

August 20, 2023

“Transformed for the Church”

Romans 12:1-8

**Intro:**

When I was growing up, Saturday morning was the best time for watching TV. That was when all the good cartoon shows were on. I recall going to bed on Friday night hoping that I would wake up in time to catch my favorite cartoons. Most of the time I would manage it, but sometimes the non-morning person in me won over and I would sleep in.

On those Saturday mornings where I would make it up in time, my brother and I (he was the morning person and was usually up) would carefully make our way down to the living room to quietly turn the TV on to watch our shows. We were allowed to do this as long as we didn't wake our parents up. Mom especially didn't want to be up any earlier than she had to be in order to get her breakfast ready so she could sit down and watch Star Trek (the original series) while eating it.

Anyways, one of my favourite cartoons to watch was Transformers. I loved the good vs evil, the cool robots that turned into other things, the mechanical voices, and of course the fact that they had a great toy line to go along with it! I'm not sure how many of you are familiar with the Transformers, but the very simple idea of the show and toy line was that there are these alien robots that could change – transform – into something else. For the Autobots (the good guys) this usually meant a land-based vehicle of some sort like a car or truck. For the evil Decepticons, it was usually something in the air-based or weapon range such as fighter planes and guns. What strikes me in the creative process of the show, especially in the first season or so, was how the thing the robot transformed into was often reflective of their role in the group or the particular skillset that they had. For example on the Decepticons side, Soundwave was their spy and he transformed into a tape recorder. On the Autobots side of things Ratchet was

their medic and transformed into an ambulance. This wasn't always the case, but there was some significant effort put into this aspect of the creative design.

### **The Passage:**

The apostle Paul has something to say about the transformation that people go through when they become believers and allow the Holy Spirit to work in their lives.

As we look at our passage this morning from Romans chapter 12, we are at a shift in direction for Paul's letter. Up to this point, he has been teaching and reminding his readers about who Jesus is, our relationship to Him as human beings, and what He has done to improve, or better yet repair or restore, that relationship. As Paul, at the time of the writing, has not yet visited the believers in Rome, he is trying to cover as many of the basics of faith as he can to ensure that the instruction received is complete and comprehensive. At chapter 12, however, he moves from the more academic, head-type focus and knowledge to a more practical "how does one live this out in the day to day" focus.

He opens the passage making this shift with the words "And so" or, as the NIV translates it "Therefore": "And so, therefore, in light of all that I have just written about, how are you the reader supposed to implement this into the day to day of your life?"

This is the sentiment that Paul is conveying and really the jumping off point for all that he will expound upon in the remainder of the letter. *Therefore*, because Jesus was committed to his work and death on the cross on your behalf, you should also be committed heart and soul to your faith and to following him. This is the plea that Paul is making. The only reasonable response to who Jesus is and to what He has done is submit yourself fully to His leading, giving up all control and possessiveness of your life, just as completely as a person would give up ownership of that which is being placed on the altar as a sacrifice.

How does a person do this, you might ask? Paul answers that when he says “Don’t copy the behaviour and customs of the world” or “Do not conform to the pattern of the world”. Meaning, don’t be shaped by anything other than the word of God and the working of the Holy Spirit. Another way to look at this is to not allow any aspect of what the world has to say or offer to have a place of more importance in your life than Jesus.

His word shapes you; the world does not shape His word.

This happens when we allow ourselves to be transformed by the power of that very same word of God and by the active working of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Be transformed, Paul says, into a new person with new thoughts, with new perspective, and with new behaviours. All of which work together so that you can be confident in seeking God’s will for your life and then recognizing it when He reveals it to you.

### **Transformed:**

Now, often when I have heard this passage used in a sermon or devotional for a small group or youth group or something, people stop reading at the end of verse 2. I can appreciate that there is a lot of good instruction contained in those first two verses, but by stopping there people can easily get the idea that being transformed in Christ is mostly a head knowledge thing – if I read enough books, memorize enough Scripture, and engage enough in careful study of the Bible, then I will be transformed and brought closer to God. This, if it is the only focus, can get us stuck in a mindset that Christianity is purely an academic pursuit and has no practical bearing on our day-to-day lives. Which, of course, is not at all the message that Paul is trying to convey. Hence, he goes on to write about Spiritual gifts.

It is the spiritual gifts in our lives that give evidence of the transformation that the Spirit is undertaking within us. Paul urges us to take an honest and sober stock of our lives – where are we being faithful and where are we falling flat on our faces.

Where, or maybe better yet, just “Are” we living the Christian life that Jesus has given us?

I get the impression that perhaps Paul thinks his readers in Rome are still trying to live with one foot in faith and the other in the world, and trying to figure their way forward in all this on their own. But they are not alone. We are not alone on the journey of faith. Jesus has set the church in place so that all who would follow Him are connected together to help one another along the way. This is what we are being transformed for: the blessing and encouragement of others. Look at how Paul sets that up:

“We are many parts of one body, and we all belong to each other.”

And furthermore:

“God has given us different gifts for doing certain things well.”

We have been and are being transformed in unique ways for a specific purpose – kind of like those robots transformed into something that reflected their specific purpose.

We often come to this passage, and to the other Spiritual gifts passages in Paul’s letters, and get stuck a little bit. We read them as though they are exhaustive, and that what he has listed are the only possible gifts that the Spirit will give. This can leave us in a bad place – what if we don’t have any of those gifts listed? Does that mean we are not saved, or that the Holy Spirit couldn’t be bothered with us? Does it mean that we aren’t good enough in God’s eyes?

Or maybe we get stuck thinking that the only way we can show that we are saved is through doing one of these specific things, and so we try to force ourselves into the mold of a particular gifting.

But that isn’t how it works. Paul is providing a list of examples – something to get our thinking engaged and a place to start from as we explore what God is transforming us into. The little word “If” at the beginning of these examples lets us know that it is just an example. So, set your imagination free to explore, with

God, what unique and special skills/talents/abilities/passions He is building into you. What is it that, when you do that thing, you not only have a deeper enjoyment than if you were doing some other thing, but you also feel God's pleasure? Maybe it is singing. Maybe it is in creativity and art. Maybe it is in working with tools or your hands. Maybe it is in being outdoors and growing plants. Honestly, the list is endless.

Spiritual Gifts, however, are not just something that you might do better or enjoy more than other things in your life. They are transformed into your life specifically for blessing others. Notice, as Paul rattles off his list of examples, that doing whatever that thing is, is done for others. "Speak out, teach well, serve others, encourage others, give generously, show kindness gladly."

This is God's will for you, that you would use the gifts He gives to you, as you are being transformed into a child of God, to bless others on their journey of faith – just as those others are doing that same thing for you. Our gifts are not meant to be kept only for ourselves, or only for those moments when someone might happen to ask us to do something that lines up with a gift that we have.

We need to take the initiative and let other people know how God has built us. To show people our transformation by sharing with them the gift(s) we have been given. The whole rest of this chapter expands on this idea that we should thinking of how the things we can do can be offered in love to other people.

And finally, our gifts are not just for those who are part of the family of God. We are to use our gifts to bless those who are outside the church so that they might have a way to encounter the love of Jesus as well.

### **Conclusion:**

Now, I know that it is not always easy to take the initiative and to put ourselves forward and offer our gifts to others. It might be seen as bragging or "thinking of ourselves as better than we really are" – which Paul warns against. But living into

the gifting that God has given you is not bragging, it is being obedient. And we want to help you to take a step forward in this.

So, here is what we are going to do as we kick things off in our ministry year next month. We are going to put a board up at the back of the Sanctuary, and we are going to provide some paper and tacks. What I will ask you to do is take a piece of paper and write down a, or the, gift that you believe you have been given – you might have more than one – and then pin it to the wall. Put your name on it.

In addition to this, I am going to ask that you also put down on the same page (or maybe a different one) where you are currently using your gift in a ministry context. It might be something within the church, or it might be in some manner outside of the church. For example you might write down that you have the gift of music and you are going to a few care homes in the area once a week to share music with the residents as a means to blessing them. Pin that on the board.

As everyone goes back and looks at the board, sees your names and gifts and how you are using them, we can use that as a reminder to pray for you in those things. It will also work as a way of letting people know where you are gifted and desire to serve, and so they would know who to ask when looking for someone with a particular gift. For example if your gift is prayer, then those who might be starting an evening prayer group would know to make a point of inviting you specifically. And finally, it might show someone an area of ministry that would fit their gifts and passions, and they might be able to come alongside you and join you in ministering to others. Going back to the “music in care homes” example, perhaps someone else has the gift of helping others and a deep care for seniors, and would love to join you by coming and helping get the residents to the main room or something like that.

So, take the next couple of weeks until our kick-off Sunday to think and pray about how God has gifted you and where He is using or desires to use those gifts. And then come prepared to add it to the board.

Let's pray.