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Romans 12:2–3

2nd Message

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# A NEW WAY OF THINKING

*SERIES: OVERCOMING WITH GOOD*

Ever since I can remember I have had a desire or hunger to live a fulfilling and meaningful life, to be and do something of value. I imagine that most of us experience this desire to one degree or another. We seek a way that will give us identity, meaning, value, and purpose, a path that leads to life. This is why we pursue our dreams and invest in our passions.

However, early in my life this desire was focused inward. Even though I went to church I was living a self-referenced life, adopting the ways of the world, attempting to control my destiny, trying to find meaning apart from God. It didn't work too well. Nothing that I tried was successful. I was frustrated and blocked at every turn. I drew a lot of cards that read "go directly to jail and do not pass go." Instead of experiencing the life I wanted so much, I only experienced emptiness and death.

When Christ entered my life I began to move in a different direction, to journey from a self-referenced life to a God-referenced life, a self-transcendent life. I gradually began to look for identity, meaning, purpose, and value in my relationship with God. But it wasn't easy. Things did not just magically fall into place. There were a lot of detours and false starts, disappointments and heartaches. I see now that the journey I started is a life-long process of growth and transformation. And I am still working on it. The long and winding road of our spiritual journey is our focus this week.

Last week we launched our summer series, "Overcoming With Good" using Romans 12 as our primary text. Evil is present in the world, it comes in many forms. It is out there and also in us, and we cannot avoid it. The theme of Romans 12 is responding to evil with the character and grace that we see in the life and teachings of Jesus. And in order for this to happen we need a deep transformation of our hearts and mind. The first two verses of chapter 12 are foundational to the entire chapter and also to everything we will talk about in the coming weeks.

**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. (Romans 12:1–2 ESV)**

The ability to do good regardless of circumstances requires two things—a willing surrender of our entire being to God and an active, continual engagement in the process of transformation. We talked about presenting our bodies last week. Today we will talk about the ideas of transformation, not conforming to the world, and renewing the mind that we see in verse 2.

## Transformation

The word transformation is metamorphosis. Most of you are familiar with that word from your biology class. Metamorphosis describes the process by which a caterpillar becomes a butterfly or a tadpole becomes a frog. The idea behind this word is a change of form

or complete alteration. Matthew and Mark use this word to describe the transfiguration of Jesus. When Jesus was transfigured he took on a different form.

The only other time this word occurs in the NT is in 2 Corinthians: "And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit" (2 Corinthians 3:18). As believers we are being transformed from the tarnished and sin-riddled glory of man into the glory of God, transformed from how we are unlike Christ to becoming like Christ.

When we believe in Jesus something incredible happens. We are united with Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection. We mysteriously become a new creation. We die to our earthly life, our flesh, our Adam nature and are raised to walk in newness of life. As Paul says in Colossians, our "life is hidden with Christ in God" (Colossians 3:3). However, as I discovered, we don't magically begin to live like Christ. We begin a metamorphic journey of growing, maturing, and changing. This is called the process of sanctification or spiritual formation.

While some changes might happen quickly other changes happen slowly and gradually. The goal is to become, like Christ, filled with the fullness of God (Eph. 3:19); to "grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ" (Ephesians 4:15); to share God's nature as we were intended; to grow fully into this life that is hidden with Christ in God; to be shaped by Jesus. Dallas Willard writes:

Spiritual formation for the Christian basically refers to the Spirit-driven process of forming the inner world of the human self in such a way that it becomes like the inner being of Christ .... the outer life of the individual becomes a natural expression or outflow of the character and teachings of Jesus.<sup>1</sup>

The goal is to live a life of love towards others as a result of a loving union with God so that like Christ we can overcome evil with good and reveal to the world the kingdom of God through our lives.

The world will not believe in Christ because of our sound theology, our correct creed, our well defined dogma, our rigorous religiosity. The world will believe when it sees Christlikeness manifested in our life.<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps you have seen the movie *The Way*, the story of a father who loses a son and subsequently takes a pilgrimage by walking the El Camino de Santiago, The Way of St. James, which leads to a cathedral in northern Spain where St. James' remains are supposedly buried. Over the years thousands of Christians have walked *The Way* as a spiritual pilgrimage, a journey that can take weeks and even months. For the traveller there is a destination but more importantly the journey itself is transformational. The El Camino de Santiago provides a vivid picture for the lifelong spiritual pilgrimage that we have undertaken. There is an end and that is to be complete, to share the glory of God. But for now we are pilgrims.

The fact that the verb “be transformed” is passive is important. It means that transformation is not our job but God’s job. We do have an active role and we will talk about that in a bit, but we cannot produce results through willpower. We can’t make it happen or rush the process or take shortcuts. Our role is being open, attentive, aware of God’s movements, and realizing that our deepest longing is union with God. Thomas Keating says that the chief act of the will in transformation is not effort but consent. We trust that God is at work in every facet of our lives, in the good and bad, the easy and difficult, the tedious and exciting, using everything for our growth in Christ.

### Not Conforming

Transformation into Christlikeness stands opposed to being conformed to the world. There is a negative as well as a positive. The word “conform” means to be molded into a form or to assume the shape of something. If you pour Jell-O into a bowl and put it in the refrigerator it will take the shape of the bowl. If you melt down gold and pour it into a form it will take the shape of the form. Paul is indicating that we are to be formed into Christ, not shaped by the mold of the world. We cannot take the shape of Christ and the world simultaneously.

The word “world” is actually “age.” The Scriptures tell us there are two ages. There is this age and the age to come. Paul calls the ruler of this age the devil: “the god of this world (age) has blinded the minds of the unbelievers” (2 Corinthians 4:4). However, Christ “gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father” (Galatians 1:4).

Paul also says that before we came to Christ we “were dead in the trespasses and sins, in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience” (Ephesians 2:1–2). The phrase “course of this world” is actually “age of this world.” The spirit of the age has great influence to shape our lives through its philosophies, belief systems, and ways of living to find identity, value, purpose, and meaning. When we conform to this age we become absorbed in these beliefs, we surrender ourselves and come under its power and control.

When I was growing up it was the hippie generation. We all had long hair and wore bell-bottom pants. Soon the hippies became yuppies making millions of dollars. We have had the New Age, the Gen X, the Gen Y, the Post-Modern. I have lost track. Every age in every culture has a spirit of the age and promotes lies about how to live. But followers of Jesus have been delivered from this evil age. Even though we live in this physical world, we are not to live according to its philosophies or ways. We are to live in the age to come. And that is possible because we have died to the flesh and our life is hidden with Christ in God.

Not conforming to this age is a significant battle for most of us because we want to fit in with everyone else. We don’t want to be different or to stand apart. Western society is individualized and privatized. However, we are the most homogeneous society in the world. We all wear the same things. We buy the same things. We do the same things. We go to the same places. I need to buy an iPhone just because everyone else has one and can look at email during meetings. I feel out of place. How many of you have done something in your life that you didn’t really want to do but you did it because everyone else was doing it?

Not only do we guard against conforming to the world but we also have to guard against being conformed to a religious community where we are defined by external appearances. Christians read this verse and immediately come up with a list of do’s and don’ts: don’t go

to movies, don’t dance, don’t play cards, read this version of the Bible, wear crosses, and do what we do because we are doing it right. Even churches can apply pressure to form us into a certain external mold. This doesn’t result in transformation.

Transformation does not happen with a sin management program or because you can read Greek or Hebrew. Transformation doesn’t happen from the outside in, with a formula or church program or even by being religious. Religion is a vessel for true transformation to take place, but people can go to church but not be engaged in transformational journey. Transformation is about connecting your deepest longings and desires to a personal relationship with God and growing from the inside out.

As a pastor I can’t produce transformation in your life. What I can do is teach, encourage, pray, companion, and give you space to encounter God. I can be more concerned about the life that you are living than our church being popular to attract people. I can realize that every person is unique and special and has their own spiritual story and thus resist trying to fit people into some preconceived Christian mold.

The Christian life in its fullness is far more than being active in a Christian community, affirming a certain set of beliefs or adopting a particular behavior pattern. These are a secondary result of the primary reality of a life engaged in an ever deepening union with God in love.<sup>3</sup>

### Renewing the Mind

Now even though we can’t produce transformation through our efforts, we still have a very active role in the process, and that is the renewal of our minds—we are transformed by the renewal of our minds. Last week we saw that our bodies are important. This week we see that our minds are important. Mind and body go together. There is a new way of living and a new way of thinking. We need to renew our minds because if we are to follow Jesus we need to think clearly about God, the world, and ourselves. We need to recognize the philosophies of this age, be aware of what is influencing our lives, and perceive the ways that our old self is hindering our spiritual growth. If we think wrongly or not at all we will live badly. Paul exhorted the believers in Corinth to “not be children in your thinking. Be infants in evil, but in your thinking be mature. (1 Corinthians 14:20).

How do we renew our minds? Basically, through embracing the will of God as revealed to us in Scripture and through the work of the Spirit. God’s will is the good, the pleasing, and the perfect. It stands opposed to the philosophies of this age and human wisdom. God’s will is the way man was intended to live. The renewed mind can detect error and discern, approve, appreciate, and respond to the will of God and then yield and obey.

We can see just how important thinking is by the next verse:

**“For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned” (Romans 12:3).**

The root word “to think” occurs four times in this verse. Even the word “sober judgment” means to “be in the right mind” or “of sound mind.” Paul’s argument is to think rightly so that we don’t exalt ourselves over others and we value each member of the body of Christ in their unique giftedness. What stands out is the importance of how to think.

Paul tells us in Ephesians 4 that as believers we are not to walk “as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. They are darkened in

their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them” (Ephesians 4:17–18). He reminds them that they have learned Christ, been taught in Him. We have the mind of Christ. Therefore we lay aside the old self, and put on the new self. The mind is key to our spiritual journey.

God’s word informs us on every aspect of life—marriage, singleness, work, parenting, sex, money, community, compassion, and how to overcome evil with good. Therefore we soak ourselves in the Word of God, mediate on it day and night, hide God’s word in our heart, and allow the Spirit to regenerate and reorder our minds. This is not living under the law but rather being shaped by the Word.

“The process of spiritual formation in Christ is one of progressively replacing . . . . destructive images and ideas with the images and ideas that filled the mind of Jesus himself.”<sup>4</sup> In other words we exchange our ideas and images for his, our mind for his.

This is the reason we are having John Stackhouse come next month and talk to us about Christ and the culture, Christ and other religions. It is important to understand the culture around us so that we can respond to people with the mind of Christ.

One of the ways where renewing the mind is critical is to think through the patterns and influences in our lives, to know ourselves. Augustine prayed, “Grant, Lord, that I may know myself that I may know thee.” John Calvin wrote: “Nearly the whole of sacred doctrine consists in these two parts: knowledge of God and of ourselves.”<sup>5</sup> Transformation doesn’t happen by ignoring our self but being aware of our tendencies and patterns. Knowledge of self is imperative in dealing with our flesh; our dead but still active old nature.

Some have called the old nature the false self. The essence of the false self “is a mode of being in the world decentered from life in God, although seeking to retain God on its own terms; a mode of being that creates its own structures of identity, meaning, value and purpose; and a mode of being that determines for itself the nature of its own being.”<sup>6</sup>

Robert Mulholland, in his book *The Deeper Journey*, suggests several characteristics of the false self. Let me mention these briefly so that you can think through the patterns in your own life.

The false self is fearful. Fear is the alternative to being a child of God. Our identity is based on what we do. We fear that our false identity will be exposed. We fear we won’t be valued or approved. A secondary aspect of fear is anger. We get angry when we don’t get what we want or our agenda is thwarted. Jesus tells us not to fear.

The false self is protective. We try and protect ourselves from pain, we become defensive, we build walls around our hearts, and we want to create and maintain our space.

The false self is possessive. We derive identity and value from possessions, compare ourselves to others who have more, get taken in by advertisements that appeal to what we lack. As believers we are to move from being possessors to stewards.

The false self is manipulative. We manipulate others in ways that are most advantageous to our own security, prestige and, especially, our agenda.

The false self is destructive. We become destructive to ourselves, to others and to the world in which we live. The result is not only do we lose our loving union with God but we gradually deteriorate mentally, emotionally, and physically. We indulge in unhealthy practices. Bitterness and resentment grow like cancer, a disease that corrodes our spirit.

The false self exalts self. We promote our agenda and ourselves above all others. Our behavior is driven by our need for approval, what other people think about us. Our efforts are not as important as how they are perceived. A side effect of self-promotion is placing blame.

The false self is indulgent. We seek joy and pleasure in places other than God and what he gives. Our primary purpose in life is the gratification of our desires and this need becomes compulsive because nothing other than God can ultimately satisfy our hunger for joy and pleasure. We become imprisoned in the destructive bondage of behaviors that have long since lost any semblance of joy and pleasure.

The false self makes distinctions. We find value in being above others. Others must be evaluated and labeled in such a way as to keep them either inferior or supportive “equals.” We need to categorize others in ways that give us an advantage and make us superior.<sup>7</sup>

Let me share with you how renewing the mind works. When we were studying Luke chapter 8, I was struck by four scenes that all exposed fear—a storm on the sea, a Gerasene demoniac possessed by Legion, Jairus fearing the loss of his daughter, and a woman fearing she will never be well. In contrast to others, Jesus remains peaceful and calm. As I immersed myself in these scenes the Spirit revealed to me how much I had been driven by fear in my life. However, instead of this being a depressing revelation, it was liberating. I saw that fear characterized the false self that had died with Christ and that my true self is characterized by peace and calm, even in the midst of turmoil. When I shared this with a group of men I meet with, the Lord gave us a powerful time of renewing our minds.

Renewing the mind involves recognizing how we are living falsely, not true to who we are in Christ. When we see ways that we are seeking identity, value, meaning, and purpose apart from God we can detach from things and abandon ourselves to God. We deny self, take up our cross, and we put to death the deeds of the body. We can set our mind on the things above, set our minds on the Spirit characterized by “compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience” (Colossians 3:12) which are all undergirded by forbearance and forgiveness. We surrender to God’s will and give him consent to work his purposes in us.

These last two weeks we have talked about presenting our bodies and being transformed by the renewing of our mind. These ideas indicate to us that both *being* and *doing* are important; “We are to be the will of God in every event, not simply do the will of God. Doing God’s will without being God’s will quickly becomes legalism. Being God’s will is impossible without doing God’s will.”<sup>8</sup> Our goal is to be in God for the world. We center ourselves in God so that the outflow of our life will be to do the good no matter the circumstances.

1. Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, (Colorado Springs, NavPress, 2002, 22).

2. M. Robert Mulholland, *The Deeper Journey*, (IVP Books, Downers Grove, 2006), 16.

3. *Ibid.*, 19.

4. Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 101.

5. David Benner, *The Gift of Being Yourself*, (IVP Books, Downers Grove, 2004), 20.

6. Mulholland, *The Deeper Journey*, 29.

7. *Ibid.*, taken from chapter 2.

8. *Ibid.*, 157.

