

**TRANSFORMED, NOT CONFORMED**  
**Romans 12**

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Our last sermon from Romans focused on chapters 9, 10, and 11, where we dealt with some very difficult issues and concluded that all that God does is for the purpose of leading all men to mercy, both Jew and Gentile (11:32).

Chapter 12 begins with the word “therefore.”

“Therefore, I urge you, brethren...” “Therefore” draws from all that Paul has written to this point. Thus far, the book culminates at the end of chapter 11 in that great praise to God. Look at 11:33, “Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became his counselor? Or who has first given to Him that it might be paid back to him again? For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen” – praising the God who tries to give mercy to all folks.

Next, those who said yes to Jesus are urged “to present their bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect” (12:1-2).

**I. Sacrifice (vs. 1-2)**

The first thing we find in chapter 12 is in verses 1 and 2. The key word is “sacrifice.” Those who worship God through following His Son Jesus are to offer their bodies as living sacrifices. Remember back in chapter 1, those who didn’t think it worthwhile to acknowledge God? Paul says God darkened their hearts and they became fools. And God gave them over that their bodies might be dishonored among them (Romans 1:24). When they refused to recognize the Creator or the Creator’s boundaries for His creation, God gave them over so that their bodies were degraded. But unlike those who refused to acknowledge the Creator, those who acknowledge His Son Jesus, are to offer their bodies as a living sacrifice.

Bodies are important in Christian theology. Remember, the Spirit of God dwells in our body (Romans 8). It is with our body (hands, feet, and tongue) that we visibly live out the will of God through our actions. Paul says in 2 Corinthians, “We always carry the death of Jesus in our body so that the life of Jesus may also be displayed in our body” (2 Corinthians 4:10). We present our bodies to God here because they will be resurrected (1 Corinthians 15:53-54).

In the ancient world, sacrifices were a fundamental way of honoring one's deity. But a living sacrifice? Nobody had ever heard of a living sacrifice. That was an oxymoron. Sacrifices were either lifeless objects like fruit from the field or ritually slaughtered animals. But we are to be living sacrifices. Instead of offering God a dead object, we are to offer God our living selves. We are to put to death our sinful, self-absorbed, self-indulgent passions and deeds of the body to present to God our renewed bodies as living sacrifices. The altar of our worship is a cross upon which, Paul says, "The world has been crucified to me through the cross, and I to the world" (Galatians 6:14).

Paul is not just talking to individuals. He is talking to the whole community. Notice the plurals. "Brothers." "You" is plural – "your bodies," plural. "Your" true worship – your is a plural pronoun.

In the second verse, he reminds us not to be conformed to this world, but to be transformed by the Gospel. The J.B. Phillips paraphrase puts it this way: "Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mold, but let God remold your minds from within, so that you may prove in practice that the plan of God for you is good."

There has never been a time in my life when I was more certain that what the world holds dear is not what God's people should cherish. Be transformed; don't conform.

We are renewed and resurrected in Christ, transformed into the glorious image of Christ (8:29; 2 Corinthians 3:18). And this inner transformation becomes evident by what we do with our bodies, how we serve with our hands, where we go with our feet, what we say with our tongues.

## **II. Service (vs. 3-9a)**

The next major section is verses 3-9a. The key word here is "serve." However God has gifted you, He has gifted you to serve the church, not to serve yourself.

Church (community) is such an unusual idea for our Western, individualistic culture. What God has given you, your grace gifts, are not for self-edification; they are for His body, for the church. Whatever you do, do it well to God's glory among God's people. And no grace gift should be arrogant or prideful, looking down upon another's gift.

He is warning them not to have an inflated estimate of themselves. Look at verse 3: "...not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think...." In our own conceit, sometimes we place people in pigeonholes. This one is valuable, like me. Oh, that one, middling value. Or, him, low value. "This one is honored like me. The other, undistinguished. And her, shamed."

Such attitudes breed discord. Paul has argued in this epistle that we are all sinners: "For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). As N. T. Wright says, "The measure of faith (v. 3) is the same for all." If you are going to do some measuring, Christ is the only one to whom we can compare ourselves.

It's so easy to be prideful, isn't it? Throughout this chapter, Paul mentions arrogance and pride. Look at the end of verse 10, "Give preference to one another in honor." And in verse 16, "Do not be haughty in mind...Do not be wise in your own estimation."

Let me give you a prescription for how to be perfectly miserable. Not only can I make you miserable, I can keep you miserable if you'll follow this prescription.

1. Think about yourself.
2. Talk about yourself.
3. Use the personal pronouns "I" and "me" as often as possible in your conversation.
4. Listen greedily to what people have to say about you.
5. Insist on consideration and respect. Don't they know who you are?
6. Demand agreement with your own ideas on everything.
7. Be sensitive to slights.
8. Never forget a criticism.
9. Trust no one but yourself.

Pride. Thinking you are the best – just a cut above.

Notice how Paul starts this section about serving. "Do not think more highly of yourself than you ought to think" (v. 3). You can't serve if you are serving with pride. Service demands humility.

During a school Fall Festival, a Halloween carnival, one of the parents fainted on the school playground and several adults quickly ran over to offer first-aid. One lady was tending to the unconscious man when an arrogant man came rushing in and started barking out the orders. He pushed the woman out of his way and said, "Step aside, madam. I just took a CPR course and know exactly what to do." She quietly watched him for a few seconds and then said, "When you get to the part about calling for a doctor, just remember, I'm already here." (*Houston Chronicle*, 3/7/2003).

Frederick Buechner tells us that "True humility doesn't consist in thinking ill of yourself, but, rather, not thinking of yourself much differently from the way you'd be apt to think of anybody else." (*Wishful Thinking*). Realize that you put your pants on one leg at a time, just like your neighbor.

While preaching a sermon against pride, the Rev. Kenneth Phillips, according to the *Dallas Morning News*, astonished his congregation by his mid-sermon act of humility. It was June 4, 2000. Right in the middle of the sermon preaching about pride, he reached up without warning and removed his hairpiece. Yes, the fake turf was now forever gone. Right before their eyes, their pastor bared his soul and then bared his bald head. In fact, Pastor Phillips said that his pride over his appearance had become a barrier to his relationship with God. Following the public act of repentance over pride, the pastor said his church experienced a big revival. Some even called it the "Toupee Revival." Even words like "hairsplitting theology" took on humorous overtones. "Our pastor," one member said, "taught us to be real." ([www.homileticsonline.com](http://www.homileticsonline.com))

Let me paraphrase Paul: “Get off your high horse!”

After warning them about their haughty spirits, Paul reminds them in verse 4 that we’re all members of one body. But all members don’t all have the same function. God gives out different gifts.

Now, this is not a definitive list. There is a different list of spiritual grace gifts in 1 Corinthians 12. There is a different list in Ephesians 4. There is no one exhaustive list of spiritual gifts anywhere in scripture, just some examples.

If you have the gift of prophecy or preaching, then preach. If you’re good at serving others (v. 7), then serve. If you have the gift of teaching – and we have some gifted folks who ought to be teaching a Bible Study class – then you need to be teaching. If you have the gift of exhortation, or urging others to action, then become the great encourager. And while all Christians ought to tithe their income, some people are especially blessed with generous hearts, and, if God has given you the gift of generosity, then give. If you’re a great manager or leader, then find a ministry in the church and start managing. Do it with diligence. If you have the gift of a tender heart, show mercy.

### **III. Believers (9b-13).**

In the third section, verses 9b-13, the key word would be “believers.”

Here, Paul addresses how Christians ought to treat fellow believers, how church members ought to treat each other. Be devoted to one another. Love each other like brothers. When it comes to honor, quit trying to make the “A” list. Show honor to others.

Seeking honor in the public sphere, particularly in ancient Rome, was like an addictive drug. Competition for honor was almost like a blood sport. I fear we have returned to something of that now with social media. “Give preference to one another in honor” (v. 10). How many social media posts are little more than the cry, “Look at me. Make me be somebody. Help me think I’m somebody.”

Or if it’s not social media, it’s those annual family Christmas letters. Let me give you an example of a Christmas card you might receive in December – that impersonalized letter.

**“Dear Friends,**

**What a great year. Jim was named Vice President of the bank. We celebrated by buying a Mercedes and flying off to the Orient. In addition to his Boy Scout work, Jim was co-chairman of the United Fund drive. He continues on the board of Grace Hospital and is treasurer of the Rotary. His first love, however, is still conservation, and he is heading up the committee to fight Dutch Elm disease. After completing my term as Junior League President, I swore I’d take life easy, but I’m more involved than ever. I accepted the vice-presidency of the Garden Club, and I’m still active in the D.A.R. I ran a bake sale for the Eastern Star again, and we made \$680. I also squeezed in a flower arranging class offered**

**by a Japanese exchange student. All this with my leg in a cast! Dumb me fell off the ladder while hanging curtains at the homeless shelter.”**

Someone who had had it with that kind of Christmas card decided to send out an honest one.

**“Dear Friends,**

**We’ve had a rotten year! Bill was passed over for promotion again, so he quit his job. He hasn’t lined up anything yet, but he’s listed with the unemployment agencies. He looks at the want ads every day. In the meantime, he’s drinking like a fish....” Signed, “Looking for a Better Year” (www.preaching.com)**

“Don’t be lazy in your Christian service,” Paul says in verse 11. “No, be ardent in spirit, fervent in the Lord. You need to rejoice in hope, persevere in tribulation, be devoted to prayer, help out with contributions to the needy saints, practice hospitality.”

Itinerant preachers traveled from church to church. Inns were disreputable, dangerous, uncomfortable, and imposed extra fees. The author of Hebrews says to his audience that as they show hospitality to traveling ministers, they are entertaining angels unaware (Hebrews 13:2; see Genesis 18:1-3; 19:1-3). Paul had been hosted by Lydia, the Philippian jailer, Aquila and Priscilla, Publius, and Gaius currently hosts in Corinth when he is writing this letter.

#### **IV. All (vs. 14-16)**

The fourth section of this letter is “all.” How are we to behave toward everyone?

“Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. 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. Never pay back evil for evil to anyone.”

Focus for a moment on verse 15. “Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep.”

The word “connected” comes mind. You know, we all want to be understood, don’t we? Verse 15 reminds me of a Saturday when I have a funeral in the morning and a wedding in the evening. I begin with weeping with those who weep and conclude by rejoicing with those who rejoice. It’s the connectedness of the body of faith. Meet others at their emotional address.

Can you rejoice when a friend receives a good word? You and several of your friends are struggling with infertility and you read on social media “We’re expecting” from one of your friends. Can you rejoice?

Can you weep with those who weep? Can you be empathetic?

We all want someone to understand us, to know our joys and to walk with us through our sorrows – someone to be right there with us.

Mr. Alter's fifth-grade class at Lake Elementary School in Oceanside, California, included fourteen boys who were as bald as eagles. Only one, however, had no choice in the matter. In an Associated Press story (March 1994), Ian O'Gorman was undergoing chemotherapy for lymphoma. He faced the prospect of having his hair fall out in clumps, so he had his head shaved. But then, Kyle Hanslik, a ten-year-old, had the idea that all the boys in the class should shave their heads. "The last thing he would want is to not fit in," said Kyle about his buddy Ian. "We just wanted to make him feel better." (Sherman L. Burford, *Fresh Illustrations for Preaching and Teaching*, from *Leadership Journal*)

Paul writes in Galatians 6:2, "Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ."

The doctor walked in, and when he walked out he wrote, "Today I visited an eight-year-old girl dying of cancer. Her body was disfigured by her disease and its treatment. She was in almost constant pain. As I entered her room, I was overcome immediately by her suffering – so unjust, unfair, unreasonable. Even more overpowering was the presence of her grandmother lying in bed beside her with her huge body embracing this precious, inhuman suffering. I stood in awe, for I knew I was on holy ground...the suffering of innocent children is horrifying beyond words; we can't explain it. I will never forget the great, gentle arms and body of this grandmother. She never spoke a word while I was there. She was holding and participating in suffering that she could not relieve, and somehow her silent presence was relieving it. No words could express the magnitude of her love. (Quoted in *Postmodern Pilgrims* by Len Sweet)

Everybody wants somebody to "get it," to understand, to jump for joy with us when the good news comes and to wallow in agony with us when the loss is too big to carry on our own. That's the way the body of Christ is, Paul says. That's the way we are to be to all men. Be of the same mind with one another. Don't be haughty. Look at verse 16. You associate with the lowly. The minute you think you're too good to have a conversation with someone else is the minute you are most unlike Christ, the one who sits with tax gatherers and sinners and lets a woman of ill-repute close enough to anoint His feet.

You're too good, because they are a sinner and you are...you are what? Yeah, that's what I thought. You are a sinner saved by grace, too.

Christopher Reeve – good looking, wealthy, had everything going his way in life, the acclaimed actor chosen to play the superhero Superman – said, "You just remember that anything can happen to anybody. In the last movie I did," he wrote, "Above Suspicion, I played a paraplegic. I went to a rehab center and I worked with the people there so I could simulate being a paraplegic. And every day I would get in my car and drive away and go, 'Thank God that's not me.' I remember the smugness of that, as if I were privileged in some way and they were different than I was. And seven months later, I, too, was a paraplegic, injured in a horse riding accident. The point is," said Christopher Reeve, "we are all one big family, and any one of us can get hurt at any moment. We should never walk by somebody who's in a wheelchair and be afraid of them or think of them as a stranger. It could be us – in fact, it is us." (*Bits and Pieces*, January 27, 2000)

## V. Enemies (vs. 17-21)

In the last verses, 17-21, the fifth part is “enemies.” Paul told us how to behave toward the church, how to behave toward “all.” Now he tells us how to behave toward our enemies.

“Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men. If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.”

You circle that verse; you star that verse. Whatever fights you are having, don’t let the flames be fanned from your side of the equation. “If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men. Never take your own revenge” (vs. 18-19) “but leave room for the wrath of God.... If you have an enemy who 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” (vs. 20-21)

Of course, Paul is playing off the teaching of Jesus (Matthew 5, Luke 6), where Jesus tells us to love our enemies. We are to respond to our enemies in such a way as the unbelieving world is dumbfounded by such behavior. Let God deal with injustice. Vengeance only belongs to God (Deuteronomy 32:35). Everybody will give an account before the judgment seat of God (Romans 14:11-12). But you – right here and now – you are to love your enemies. You’re to be like the Christ who hangs on the cross and says to those who crucify Him, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” When you treat somebody with vengeance, you may break their spirit, but kindness will break their hearts.

The call from this passage is that in every conflict in your life, you need to ask yourself, “What did I do to contribute to that? As much as it depends on me, I will be at peace with you.”

Soren Kierkegaard once said, “You say you don’t need God? Try to love your enemies and believe me, you’ll need God.”

Frederick Buechner, in *The Magnificent Defeat*, says “The love for equals is a human thing... of friend for friend, brother for brother. It is to love what is loving and lovely. The world smiles.

The love for the less fortunate is a beautiful thing...the love for those who suffer, for those who are poor, the sick, the failures, the unlovely. This is compassion, and it touches the heart of the world.

The love for the more fortunate is a rare thing...to love those who succeed where we fail, to rejoice without envy with those who rejoice, the love of the poor for the rich.... The world is bewildered by its saints.

And then there is the love for the enemy...love for the one who does not love you but mocks, threatens, and inflicts pain. The tortured’s love for the torturer. This is God’s love. It conquers the World.”

“Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (v. 21).

Paul says yes, we are saved by faith. But it's not just the transforming of our spirit, but also our bodies as living sacrifices. Faith is fervent service. Allow the Holy Spirit to shape you from within that you may serve Him without. Serve His people.

A healthy church body has everybody exercising their grace gift in cooperation with others. If you have a gift God has given you and you're not using it, you are living in disobedience. If you can sing, you need to be up here singing. If you can teach, you need to be in the classroom teaching. And, no gift is better than another. If God has given you the gift of compassion, you need to be cooking funeral meals whenever those resume. If you have the gift of management, you need to lead out and execute a ministry here.

In all things remember, you are to present your body as a living sacrifice. No more dead animals on His altar. God wants the living you!

Let us pray.