

## ***Conforming and Being Transformed***

*I appeal to you therefore, brethren, 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 you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.*

Romans 12:1-2 (RSV)

The Holy Scriptures make a careful and deliberate distinction between the saving work of Christ and our personal faith in Him. As our Lord Jesus hung from the holy cross He declared, "It is finished." At that moment in time in the history of mankind believers in Him were saved completely from their sins, from the power of the devil, and from eternal death once for all. Christians don't gradually become saints by means of their own works. We are declared saints then and there on account of Christ and His work. Our fatal sins committed in the past, present, and future are wiped away and eternal life is a genuine reality. On the other hand, our personal faith in the Savior is not a matter of once saved-always saved. It grows and wanes over time as we experience sufferings and joys, highs and lows, times of triumph and days of defeat. This on-going process of striving to be transformed from a life that is often conformed to sinful habits toward a new life molded by God's will is known as God's work of sanctification. Writing to the church gathered at Rome, the apostle Paul spells out what this sanctified life in Christ is like and how it transforms the hearts and minds of God's people for an eternity with Him.

Whether you are just beginning your Christian journey as an infant or are embarking on the waning years of your life in this sinful world, an honest question you will want to ponder today and from time to time is: What is God's will for me? How will day to day decisions I make reflect His approval or cast judgment on what I'm thinking and what I'm doing? Clearly the Bible informs me of what God's good and pleasing will is for me. From the 10 Commandments I discern what the Lord expects of me and my family. What we owe Him by way of true fear, love and trust in Him above everyone and everything else is no secret. How He expects me to love the neighbor is

abundantly clear. What's not so clear is the murky waters we navigate in a world that is marred by sin and rebellion against God. The difficult decisions we must make are entangled by complicated circumstances and unintended consequences. What career path I choose, who I will marry, and how I will manage my money are but a few personal decisions that impact my Christian faith, my relationship with family, and my fellowship with others. The problem with these life-changing and personally impacting decisions is that they are not expressly commanded nor forbidden in the Bible. These and similar matters of faith and life require a faith in action that expressly tests and proves what God's definitive will is for me and how that intersects with my family and friends. Use of our God given sanctified reason and common sense in these matters ought to reflect an understanding of the 10 Commandments, the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and the Catechism in general. Being "living sacrifices" (as St. Paul puts it) means that Christians make day to day decisions that reflect their worship of God in spirit and life. Faith expresses itself in self-denial and following after Jesus Christ. We discover this expression of faith in the confession of St. Peter in today's gospel lesson. There Jesus commends Peter's bold confession and builds on it as the rock-solid basis for the Office of the Keys. "Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven. Whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." So in the midst of life's myriad of choices God has not left us without the promise of forgiveness-and this forgiveness is expressed definitively and concretely through the lips of His pastors who absolve sin.

Zeroing in on the text, the apostle provides us with two similar but distinct terms to describe the Christian life of faith. "*Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world...*" (verse 2). To conform is to "form with" the pattern prominently displayed in the world. This is a life that doesn't concern itself with what God has to say or why He says it. It is a life void of Christ and oblivious to His will or purpose. The life of the world is turned inward to what's best for me, how I can get ahead, and what means are available to benefit from the sacrifices of others for my own personal gain. The pattern of this world is a catch-all phrase for all that is opposed to the will of God and discipleship under His lordship and rule. Conforming to this world's easy and broad road makes no demands on us and requires no standards for us to follow. Ours is a world where chaos and personal entitlements manifest themselves in distrust and disunity of everyone and everything. Welcome to 21<sup>st</sup> century America!

The second definitive word that Paul uses is in direct and stark contrast to a life conformed to this world. "...*but be transformed by the renewing of your mind*" (verse 2). A follower of the written and incarnate Word of God in the person of Jesus Christ is one who has been transformed. Transformers channel electricity and convert it from one form that is raw and unrefined to another form that is readily available and universally useful. How is this transformation brought about in us? Simply this: "If any man would come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for My sake will find it" (Matthew 16:24, 25).

The fallen world mocks the cross as utter foolishness and a stumbling block to personal progress and success. But you and I hail this same cross of Jesus as our standard and joy to have it change and mold us from condemned sinners to suffering saints, from souls lost to ones found. Minds are renewed and transformed when they focus on the Word of God for guidance and help in navigating life in this world. We think about how decisions express our faith in a common confession of Jesus as the Christ before we decide. We contemplate whether or not to do or say this or that conscious of the witness we are making. Those who conform themselves to the pattern of this world don't think like that. They don't make their choices based on the will of God. They just go with the prevailing fad and whatever serves their own sinful will.

Political conventions held in an election year often focus on what is right and wrong about our country. Easy solutions are offered for very difficult problems regardless of political ideologies. Speeches are made and analysts provide their own spin. Some even are bold enough to make mention of sacrifices. If we want to be stronger, we must be willing to give up some unhealthy comforts for the sake of the whole. Most often the rhetoric never makes it off the ground. If we as Christians want to be stronger in the faith, we must be willing to give over our individual and collective wills and wants to Jesus. Our bodies become living sacrifices when our worship spreads from lips and hearts to hands and feet for the sake of the Gospel. The way of discipleship in Jesus' kingdom is the way of living sacrifices. Our worship is intended by God to be a life-long endeavor rather than a once hourly obligation. God demands a transformation, a channeling of our entire life rather than merely a little corner of it by way of the

cross. That's a painful and unpleasant way, except that Jesus has already made a way for us in His own death and resurrection.

A moment ago I dared to pose the question to you: What is God's will for me? How will day to day decisions I make reflect His approval or cast judgment on what I'm thinking and what I'm doing? To help answer this juggernaut we look no further than the Word and Sacraments. In Jesus we have all the demands of discipleship met. In Jesus we have the will of the Father fulfilled. In perfect harmony, Jesus conformed His life and work to the will and purpose of the Father for you when He declared, "Nevertheless, not My will but Thine be done." Your Lord and mine denied Himself and took up our cross when there was absolutely no reason of His own to do it. Out of over-abundant fear, love and trust in God, Jesus took up the cross and carried it to His own suffering and death that I may be His own and live under Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence and blessedness. This He did that all our lives of worship together might prove to be living sacrifices of service to God and neighbor. We can't even begin to come close to following Him as we ought by living a life without sin, but by grace we have been baptized in His death and made alive (transformed if you will) in resurrection glory. Daily remembering our baptism, God calls us to repentance and applies forgiveness of all our sins. This transforming work of the Holy Spirit day in and day out affords us the power and will to discern what God's good and gracious will is for us. Fed with manna from above, bread not of this world and drink from the veins of our Savior, you and I are hereby reminded that we are not of this world. We have been transformed and renewed for another way, a way that is eternal life.

Though bound by time we look forward to eternity without end. Conforming to the influences of this world will only serve to strip us of our freedom to serve God and neighbor. Rather, being perpetually transformed by the renewing of our minds and living the new life in Christ, we believe that our Lord and God is testing and proving our faith. As God does that in us, we remember the Rock from which we have been hewn and fight the good fight of the faith until He comes again in glory. Amen.