

THE GENEROUS LIFE

(2) THE TRANSFORMATION OF GENEROSITY

Romans 12:1-2

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SCRIPTURE

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, 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 renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God--what is good and acceptable and perfect (Rom 12:1-2 NRSV).

INTRODUCTION

In Romans 12, the Apostle Paul makes a passionate appeal for transformed living. He urges us to resist the pressure for conformity to the world and exhorts us to actively transform how we live for God. Furthermore, the transformed life is demonstrated by a willingness to give back to God and to live a generous life. The transformed life is the giving life and this transformed giving can be seen in at least three ways:

1. TRANSFORMED GIVING IS AN EXPRESSION OF WORSHIP

First of all, transformed giving is an expression of worship.

"Pastor," said Mr. Paulson, "I have a problem. I am a spendthrift. I spend money like a drunken sailor. I throw my money around right and left. In this morning's service I want you to pray that I may be cured of this habit." "Yes, my friend," said the pastor, "I'll be happy to pray for you—right after the offering."

Stewardship brings worship to God. But we are not just talking about the collection during the service. Paul writes:

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship (12:1).

Only a transformed life can offer the kind of living sacrifice of which Paul speaks. From time without memory it has been recognized that we approach God with a sacrifice. Biblically speaking, a sacrifice is not intended to change God so that he serves us. Rather, it is intended to express our willingness to change in such a way that we can serve God.

In the Old Testament, the sacrifices of God's people were material, intermittent and local. God's people brought animals, cereal grain and liquid libations to pour out at the altar. These material gifts were separate and apart from the worshiper's own personality and life. At their best, they expressed an inward reality of faith. At their worst, they were merely outward religious acts that had no reference to the worshiper's actual state of heart.

Further, the Old Testament sacrifices were intermittent. There were three great feasts every year in Jerusalem. Those were the primary times of giving. On other occasions people might give a free will offering. But the thought of each individual giving a daylong sacrifice was beyond comprehension. Also, the giving of sacrifices was limited to one place, the temple in Jerusalem. If one lived a mere 50 miles away in Galilee, the thought of a daily sacrifice was out of the question.

This is why the Old Testament system was merely a shadow of things to come. God never intended it to be the last word. In the coming of Jesus Christ, the system of giving has been changed completely. We no longer bring material sacrifices first; rather we bring ourselves first. We do not do this as an intermittent act but as a daily way of life. Such giving is not confined to a religious shrine but is given everywhere the believer goes — home, office, recreation, social life and church. When one sees life as a daily living sacrifice, giving to the cause of Christ becomes as natural as breathing itself.

2. TRANSFORMED GIVING IS AN ACT OF SUBVERSION

Transformed giving is also an act of subversion. Paul tells us:

Do not be conformed to this world (12:2a).

J. B. Phillips made a contemporary statement of this verse with his now-famous translation, "Do not let the world press you into its mold." This reflects the Greek word behind the English version, a word indicating the adoption of a superficial, external conformity to the world around us. The reformer Martin Luther had an expression, "Become what you are." For the Christian the normal course of events is for the inward life to transform the outward. In the endless pressures of our world, however, the opposite often happens to us. Our outward behavior often conforms to the world rather than to our spiritual nature.

In this regard, it is important to ask what is the "world" against which we are warned. It does not refer to the good Earth which God created and gave to us to care for and enjoy. Rather, Paul uses the word to mean something like, "the spirit of the times" or that part of human society which seeks to live apart from God. Christians are not to conform to such a world.

The dimensions in which this can define our lives are numerous. In a poll of executives, a Gallup survey discovered that 80 percent admit to driving while drunk, 35 percent overstate tax deductions, 75 percent take work supplies for personal use, and 78 percent use the company phone for personal long distance calls. White collar crime in the United States is estimated by the F.B.I. at over \$300 billion per year.¹ Major American businesses lose 9 percent of employee hours due to absenteeism.

Each of these examples indicates the incredible pressure of the world to press Christians into its mold. Notice that every one of these examples relates to some area of life's stewardship. The misuse of automobiles, tax deductions, work supplies, and telephones demonstrate the world's sinister capacity to distort and to misuse, to create irresponsible stewardship of life's good gifts.

Nowhere can this become more obvious than in the dimension of Christian giving. Whereas John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, said, "Make all you can, save all you can, give away all you can," many professing Christians say today, "Make all you can, keep all you can, spend all you can." The startling truth is that the average American Christian gives less than 1 percent of personal income to the work of Christ.

The earliest Christians were described as people who turned the world upside down (Acts 17:6). The single Greek word that is translated as "turn upside down" can also be translated as "subvert." As followers of Jesus Christ we are called to subvert the values of this world and replace them with Kingdom values. It is to pray with Francis of Assisi (1181-1226):

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
where there is sadness, joy.
O Divine Master, grant that I may not seek so much
to be consoled as to console,
to be understood as to understand,
to be loved as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,

¹ As reported on the Cornell Law School - Legal Information Institute website.

and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

Eugene Peterson, who passed away on October 22 (2018), often spoke of Christian spirituality as subversive, in that it does not seek what the material world holds to be important, but seeks a transformation. Our giving needs to be subversive. We need to reflect the values of God's reign rather than the values of human culture. We must be thermostats that set the temperature around us rather than thermometers that merely reflect it. Be a thermostat not a thermometer.

3. TRANSFORMED GIVING MEANS A LIFE WORTH LIVING

Thirdly, transformed giving means a life worth living. Paul implores us:

...Be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect (Rom 12:2b).

The opposite of pressure into the world's mold is a life of transformation. The imperative "be transformed" is from the Greek word "metamorphosis." This means not a change in the external scheme of things, but a change in the essential nature of the person, beginning on the inside and working its way to the outside.

The sun gives off light because it shines, the rose exudes fragrance because it is a rose, and the believer demonstrates the traits of a believer because it is the nature of the believer to do so. The Lord Jesus did not say, "Take salt and pour it on the earth," but rather, "You are the salt of the earth." Nor did Jesus say, "Shine light on the world," but rather, "You are the light of the world." The Christian exercises saline and illuminating influence in the world not first by doing but simply by being.

The Beatles raised religious questions around the world with their haunting melody, "Let It Be." Although they denied a religious connotation to the lyrics, many saw a spiritual lesson. When one truly knows Christ inwardly all one must do is "let it be." The fruit tree does not change the bud into the flower and the flower into the fruit by some extraordinary effort of self-transformation. It is the very nature of the tree because of its internal life to produce the fruit. The same is true for transformed living in the Christian dimension. If and when we truly know Jesus Christ, the life of Christ within us transforms the externals of life around us.

Nothing so demonstrates the tangible change in our lives brought about by Christ as the willingness to give. It is no accident that Paul follows the remarkable chapter on the resurrection of Christ with a practical appeal that believers give with individual responsibility, weekly regularity, and proportionate return to God's work (1 Corinthians

16:1-2). Paul immediately connects the mighty transforming power that raised Jesus from the dead with the power that transforms selfish humans into regular givers to the Kingdom of God.

The biological process of metamorphosis or transformation takes place when an ugly caterpillar becomes a beautiful butterfly. For a human being who has lived in self-absorption, materialism, greed and possessiveness to change into a person who is loving and generous — is no less a miraculous transformation. This comes only by the grace of God and living empowered by the Holy Spirit. But such a life is the only life truly worth living.

CONCLUSION

The transformed life is the giving life. Giving is actually a double miracle of transformation. It reflects the miracle of Christ within us. It also reflects that providence of God around us by which our energy, work, and education are turned into that which we place in the offering plate. Our life transforms into money. That money transforms into ministry. That ministry transforms again into life.

If your life has been transformed by the grace of God then in the light of that grace, become a transformed giver where your giving is an expression of worship, an act of subversion and a means for attaining a life worth living.