

Be Transformed

A Sermon Preached by Anne Keener
First Presbyterian Church, Franklin, Tennessee
August 23, 2026
13th Sunday after Pentecost
Romans 12:1-8



Today's scripture is from Romans chapter 12. As it is a letter written to the church in Rome, its original audience would have heard the complete letter and known the context for these words we will hear today. So, before I read today's Scripture, I want to remind you of some of Paul's teachings from earlier in the letter.

From chapters 1-3, you have sinned, and Jesus Christ revealed that you are not defined by that sin. From chapter 4, you have done nothing to earn God's grace. From chapter 5, you are given grace, forgiveness, and reconciliation by God. From chapter 6, you are called to joyfully respond to God's grace through a sanctified life of love. From chapter 8, nothing can separate you from God. From chapters 9-11, God's promises are forever and for all people. Now, because of all this. Now that you have the context, I invite you to listen for the Word of God in the reading of Roman chapter 12 verses 1-8.

12 Therefore, I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, on the basis of God's mercy, 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 renewing of the mind, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the encourager, in encouragement; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

The Word of the Lord, **Thanks be to God.**

What does a life look like that isn't conformed to this world but rather transformed by God? Or maybe a better question is who comes to *your* mind when you think of a life being transformed by God?

I think of Frank. As a young businessman, Frank could have allowed himself to be conformed to this world, the same type of power-hungry, individualistic focused system that Paul was referencing with the Roman Empire. Frank could have allowed his values to be fashioned by the societal pressures into a mold shaped by our culture. A mold or way of being where we are taught to only look out for ourselves, to rush through life adapting to the hustle culture that tells us to wear the adjective *busy* as a badge of honor, and to embody a scarcity mindset that believes there isn't enough for all so we must hoard what we have.

Frank could have easily let his career be molded in this way, but he didn't let that happen. In a culture where the bottom-line is king, Frank prioritized people and relationships. A salesperson wasn't a dollar sign but rather a beloved child of God. Frank took time to get to know people and learn what motivated them. He sent handwritten notes, remembered birthdays, and asked about family members. He prioritized mentoring young professionals entering their career over using others to further his. Frank cared about people more than profit and leaned on God instead of himself. He kept his heart open so he could be transformed rather than allowing himself to be conformed to this world.

I think of Margaret. As a stay-at-home parent, Margaret recognized that the opportunity she had to spend so much time with her children as a gift. While they were home, her focus was on nurturing them in body, mind, and spirit, and then when they went to school, she broadened her focus to all the students in their classes and eventually the whole school. Margaret began volunteering wherever help was needed – baking the cookies, driving the carpools, chaperoning the fieldtrips – and eventually serving as president of the parent board.

The same passion that encouraged her to nurture children also led her to serve through her church, first leading in the youth ministries and then helping older adults who don't have the family support to navigate life's challenges. At many stages in her life, Margaret could have turned her focus inward on herself, but at every crossroads, she looked outward. At each crossroad, she opened herself to being transformed and guided by grace.

I think of so many. Don't you! People whose ordinary lives are shaped by God and that point people to Christ. People who choose every day to open their hearts to the movement of the Holy Spirit so they can be transformed. Because this transformation isn't a one-time event, but rather an ongoing process. The person that came to your mind didn't simply make a decision one day to no longer be conformed to this world and cross it off as a task on their to-do list. Being transformed is an ongoing process. We must continually choose to not allow ourselves to be conformed but to open ourselves to the work of the Spirit, so we can be transformed and discern the will of God each and every day.

This idea of continual movement reminds me of a central tenet of our Reformed faith, "reformed and always being reformed according to the Word of God." God doesn't change, but we are always being reformed, always being changed by God. As we continue studying scripture anew, we open ourselves to the Spirit transforming us, deepening and expanding our relationship with God. Being reformed and being transformed both point to the one initiating the act. Transformation always begins with God. The initiative of the transformation always comes from God, never from our own thoughts or abilities. This is what Paul was pointing to in the first verse when he wrote, "by the mercies of God."

By the mercies of God is another way of saying with God's help or by God's grace. By the mercies of God and because of all that Paul has spent the first 11 chapters writing about (because of all this,) therefore we are to respond by living all parts of our lives in response to God's grace. Sounds familiar? This is at the heart of our mission statement, "Responding to God's grace through worship, study, and service." It is a powerful mission statement, but there is always a follow up question, how? How are we – as individuals and as a faith community – to respond?

Paul suggests, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of the mind, so that you may discern what is the will of God." These too are powerful words that can shape our living, but I also found Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of this passage in *The Message* helpful. He writes, "Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for God. 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 God 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."

We are to fix our attention on God. When we fix our attention on God, we will be transformed, changed from the inside out. When we fix our attention on God, our vision more aligns with God's vision, and we begin to see the world - creation and all the beautiful people in it - as God sees. When we fix our attention on God, our hearts and minds are renewed which creates space for discerning what God wants from us or how God is calling us to respond. When we fix our attention on God, we are being changed from the inside in ways we recognize and ways we don't, but God uses is all to mold our living in ways that point others to Christ.

By fixing his attention on God, Frank was able to choose people over profits. By fixing her attention on God, Margaret was able to use her God given gifts of caring and nurturing others to bless not only her family but countless others. With God's help, we, like Frank and Margaret, can offer our ordinary lives – our going to work and to school, our running errands and running around with friends – to God.

When we offer our lives in gratitude for all God has given us, something remarkable happens. It doesn't just benefit us. As Peterson wrote, "Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for God." God longs for us to be in relationship. When we fix our attention on God rather than on ourselves or on the culture that too often drags us down, we are drawn deeper into relationship with God and with one another. When we fix our attention on God, God brings out the best in us.

Embracing the gift of God's grace inspires us to gratefully respond in profound ways. When we keep our attention fixed on God, we are no longer fixated on our culture that tries to drag us down to its level of maturity. When we keep our attention fixed on God, we keep ourselves open to being transformed, continually changing from the inside out. When we keep our attention fixed on God, we will no longer be molded in ways that conform to this world but instead be molded into cross shaped lives. Lives that are molded by God and shaped by the structures of grace rather than the structures of this world.

Being transformed by grace should shape every part of our lives. It should shape how we live and move and have our being not just on Sundays, but every day. Being transformed by grace shapes us: body, mind, and spirit. It shapes our faith and prayer life drawing us into deeper relationship with God. It shapes our way of thinking and how we view the world and the people around us. It shapes our actions and how we treat each of God's beloved children.

Siblings in Christ, therefore by the mercies of God – in response to God’s grace and with God’s help – let us fix our attention on God so we can be continually transformed from the inside out as the Spirit molds our lives in ways that point people to Christ.

May it be so. Amen.