

## Reading

Let me read our first passage for this year, Romans 12:1-2. This is the word of God:

12 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. 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.

(Romans 12:1–2)

## Intro

We're only a week into the year, but let me ask you: how are you doing with your new year's resolutions?

As you know, this time of year usually sees an uptick in the number of people going to the gym, and going to church, as people begin the year determined to become fitter, happier versions of ourselves. But these resolutions are hard to stick with, aren't they?

According to an article in *The Atlantic*, between one-third and one-half of Americans make New Year's resolutions. But fewer than half of those resolutions make it past June. Some surveys find even lower success rates—as low as 6 percent. So the message is: don't bother trying to change, you'll probably fail.

I hope you're enjoying this motivational speech, by the way! It's amazing I've never been asked to give a TED Talk.

I've called this first sermon in our new series, *Deeper Transformation*. Because many of us long to be transformed.

But again and again, we come up against the gravitational pull of our former selves or our current selves. We look into our hearts, and we realise - that thing I was struggling with when I was young, that thing I've been praying about for years, I'm still struggling with it now. So is there any hope of deep and lasting transformation in the Christian life?

I was watching an interview with the British comedian Russell Brand, and Russell Brand is in many ways the perfect illustration of this: he's often spoken in recent years of his desire to reform himself.

And Brand said he found himself watching a video of a Californian pastor. He said he was almost embarrassed by how much he was affected by it. He said “I think of myself as culturally sophisticated, and here I am watching this Baptist pastor on TV...”

What most struck Russell Brand was a prayer this pastor prayed, asking for change, for transformation. In Brand’s recollection of the prayer, the pastor said something like this: “Father, I put aside my need to understand. I don’t need to understand the digestive system to enjoy a steak. I don’t need to understand the combustion engine to drive a car. I don’t need to understand HOW you’re able to change me, but I DO know I NEED to change. Jesus, I’m calling on your name for help [to change]. I don’t want to go on like this. I don’t want to go on like this. I *need* transformation.”

Brand said he was really captivated by that idea of just simply calling on the name of Jesus to help him change. But then he found himself questioning it. “Really? [he said] That’s it? Just asking Jesus to change me? Is it really that simple?”

Is it? Let’s turn to Romans 12.

The Apostle Paul tells us there are three things we must do if we want to be deeply transformed. He tells us that we must BELIEVE something; we must BECOME something, and then thirdly, we must RESIST something.

**So firstly, what must we BELIEVE if we want to be deeply transformed?**

Specifically, according to Paul, we must BELIEVE the GOSPEL of God's mercy towards us. Look at verse 1:

I appeal to you *therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God...*  
(Romans 12:1)

"The mercies of God" is Paul's way of referring to "the gospel" he's been unpacking for the previous 11 chapters of Romans.

He's been talking about the wrath of God against all human unrighteousness. He's been saying that judgement will fall on all those who practice covetousness, evil, envy, deceit, and malice, and that we have no excuse because we condemn these things when we see them in other people, and yet we ourselves do the same things.

He's been saying that we are sinful, therefore, even by our own standards. And that it is a fearful thing to be a sinful person under the penetrating gaze of a God who does not tolerate evil.

And yet, Paul says, God in his mercy has made a way by which you and I can be saved. And at the most extraordinary expense. God has sent his only Son Jesus Christ to live the righteous life that you and I have failed to live. And then to die the death we deserve to die, because of our unrighteousness. So that anyone can be saved, simply by putting their trust in Jesus Christ.

J I Packer in his book *Knowing God*, writing about these chapters of Romans, put it like this:

The wrath of God against us, both present and to come, has been quenched. How was this effected? Through the death of Christ. 'While we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son' [he's quoting there Romans chapter 5 verse 10]. The 'blood' – that is, the sacrificial death – of Jesus Christ abolished God's anger against us, and ensured that his treatment of us for ever after would be propitious and favourable. Henceforth, instead of showing himself to be against us, he would show himself in our life and experience to be FOR us.

Now why does Paul spend the first 11 chapters of Romans unpacking this good news, before he even starts talking about transformation in chapter 12? Because the fuel of deep transformation is a heart and a mind that has been CAPTIVATED by this good news.

And I want to pause here to be clear about something.

(Romans 12:3a)

Some of us hear those words in Romans 12 verse 3 "be transformed by the renewal of your MIND", and we think that means that all we need to do in order to have deep transformation is that we need to know certain facts, to tick certain doctrinal boxes. We think Romans 12 verse 3 means "be transformed by replacing the incorrect facts in your mind with the correct facts." Now, you know true facts about God are vital. But if that is all we have, we will not get the deep transformation we long for.

It's possible to believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, that he came to die for sinners, that he was resurrected from the dead, and for your life to remain basically unchanged.

That's because there is a world of difference between having a head that agrees with certain facts ABOUT Jesus, and having a heart that is captivated BY Jesus. Only one of those is transformative.

This is what we mean when we use the illustration of the music and the dance. If the Christian life is a dance, you will find it very hard to do it unless you can hear the music.

You have to be able to "hear" the music of the gospel, the melody of it, the rhythm of it, if you want to be changed by the gospel. It has to MOVE you, engage your imagination, your emotions as well as your brain.

Let me try and illustrate this another way. I could simply present to you the following fact: God loves you despite your sin, and is inviting you into his family.

That is a true and very wonderful fact. But does that fact touch your heart? I have not done my job as a preacher if all I've done is declare gospel propositions, gospel facts. We need to hear the music of it, so that it stays with us, moves us, maybe even haunts us.

The author Mary Ann Bird wrote a true story titled *The Whisper Test*. In it she tells how she was born with a cleft palate, a big gap in the roof of her mouth and her upper lip.

When she started school, her classmates made it clear how she looked to them: she was just a girl with a misshapen lip, crooked nose, lopsided teeth, and garbled speech.

When they asked, "What happened to you?" she'd tell them she'd fallen and cut it on a piece of glass. She thought it was more acceptable to say she'd suffered

an accident than to say she was born different. And she became convinced that no one outside her family could love her.

But she had a teacher in second grade named Mrs. Leonard. Now, Mrs Leonard gave an annual HEARING test to everyone in the class. Each student in turn would stand against the door, and cover one ear, and the teacher would whisper something, and the student would repeat it back - things like "The grass is green" or "Do you have new shoes?"

Well eventually, it was Mary Ann's turn. And she describes how she stood at the door and she waited for her teacher's words. Much later, when she was older, she came to believe that the words Mrs. Leonard whispered to her had utterly transformed her life. The words Mrs. Leonard whispered were: "I wish you were my little girl."

Now. Imagine what it must be like to hear the author of the entire universe say to YOU, "I wish you were MY son. I wish you were MY daughter." That's exactly what God is saying to you this morning, if you are not already his. And the proof of that is that He sent His very own Son, Jesus Christ, who willingly gave his life for you, so that you could be adopted into his family.

Do you feel the weight of that? We need to. Because deep transformation only comes, not just when we know theological FACTS, but when those facts have moved us deeply.

That's one of the reasons why Jesus doesn't just give us facts about God, he tells us stories, he gives us parables - he does that so that gospel truths will go deep into our hearts and transform our lives. And later this year, I hope to do a series on the parables of Jesus.

But that's our first heading: to experience deeper transformation, we must BELIEVE the gospel, and be moved by it. Not just head, but heart. Not just KNOWING the gospel, but LOVING the gospel.

On to our second heading, **what must you BECOME if you're to be transformed?**



**[What must you BECOME if you want to be deeply transformed?]**

Verse 1. You must become "a living sacrifice." Paul says:

...present your [body] as a living sacrifice...

(Romans 12:1)

When they heard that word "sacrifice", Paul's first listeners would immediately think of the sacrificial system that God had given to his people before Christ came. An animal was put to death, then placed on the altar to be consumed by fire.

And Paul is saying, you no longer need to sacrifice animals as an atonement for sin, because Jesus has made full and final atonement for your sin, but nevertheless you DO need to sacrifice yourSELF.

What does he mean?

In the book of Hebrews, we're told that God does not desire or take pleasure in animal sacrifices for sin. Quoting Psalm 40, it says this:

6 in burnt offerings and sin offerings  
you have taken no pleasure.

(Hebrews 10:6)

So what DOES God take pleasure in? What kind of sacrifice DOES God desire?

Hebrews chapter 13 says:

...let us continually offer up a sacrifice of *PRAISE* to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices *ARE* pleasing to God. (Hebrews 13:15–16)

God has always desired from his people faithful hearts and lives much more than the mere performance of sacrificial rituals. He takes no pleasure in a person who performs the outward ritual of coming to church on Sunday, but whose life is otherwise indistinguishable from those who do not know Him. He desires heartfelt praise, and love that is genuine, love that overflows in doing good to others.

That's what Paul means when he says:

Present your [body] as a living sacrifice  
(Romans 12:1)

In evangelical circles we sometimes use phrases like "ask Jesus into your heart" or people say "I gave Jesus my heart when I was younger", but I don't think that's a biblical way of speaking, and it gives the impression that faith can be a private, internal thing that is not at all visible from the outside, and may make no visible difference at all. It's just between me and Him.

That is not at all the picture Paul gives here. He says, present your **BODY** to God, not just your heart. Give your **WHOLE SELF**, not just part of it, and not just for a few hours, one day a week.

There's that 19th century story about the preacher Rowland Hill. Apparently he was walking home one night when a man jumped up from the gutter, clearly quite drunk, and said to him, "Mr Hill! I'm so pleased to see you! I'm one of your

converts!" And Mr Hill said, "Yes, I thought you must be one of MY converts. I don't think you're one of God's."

Deep transformation requires seeing your whole life, not just your heart, as a living sacrifice.

This is where Paul's language is extremely provocative. You see a LIVING sacrifice is very different to a dead sacrifice like the ones they made in the temple. Those DEAD sacrifices were killed, burned, and that was it. You left the sacrifice at the altar. You went home from the temple. Job done.

But LIVING sacrifices move. They go with you. Because YOU'RE the sacrifice. AND you're the altar. AND you're the priest making the sacrifice. AND you're the temple, according to First Corinthians 6.

So for the Christian, the sacrificing is constant. It's always happening, everywhere. It's 24/7, 365 days a year - 366 days this year. There's no moment in which a Christian stops sacrificing. The altar and the sacrifice and the priest and the temple are there when you go home, when you go to work, when you're at college, or dealing with an incalcitrant toddler, or navigating serious illness, or hanging out with non-Christian friends. In every moment, says Paul, you are to present your whole self "as a living sacrifice [that is] holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship."

Now of course, the thing about sacrifices - whether living or dead - is that in both cases, you have to put something to death. That is what a sacrifice IS.

There IS no Christian life without constantly putting things to death. Dying to self, dying to the belief that you can live in whatever way you choose, dying to sexual immorality, dying to greed, dying to envy, dying to everything which is

not pleasing to God. This is what Jesus meant when he said you must “take up your CROSS, and follow me.”

So you put to death the belief that your body and your time and your money are your own. You put to death the belief that you belong to yourself. You put to death the belief that you can drift in and out of church whenever it is convenient for you. You put to death the idea that you know better than God what is best for you. You put it to death, and you offer it up to God. You say, “I trust you on this. I know you’ve spoken on this matter in your word, and I trust that obeying you is for my good and your glory.” That is what it means to be a living sacrifice.

John Chrys-os-tom, the early church father, put it like this:

How is the body to become a sacrifice? Let the eye look on no evil thing, and it has become a sacrifice; let your tongue speak nothing filthy, and it has become an offering; let your hand do no lawless deed, and it has become a whole burnt offering.

The other challenging thing about LIVING sacrifices, as opposed to dead ones, is that living sacrifices have a habit of trying to squirm off the altar. Often we just don’t want to put these things to death.

Because it really does feel like a death, doesn’t it? It really does. Obedience is not always not easy. But that’s what a sacrifice IS. It costs us.

And yet, when we zoom out, we see that really there’s no cost at all. Because what feels like a death leads to life, and the deep transformation we’re yearning for.

Russell Brand said a remarkable thing in that interview I mentioned earlier. He said:

“I’ve been thinking the solution to my crisis of identity is to die on the cross with Christ that he can be reborn in me.”

He’s not wrong. There is no way for Christians to have deep transformation without dying a kind of death.

This is what Jesus is saying in Matthew chapter 16:

...whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.

(Matthew 16:25)

So you lose your life, and through that you find it.

You think you’re losing your identity by obeying Christ, but actually you find it.

You present your body as a living sacrifice, and yet on the other side of that death, there’s life. Freedom. Joy. Transformation.

Last year I was asked to write about the missionary David Livingstone, and something he said really stuck with me:

People talk of the sacrifice I have made in spending so much of my life in Africa.

Is [it] a sacrifice which brings its own reward in healthful activity, the consciousness of doing good, peace of mind, and a bright hope of a glorious destiny hereafter?

Away with the word "sacrifice". Say rather it is a privilege. Anxiety, sickness, suffering, or danger, now and then, with a foregoing of the common conveniences and charities of this life, may make us pause, and cause the spirit to waver, and the soul to sink... but let this only be for a moment.

All these are nothing when compared with the glory which shall be revealed in and for us.

I never made a sacrifice."

So if we yearn for deep transformation this year, we've seen what we must believe, and what we must become. Now thirdly, Paul tells us what we see what we must resist.

### **Thirdly, what we must resist.**

Look back at Romans 12. 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.*

(Romans 12:2)

You and I have a chameleon-like ability to take on the colour of our surroundings. A sponge-like ability to pick up what is around us, and absorb it, and make it a part of ourselves. A lot of the time it's not even conscious; it's just what human beings do.

Look back at photos of yourself when you were younger, and notice the way you dressed, the way you did your hair. It's not the way you'd dress or do your hair now. Frankly, you look slightly ridiculous. I saw some of the photos at Larry and Connie's party just before Christmas. How come you didn't realise how ridiculous you looked at the time? Because it was the 1980s, that was just the way the world was, and everyone was swept along with it. It felt NORMAL.

And of course, it's not just fashion that works like this. Ideas work that way too. Morality works that way. Like water taking on the shape of the glass it's poured into, we take on the shape of the culture we pour ourselves into, and we barely notice it's happening.

And Paul says, you must resist that. And there's only one way to resist it.

Paul's saying here, there are really only two alternatives. You can see them in verse 2. You and I will either be conformed to this world, or alternatively we will

be conformed (verse 2) to the will of God. Your mind will either be conformed to the world, or your mind will be transformed and renewed by the Holy Spirit. Or to put it another way, if we are not conformed by the Word, we WILL be conformed by the world. Those are the two alternatives.

I was sent the results of a survey this week, about the effects of reading the Bible. Now, you can take these results with a pinch of salt, I don't know how the researchers calculated them. But I thought it pointed toward something that I think most of us intuitively grasp.

“Research shows that destructive habits decrease and positive habits increase when people [spend time reading] God's Word at least four days a week.

Someone who reads the Bible four or more times a week is:

- 59% less likely to view pornography
- 74% less likely to gamble
- 228% more likely to share their faith with others
- 231% more likely to disciple others

These same people are 30% less likely to struggle with loneliness.”

There is power in the Word that keeps us from being conformed to the world.

Why is it that the current leadership of the Anglican Church are wanting to change the church's teaching on marriage and sexual ethics? Is it because those leaders have become more conformed to Scripture, or more conformed to the prevailing views of the Western world?



This is why Scripture is full of warnings to resist conformity with the surrounding culture.

God tells the Israelites:

3 You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you lived, and you shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you. You shall not walk in their statutes.

(Leviticus 18:3)

In Matthew 6, Jesus says to his disciples: "Do not be like" the Gentiles or the hypocritical religious leaders who love to be thought well of by others.

James puts it like this:

Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.

(James 4:4)

That's the pattern. If we're to be transformed, we must resist being conformed.

Now, this is a gradual process.

The Lord by His Spirit takes his time with us, the way a surgeon performing radical surgery is going to take his time with the procedure, especially with someone he loves so tenderly.

But is it possible that the reason many of us are frustrated with our lack of transformation in the Christian life is because - maybe without realising it - we continue to allow ourselves to be conformed to the world?

One of the many reasons I'm so grateful for Christ Community Church is that being among godly brothers and sisters is one of the most powerful ways we have of resisting conformity to the world. We need communities of faithful people around us so that we imitate each OTHER rather than the world. This church is one of our best hopes for deeper transformation.

And as we do that, we will find ourselves as it says in verse 2, able to "discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect."

## **Conclusion**

So can I suggest a different new year's resolution this year, one that DOES bring about real transformation ?

What if you were to resolve to find ways each week to hear the music of the gospel?

What if you were to resolve to live each day this year, as a living sacrifice, gladly putting to death all the sin that is encumbering you?

And what if you were resist conformity with the world by immersing yourself in the Word, and with Christ's people here at church?

**Let's pray.**