

APPLIED CHRISTIANITY

I. "Where the Rubber Meets the Road"

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Romans 11:33- 12:2

TEXT: *Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy,
to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing
to God—*

this is your spiritual act of worship.

*Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world,
but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.*

*Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—
his good, pleasing and perfect will (Rom 12:1-2).*

INTRODUCTION

Do you remember math classes where you were taught some new function, then you'd do a series of 20 problems or so out of the book to get the hang of it? Then, there were those dreaded "Application Problems" at the end, where none of the stuff you'd learned seemed like enough to solve the problem. Something like:

Polly took a walk that lasted 53 min. and 37 sec. She began walking at 3.1 mph. But, after 17 min., she came to a hill and slowed to 2 mph. It took her 5 min. and 6 sec. to get to the top. Then, going downhill she walked at 3.4 mph for 2 min. and 40 sec. She stopped for 21 sec. to pet a horse. An aggressive horsefly began chasing her, so she ran for 50 sec. at 7 mph. Then she resumed her walk at 2.8 mph. How far did Polly walk, and what was her average speed?

Does that make your head hurt? Of course, the point is, learning to do math in the abstract does us little practical good if we can't apply that knowledge to the problems of everyday life.

This morning, I'm beginning a trilogy of sermons on applied Christianity. I'm concerned about how we often accumulate considerable knowledge about the faith, but fail to apply it in the rough and tumble of our lives. Our knowledge about God can stay locked away in a separate compartment and have little affect on our values, our morals, and our lifestyles. Pollsters, George Barna and George Gallup, are both Christians. Because of that concern, they frequently use their separate polling organizations to give us a picture of Christianity and moral values in American life. Tragically, poll after poll shows the morals of those calling themselves Christian often differ little from those of the general population. And, a recent study showed that over half of evangelical Christians agreed with the following statement: "The purpose of life is enjoyment and personal fulfillment." Now, if you're wondering, "What's wrong with that?", stay tuned.

The good news this morning is that the Gospel has the power to utterly transform our lives and the application of Christianity isn't that confusing. But transformation is not automatic and it

does have its difficult spots. Here's a cartoon from a recent *Leadership* magazine...[projected]. It does pose a question we can all identify with, as this preacher says, "This is my fourth sermon on the transforming power of the gospel. Why do you look like the same old bunch?" Don't you ever feel puzzled over your lack of showing forth the character and nature of Christ? I know I often feel distressed with myself.

IN VIEW OF GOD'S MERCY

I can't think of a better place for us to learn the how-to's of application than our Scripture this morning, Romans 12:1-2. This is where Paul begins getting down to the practical ramifications of grace and all God has done for us. This is one of the great chapters in the Bible and even three sermons won't begin to tap its riches.

But note our text begins with a connective word, "therefore." *Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices....* Therefore" links this to all Paul has been telling us about God and His salvation, *in view of God's mercy*. "Because of what I just said (chapters 1-11)," Paul is saying, "Here's how it is to translate into our living transformed lives." Paul begins the application section here and continues with it for the next four chapters. The first 11 chapters of Romans are a carefully reasoned explanation of the Christian faith:

- The problem: We are all sinners (Rom. 3:23) and incapable of saving ourselves.
- Rom. 6:23– *The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord.*
- He affirms the power of the resurrection life we can live through Christ's resurrection.
- There is therefore now no condemnation for believers in Christ. We stand forgiven before God, adopted as sons and daughters and empowered by the Spirit (Rom. 8).
This plan of salvation by grace alone through faith alone is so marvelous and beyond us, Paul concludes his description of God's plan with a doxology of praise. As a bulletin insert we have 11:33-38- 12:2 from *The Message* paraphrase. I think this does a good job of giving us the feel of this transition to application with a bracing freshness. Please follow along in the reading.

Blaise Pascal was well-known for his genius in mathematics and science by the time he was 31. That year, he visited his sister in a religious community where he heard a sermon that brought about a profound religious experience. He remembered that day, Nov. 23, 1654, as the key moment in his life. He wrote the following on a piece of paper and sewed it into the lining of his coat, carrying it with him the rest of his life:

"Fire. God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, not of the philosophers and scholars.

Certainty, certainty, heartfelt joy, peace. God Jesus Christ. Joy, joy, joy, oceans of joy!"

For the next six years, he lived with that community, studying the Bible and reflecting on the Christian life. Then, at age 37 he began writing a defense of the Christian faith collected in *Pensees*. He died at age 39 before completing it.

I like that picture of Pascal carrying a description of his powerful encounter with the living God close to him, permanently sewn into his coat, reflecting on it and letting it penetrate his living—changing his life from that point on. It's like every time he put on his coat, he was clothing himself with that saving knowledge. Have you caught a compelling vision of God's salvation?

You can find it in the first 11 chapters of Romans.

Then, there are two steps here to begin living-out our walk in Christ:

1. Surrender, offering ourselves to Him.
2. Ongoing renewal of our minds.

First an emptying step and then a filling step.

OFFERING OURSELVES

God has acted through Christ Jesus to let us know in every conceivable way that we are loved and God wants us to be a part of His family and to empower us to live for Him. The first action called for us in order to accept this is, letting go, relinquishing our lives— offering up ourselves to Him. “Bodies” in the NIV means far more than our physical body. It means our whole persons, all that we are. As *The Message* put it,

Take your everyday, ordinary life— your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life— and place it before God as an offering.

The call to offer our bodies as “living sacrifices” calls to mind the sacrifices laid on the altar in the Old Testament. They were burned up, destroyed. Why this radical talk of sacrifice and total offering of all that we are? The reason is that, living the Christian life always involves a surrender of our wills. The fact is, only one person can be in control at a time. You can only have one driver.

I heard Dr. John Powell (author, counselor, Catholic priest) give an illustration in a sermon that stuck with me. He lived with his mother in her years of declining health. When she was no longer able to handle the stairs herself, he had to carry her up and down the stairs of her home. She was a small woman, so that was no problem for him. But, as he was carrying her down the stairs, she’d suddenly grab onto the banister and hold on tightly so they couldn’t move. He’d say, “Momma, you have to let go or we can’t move.” In response, there was a plaintive little, “But, I’m afraid you’ll drop me.” And John would have to go through his whole reassuring spiel: “I love you, and I’m strong enough to do this. Trust me, I won’t drop you.” Then, she’d finally let go. It was fine until the next time she’d suddenly latch onto the banister.

That picture sticks in my mind of that little woman grabbing onto the banister. Isn’t that what we often do? Instead of trusting God to take care of us, we grab onto the banisters of life— the things that make us feel secure, trying so hard to remain in control. Our banisters may be bank accounts, people who are important to us, physical beauty, alcohol and drugs we use to cope with in life. They can even be things like anger and intimidation we use to achieve what we want. Our banister is anything apart from God we rely upon for security. We are called to let go and trust God.

I come across so many people who are trying to live the Christian life without this step of letting go of their lives in complete trust in Christ. They are simply adding Christian behaviors to their lives. They may go to church and are trying to follow teachings of Christ. They make changes in their lives and clean things up a bit. BUT they’ve missed this step of surrender where we

relinquish control of our lives to Christ. This is where the heart is actually changed and the life of Christ is implanted in us— we are born again. His spiritual DNA is given to us so it can begin to reproduce the character of Christ in our lives. Without this heart transformation, it would be like me dressing up like a doctor and trying to sound like a doctor. I might be able to fool a lot of people if I'm good at it. But I'm not *really* a doctor. Something essential is lacking— I have not learned what a doctor knows and been trained in the necessary skills. Looking like, acting like, and sounding like a doctor doesn't make me a doctor. Likewise, Christian behaviors don't make us a Christian. We become a Christian only through offering to God all that we are, letting Him determine our lives. It is dying to ourselves and embracing the life of Christ.

This surrendering ourselves to Him is an ongoing process. We need to keep doing it. We have a terrible propensity to take back the control of things. What would it look like if you just offered every part of your life up to Christ, letting go of your agenda? Think about it. What effect would it have on:

- your family life, your marriage?
- things at work or at school?
- your recreational time and other free time?
- your eating and social relationships?
- your reading and watching TV?

Applied Christianity means to live our days constantly in the attitude of, "Not my will, but Thy will, O Lord."

TRANSFORMATION

Vs. 2— Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is— his good, pleasing and perfect will.

Notice, this verse begins with a "do not," a stop command before going on to what we need to do. Here's a "no" we must say before we can say "yes." Our culture exerts considerable pressure on us to conform to it's pattern. We're bombarded with something like 300 advertisements a day. If you make it to 80 years of age, that's 8,760,000 advertisements. Is their design to help you become a better person, to develop noble character? No. Most are to encourage us to give into our passions and hungers, to be discontented, coveting, and materialistic. Our culture teaches us that we get our value from what we have, how we look, and how important we are. The constant drumbeat of our culture is, "Don't be different— fit-in."

Many of us do far too good a job of hiding our Christianity, blending with the world's values. A friend was telling me of attending the funeral of a man he'd worked closely with for 15 years. At the funeral service, the minister listed all this man's service to the church and talked about what a fine Christian he was. My friend said he was shocked. In all those years of working with him, he never had a clue that he was a Christian. Could that be you in your work place or at school?

Perhaps you're thinking, "I don't believe in making a big deal about my faith in talking about it

all the time. I just quietly live it.” I’m not saying you need to say that much, though what you love you tend to talk about. Isn’t it natural to talk about your family with others because you love them? If you love golfing or fishing, doesn’t it get talked about? But, even if not much is said, shouldn’t there be a joy, an attitude, an approach to life, a reflection of peace, kindness, values, and character reflecting the life of Christ? Shouldn’t that cause you to stand-out from the run-of-the-mill culture?

Now that we’ve said “no” to conforming to the pressures of our culture, we are free to, as our text puts it, *be transformed by the renewing of your mind*. This is how the ongoing transformation of our lives into the likeness of Christ happens. Again, I find The Message helpful:

...fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out.

Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it.

Remember this is not a self-reform program. We have one job, to keep focused upon Jesus. As we do that, we are then changed to be more like Him. What we fill our minds with is what will define our life. Fill it with evil thoughts, lust, pornography, greed, anger and revenge and that’s what we become. If you are focused upon self, getting what you want when you want it, your life contracts to your tiny self-absorbed world. The music we listen to, the TV programs and movies we watch, the books and magazines we read, all have significant impact on who we are and how we live.

How do we get our attention fixed on Christ? Begin every day with Him. As you get out of bed, as you brew your coffee, begin with a prayer of surrender— offering yourself and the day to the Lord. Take some time to be quiet before God in prayer, listening, alert to God. The Bible is absolutely basic in all this fixing our minds on Christ and renewing our minds. Through it we understand the ways of God, His will, and the Holy Spirit speaks through the Bible. Devotional-type books are good too. Singing songs of praise help focus your attention on God. Through the day we can continuously turn our thoughts to Him in prayer or song as we get little breaks in our activity or work. Be careful what you listen to and watch— is it God-honoring? Is it something you’d like Jesus to share in? Then, worship with other believers is a weekly opening and reprogramming of our minds. That provides needed maintenance, correcting, and adjusting of our focus.

The more our attention is fixed upon God and His purposes in our lives, the more our lives will be changed to look like Jesus. So anything that helps in this is useful in this ongoing transformation of our lives. But, remember our job is to expose ourselves to Jesus, to open-up to Him in these simple devotional practices. As we do that, the power of His Spirit does the actual changing within us— we just cooperate in what He’s doing.

If you want to get a suntan (of course now we know this is bad), what do you do? We can’t “make ourselves tan.” But, we can put ourselves in a place where we are in the sun, and expose our skin (maybe adding suntan lotion if needed) and a tan “just happens.” Spiritual transformation is similar. Exposure to the life of Christ, opening ourselves to Him is where the deep changes begin to make us more like Jesus.

CONCLUSION

Remember our transformation begins with a good grasp of what God has done for us in Christ, “His great mercy.” He has provided for our marvelous salvation. Do you know that certainty, that joy of relationship with God through Jesus Christ expounded in Romans 1-11? Once you know that, your next step is to offer your whole being to Him for His purposes. He then implants His DNA in your heart, reproducing the character of Christ. We cooperate in the process by making room for Jesus and resisting the world’s efforts to squeeze us into it’s mold. As we do that, we will indeed be transformed.

Our text ends with, *Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is— his good, pleasing and perfect will.* “Test” is like when you take a test drive of a new car— check it out. God’s will is good, you’ll find it pleasing to you, and it is perfect.