total non-conformists.

Really, friends, *anybody* can be a non-conformist, with respect to mere externals.

No, Christ calls us to a special kind of nonconformity: a refusal to conform to the sinful patterns of the world, to patterns of disobedience.

When I was in seminary, there was a guy who made a little money picking up speakers and professors and visiting guests at the airport, and taking them back. And it was fun to see – especially the older, emeritus professors – Dr. Clowney, Bruce Waltke, John Sott – get out of this guy's car when they arrived at the school, because their hair looked like the Grinch's hair – swept every which way. This guy was known for driving down the Lincoln Highway to the Schuylkill Expressway like it was a race at Le Mans. And anytime he felt someone was going to pass him, or worse, move into his lane in front of him, he would say, "Don't *even think* about it." As one professor said, "It's amazing how many of these other drivers didn't bother to listen to him."

And these visiting guests looked so shaken because when this guy would say, "Don't even think about it," he'd press that gas pedal down all the more to make sure no one would pass him or ever get into his lane.

But I'll tell you. That may not be a good way to drive, but that is a *great* way to live the Christian life. Don't even think about getting in my way, and then pushing the pedal down to live only for Jesus Christ.²

And this takes us to the other prong. *BE ye TRANSFORMED.*

² I was reminded of this guy by Sinclair Ferguson.

- **The *Effects of Commitment "Be Transformed"***

This is as bold a call to total commitment as there is anywhere in the sacred writings. It applies equally to all—to the professor, to the preacher, to the pianist, to high schoolers—to *everyone!* It is for the *entire* Church. We must put away the medieval thinking that makes a distinction between clergy and laity—the idea that ministers and missionaries should have 100 percent commitment, but the laity is permitted 75 percent, or 30, or ... The truth is, *all believers* are called to be totally committed to Christ.

Now, I want to be careful, but let's be bold, too. Because the Christian is called to a kind of elitism here. Elitism is not popular today. But what I mean is that if you are in Christ, and you give yourself passionately to the kingdom of God as a living sacrifice, the fruit of your life should outstrip what others in the culture are doing. Because you should be going above and beyond the culture.

Now I'm not saying that you'll be a better salesperson, a better pianist, a better quarterback, or whatever. Sometimes the unbeliever has more talent than you. But you *will* go beyond the ethical standards of this world. You will be the cultural leaders of this world, because of what you do and how you do it.

RC Sproul says that a lot of people worry about the laws of a culture – especially when it comes to things like abortion or marriage. Those things *matter*, he says, what the laws of a given society are. Issues of justice matter. But that should not matter *so much* to the Christian, because the Christian doesn't take his marching orders from the secular state or from the laws of man, but from the law of God.

So that even if something has complete acceptance – total acceptance – in the culture, it may not be acceptable for the Christian. And if something is prohibited in a society, it may be acceptable – in fact it may be *commanded* – for the Christian. Because our ultimate authority transcends this world, this age.

How do you do this? How can you be a non-conforming transformationalist? Well, remember, this is the summary statement. We'll open this up more in the weeks to come. But the summary statement is this: *by the renewing of our minds.*

A Christian has his *life* changed because he has his *mind* changed. A Christian receives and evaluates and interprets his or her world differently than he or she did before he looked at things through the eyes of Christ. A Christian doesn't simply look at a job, or a choice, or a prospect for marriage and say, "What do I like?"

A Christian first asks, "What does God love, and what does God hate?" Where are his priorities? What is God passionate about?" And when you know the scriptures, when you search the scriptures – because that is where the mind of God is revealed – then you'll find that his standards and his priorities are not the same as this culture. You will be transformed.

Do you see how practical this is?

The basis for this is not what the surrounding culture expects of us, but what God in his mercy has done *for* us.

Look, what a lot of us got growing up, when it came to being a Christian *was out of* Romans 12. But what it came down to was, don't do what the world does. Don't talk like them, don't dress like them, don't behave like them. It replaced all of those things with the rules of men: **HERE** is how you dress. **THIS** is the way to speak. **THAT** is how you should behave. It had nothing to do with the renewal of the mind. It had little to do with learning about God, and then, when you've done that, thinking like God himself.

I know this isn't what some of us want to hear. But Paul talks about starting with the mind. You need mind renewal *first*. You have to think. Neil Postman – the late social commentator and philosopher – said that it's ironic that evangelicals have been at the social forefront of becoming "worldly" by adopting the entertainment, anti-intellectual culture. Evangelicals, he says, are so focused on "meeting people where they are," that they've lost where they begin...such that we have become just like the world, in our worship, our behavior, our loves. No, Paul doesn't want you to become all things to all people until your mind is renewed. Until you've become something *completely* new.

And that is what **WE** are here for.

Let's pray