

Pastor Joe Polzin
Romans 11:33-12:8
“Transformed: Living as Sacrifices”
Transformed Sermon Series: Week 1 of 4
August 23, 2020

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. **Amen.**

Today we begin a four-week sermon series that is based on the readings we find in our scheduled church lectionary. As you may have noticed, since June, our Epistle readings in church have taken us through the book of Romans. And every week we’ve heard the Apostle Paul share with the Roman Christians the wonderful mercies of God, starting first and foremost with the Gospel message that we have been “justified by faith” and that “we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Romans 5:1). And because of that foundational truth of the Gospel, there are all these ripple effects in the world, and in history, and in our lives.

Paul then makes a shift in his letter, which begins with our reading today, as he now begins addressing the Christians in Rome and how it is their faith in Christ *transforms* the way they think, the way they speak, and the way they act. And it is this transforming power of God that will be the focus of our series the next few weeks. Because in this upside-down year we call 2020, it can be quite easy to lose sight of what it is God expects of us. It can be difficult to figure out what we as Christians are supposed to do.

In our sermon series these four weeks, we’ll be discussing things that can’t help but speak to us in our time as it did to the Romans in Paul’s time. In our time, with the unrest we see, the deepening divisions, the constant debates, and the upcoming election, what better time to talk about things like sacrifice, service, living peaceably with all—especially with our enemies, government, living as citizens, how to handle differences of opinions, and what focus we ought to have as Christians in both life and death. These are the kinds of things Paul addresses in Romans chapters 12 through 14, and we will address them in the coming weeks, as well.

But it all begins with our reading today, and with what we’ll be using as our theme verse in this series. And if you have your Bible, or you’re taking notes, I’d like you to underline or highlight Romans 12:2: “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.”

The Apostle Paul is telling those Roman Christians not to fall in step with the old, sinful ways of this old, sinful world. Do not be conformed by this world. Instead, as Christ’s disciples, be transformed. And I want you to notice, and this is quite important, that being transformed is a passive verb. Paul doesn’t say transform yourselves. He says be transformed. That means, you aren’t the one doing the transforming. You are simply a passive recipient of this transformation.

And this is where we must begin this *Transformed* series, with the reason that we are even able to discuss living in transformed way is only possible on account on what God has done for us in Christ Jesus. If you were to have read Romans as a whole letter all at once, this would be abundantly clear. Paul has spent considerable time talking about the free gift of faith:

“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,” Paul said in chapter three, “and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (3:23-24). In chapter five, he said, “God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (5:8). In chapter six, Paul said, “We were buried therefore with [Christ] by baptism into

death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life” (6:4). And in chapter eight, he said that because the Holy Spirit now dwells in us, we are not dead and condemned, but alive. The Spirit enables us to walk according to his ways (8:4-11).

Which brings us back to our theme verse in chapter 12: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind.” This is not first and foremost Paul telling you something you must do. This is Paul telling you what has already happened to you on account of what God has already given you: faith in Christ. You are transformed... by the power of Christ’s love and by the Holy Spirit working in you.

You will not be conformed to the old, sinful ways of this world because Christ has already taken you, a lost and condemned sinner, and by his death forgiven your sins, and by his resurrection freed you from sin, and death, and the devil. He has resurrected you to new life in the Spirit, and by his power, you are transformed.

So then, the question remains, what does this life transformed by Christ look like? Well, that’s the question we’ll be answering throughout the next four weeks. But today, our focus is “Transformed: Living as Sacrifices.” Paul says in verse 1: “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.” Today we see that a life transformed by Christ looks like sacrifice.

Now, that’s an interesting phrase: “living sacrifice.” Because in the religious life of that day, a sacrifice would have been typically understood as something dead. And in the Old Testament, the sacrificial system was given by God as a way for their sins to be forgiven and for his presence to be among them. Israel would offer the lifeblood of an animal and this would be accepted by God as an atonement for their transgressions.

Of course, Christians aren’t required to offer these sacrifices, it’s not something we do anymore, because the once-for-all sacrifice, Jesus Christ, offered himself on the cross for our sins and the sins of the whole world. What required the lives of countless animals throughout the Old Testament, the lifeblood of the Lamb of God satisfied it all. And remarkably, though Christ truly died, he is not a *dead* sacrifice, because he was raised from the dead on the third day. Therefore, he is the one true Living Sacrifice. And because he lives, you will live also.

Do you realize the great freedom Christ’s sacrifice has given you? Not only for all eternity, when you will experience eternal joy and life because of what Jesus has done for you, but also freedom right here and now in your life today. You don’t have to spend your days worried about getting right with God, worried about earning his forgiveness. Paul isn’t saying you should be a sacrifice because you still have to earn something. It’s not your works that earn your salvation. It’s a free gift given to you by faith in Christ, who has already done it all.

So then, you, as a transformed Christian, don’t use this profound freedom to do whatever it is you want. Instead, Christ enables you to use your freedom to present your body as a living sacrifice for your neighbor. Just as Christ served you as your sacrifice, so now you serve others as a sacrifice. You put others first. You find ways to love and serve them. You consider their needs ahead of your own. And this, then, is a life transformed by Christ, it is a life “holy and acceptable to God.”

We are told not to conform to this world, but be transformed. And what this sinful world teaches you that you are the only person that should matter. It teaches you that the world revolves around you. It teaches you that you will find the most fulfillment and satisfaction when you put yourself ahead of anyone else and anything else. This world attempts to conform you to

its way of thinking. But when you are set free by Christ, you are set free from needing to live for yourself. Because Christ has already done everything for you. Instead, you can focus on living as a sacrifice for others.

So, how do you do this? How do you live as a living sacrifice? Well, here is where I think it would be helpful to discuss an important part of our Lutheran doctrine called the doctrine of vocation. And don't let those words scare you, because this is both a very simple and yet incredibly profound truth that shapes how we live our lives.

God teaches us that we all have a vocation, or more accurately, multiple vocations. And it doesn't just mean your job. Our vocations in life are the God-given callings and responsibilities that are unique to you. No one else can do them, because God has given them to you. They are the various positions, responsibilities, and relationships that God has already placed in your life. They are the locations you can uniquely find ways to love and serve those around you.

So, what are *your* vocations? In his book, "Callings for Life," Pastor Jeffrey Leininger shows us how we can easily determine what our particular vocations in life are. All you need to do is consider the *faces, places, and spaces* in your life. The *faces, places, and spaces*.

First, the faces. Whose face do you see first in the morning? Who do you encounter in your life on a regular basis, in your home, at your work, at church, or on the street? These are the people God has specifically given you to serve. The people closest to you, like family and friends, but truly all the faces you encounter, even if it's a stranger in passing. Their face is no coincidence in your life. It is God giving you the opportunity to serve them as a living sacrifice.

Next, the places. Where do you live, study, work, worship, and play? What planet has God called you care for? What nation has God made you a citizen of? What neighborhood do you live in? What church are you a member of? Most importantly, what home do you live in? In all these places, and your living in them, you will find the places where God specifically wants to serve, and care, and live as a sacrifice for others.

And finally, the spaces. What spaces in life do you occupy? What roles do you fill? Are you married or in a relationship? Are you a son or daughter? A parent or grandparent? A brother or sister? What role do you occupy at your work? At your church? In your community? Are you a student? An employee or an employer? Are you a soldier? Are you on the PTO? Are you on the neighborhood board? These are all the spaces in your life that God has given you to fill, and again, to offer yourself as a sacrifice for others.

And in case you're getting the impression that your vocations and your being a living sacrifice is some dramatic, unattainable thing, consider this example of a college student named Jamal from the book I mentioned earlier, "Callings for Life":

Jamal's phone woke him early for practice. His roommate was still sleeping, so he carefully and quietly put on his workout clothes in the dark and laced up his Nikes. It has been a rough weekend for his roommate... Jamal took a moment to text him an encouraging Bible passage, knowing it would be the first thing seen before his 8:00 a.m. class: "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are Mine" (Isaiah 43:1). Before he left the room, Jamal spent an extra few minutes in prayer for his friend, whom he knew had a tough day ahead.

After quietly leaving the room, Jamal ran into his RA in the hallway. They were both in a hurry but paused long enough for Jamal to thank him for last week's floor program. Not a lot of guys showed up, so Jamal thought he could use a bit of encouragement. Jogging out of the residence hall, Jamal saw one of the college maintenance workers on early morning trash duty. Jamal greeted him by name and asked about his daughter's first day of preschool. The worker gave a smile and a thumbs-up, and Jamal fired the same back as he sprinted off to practice.

As captain of the basketball team, Jamal knew how important it was to set an example of leadership. He set up the cones for a defensive drill before the coach arrived and took a moment to chat with two of the new freshmen on the team. They were both far from home and having some trouble adjusting. Jamal invited them over for some [video games] after lunch and reminded them that the team was going to chapel later that morning for worship.

After practice, Jamal took a few minutes to chat with the coach. Some of the guys were frustrated about the new offense, and he wanted to address it directly, right away, before any problems surfaced. A quick shower, an OJ and bagel from the cafeteria, and he sat down just in time for his 8:00 a.m. class. The professor was new, so she struggled again with the technology for the lecture. Jamal popped up from his desk and adjusted something quickly on her laptop so the PowerPoint would work. He gave his teammates snickering the back row a stern look to quiet them down, and the lecture proceeded flawlessly.

And this is the author now speaking: *By only 8:05 a.m., Jamal already demonstrated love, service, and sacrifice in a number of his God-given callings. Each individual face seen that morning was a sacred vocation, an opportunity for Christ to be at work through him. He had been a friend giving the Word, a classmate offering encouragement, a captain displaying responsibility, and a student showing respect. Jamal needed little help in discovering his God-given purpose. He simply looked into the faces of his normal morning routine.¹*

Sometimes, and this is now me speaking, we imagine our Christian life as some great ordeal that we never can live up to. But our God-given doctrine of vocation shows us that what is truly holy, what is truly important, what is truly God-pleasing and Christ-like is our everyday life. We don't have to go searching for some far-reaching, grandiose purpose that's hard-to-find.

Rather, our everyday life, the life in which God has already placed you, and the people with which he has already surrounded you, provides you with the greatest opportunity to present your body, as Paul says, as a living sacrifice. And you notice, Paul says "bodies." It's not only your heart and your mind. It's not some lofty spiritual achievement or something only a few enlightened saints can obtain. Rather, it is the normal, everyday use of your hands, your feet, your mouth, through which Christ can and certainly will work as he works through you.

And, of course, you will fail. You will sin because in this life we are all still sinners. And you will need forgiveness, from those around you, and also from God. But Christ came as a sacrifice for you to forgive your failings and your sins. And not just once, but every time you come before him in repentance and humility.

We've do so again today in our confession of sins. But we also again receive Christ's absolution, and we receive his body and blood, which was sacrificed on the cross for us, which delivers his forgiveness directly to us, and strengthens and frees us once again to present our bodies as living sacrifices to the faces, places, and spaces in our lives.

And this, then, is our worship to God, Paul says. Not because we need to earn our salvation, but because our salvation has already been earned by Jesus. We live transformed lives as living sacrifices because our one Living Sacrifice, the Lamb of God, has already transformed us by his mercy and grace. In Jesus' name. **Amen.**

And now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. **Amen.**

¹ Leininger, Jeffrey. *Calling for Life: God's Plan, Your Purpose*. St Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2020. 10-11.