

Be Transformed

Kenwood Baptist Church Sermon Series

January 2023

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TEXT: Romans 12:3-5



Praise the Lord. It's good to open God's Word together, and I hope that when you arrived this morning your expectation was that when you left, you would look, act and think a little bit differently than when you arrived. It's a very dangerous thing for those who love to stay as they are to expose themselves to God's Word. But that danger, I want to tell you, is worth taking. This morning we are looking at a passage of Scripture in Romans 12 that is an invitation, it's a summons, it's a challenge for us to be transformed, to be changed. That change, as we saw last week, is a change to Christ-likeness, to becoming more like Christ, and that's our deepest joy and the greatest vision of who we are supposed to be as people. Last week, we looked at the riches of the first two sentences that open Romans 12. In these first two sentences, we saw that there were two great asks, two great appeals that had big implications for us as a church.

We saw first that, in light of God's mercy to us in Christ, we are to present our whole body, our physical person to God as a living sacrifice, that all that we are in our embodied cells is to be offered to God as an act of worship. We saw secondly that, in light of God's mercy to us in Christ, we are no longer to be shaped or molded by the pattern of this age, of this world, but we are to be re-molded, remade, transformed into the image of Christ. This morning, we want to look at the next two sentences in which we will see that God, the God who is willing and the God who is able to transform us into Christ-likeness wants to work on us further this morning.

We are going to see in these next two sentences, which are really three verses, first, that God intends to mold in us and shape in us the humility of Christ. Humility is something that we see

in Jesus: His willingness to come to this world, His character, His offering of Himself for the sin of the world. Jesus' leadership, His character, is marked by this type of humility. The opposite of humility is pride and arrogance, and probably three quarters of this sermon is going to be a frontal assault, a side assault, and a rearguard attack against the pride that lurks in all of us, including me. God is going after that, and He is going after that for our good. Has pride really produce good things in us? No! If we could get rid of it, should we want to get rid of it? Yes! We are going to be pointed in that direction. Secondly, will see that God intends to mold us together into the body of Christ, and Paul uses this image of the body of Christ to describe the church as a living, breathing entity where Jesus' own presence continues to be experienced and felt in the world. So, let's get ready for these next two sentences.

If you weren't here last week, or if you miss a sermon, I want to remind you that all of the past sermons are available on the Kenwood website. There's a Kenwood podcast if you want to listen or watch, or if you do better by reading, the full manuscripts of sermons are available there and you can read them and share them with others. But let's recap briefly from last Sunday. The first sentence is Romans 12:1. Let's say this all together:

*"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."*

This is the first ask. It's addressed to us all. It's plural. We see that discipleship is grace-based. It's not works-based. To follow Christ, you need to be a simple person who is the recipient of grace, and by the grace, by the mercy, we present ourselves in total dedication as belonging to God. This is the language used of Israel in the Old Testament—to be a holy people consecrated to God. We are called to a full, whole-person discipleship, and this is our true humanity. This is our active worship, Romans 12:2. Let's say this together:

*"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."*

This second ask, the second appeal from last Sunday was the appeal to no longer be shaped by the pattern of this society, of this world, of this age, which will seek to cultivate in us passions and priorities, ways of being and living and spending. It shapes our attitudes and our ambitions. It molds us actively and sometimes passively. Then, Paul invites us to be no longer shaped by it, no longer have our lives built around that scheme, but instead to be transformed. We rightly asked: "How is it possible to get out of the shaping influences of this world? How is it possible

to leave that paradigm and enter into a new one?" Some of you are thinking: "Well, maybe we could get a cabin in Maine and have no Internet, and we could separate from all society." You know what? That wouldn't help us, because the pattern of this age is inside each of us. The only way to be transformed is to have our mind renewed or born-again. The only way to be transformed is to attach ourselves to Jesus Christ who is the only One who is participating fully in the new age, the beginning of God's new creation, and so we must attach ourselves to Him. We are transformed into His likeness by the renewal of our minds, and that renewal and transformation isn't just about life habits. It's about discovering who we were really created to be. It's about finding out who we are in Jesus Christ. We looked last week at this language of change or transformation. In Greek, it's *metamorphosis*, to be shaped in a new way. Paul uses this imagery in only one other place, in 2 Corinthians 3:18:

"And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another."

That's why it's so critical that we are here with His Word before us, that we are gathered in worship. To be renewed, he uses this imagery in 2 Corinthians 4:16:

"So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day."

These outer selves are wasting away. Have you noticed that? Yet, our inner self is being renewed day by day. So, though our mortal bodies get older and weaker over time, our inner self is being renewed, and we are, in a sense, getting more and more alive for eternity. He uses this image in Colossians 3:10-11:

"[We]have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its Creator. Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all."

We're being renewed into the image of Christ. With renewed minds, we're born again. We see the good, because we see Christ. We see holy, because we see Christ. We see perfect, because we see Christ. Now we're ready for the two sentences of this Sunday.

Let's look at Romans 12:3 where we get the first sentence. Would you say this out loud with me?

*"For by the grace given to me
I say to everyone among you
not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think,
but to think with sober judgment,
each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned."*

Let's look at this first sentence together. You can see that grace saturates this passage. Paul says: "*By the grace given to me.*" In light of that grace, there is an appeal to "*everyone among you.*" Every single one of us is addressed by Romans 12:3. Every single one of us is told "*not to think of [ourselves] more highly than we ought to.*" Isn't that interesting? The apostle Paul thinks that every single person in the body of Christ needs to hear this. This is one of those rare moments in the sermon when you have no need to look to the person next to you and say, "You probably need to really listen to this." This is true for all of us. Every single person has some tendency and inclination to have an elevated sense of self. We have this ubiquitous tendency as fallen human beings to compare ourselves with others in some way that makes us look better and the person we compare ourselves to look worse. We will go down the list, and we do this relentlessly. Paul says, "Instead of doing that, we have to think with right thinking. The ESV says: *sober judgment*. If you look at other translations, they render it differently. The CSV says: *think sensibly*. The New American Standard says: *have sound judgment*. But, the expression he uses here is best captured by the sense of *to think humbly*, because thinking more highly of yourself, the corrective of that is to think humbly, and to think humbly about ourselves is a consequence of being a grace recipient, isn't it?

Pride says, "I am right, and I like to be right." Humility says, "I'm sorry. I was wrong about that." Pride says, "I am the most important person in the room." Humility says, "I need you. I value your perspective." Pride says, "You are here to serve me." Humility says, "I am here to serve you." Pride is arrogant. It's boastful, it exaggerates its aggressive. It's demanding, it's unattractive, it's unappealing. It's unproductive, and yet somehow we love it. Fallen culture lures us into it often. Go with me on this tour pride checklist and see how you do. We are proud sometimes in relation to others based on our education. Sometimes we do this subtly just by asking: "Where did you go to high school?" That question means a number of things. Sometimes we evaluate and rank ourselves in relationship to others by our profession: "What do you do?" There is a set of professions that we honor more highly than the others. Sometimes we ask each other about their athletic ability, and some people are much better athletes. We sometimes rank ourselves against others by our physical appearance, don't we? Sometimes we assess our social influence: "How many Instagram followers do you have?" Sometimes we rank each other by our status in society, sometimes by our wealth, our possessions, our cultural sophistication or perceived lack thereof. Sometimes we are proud or think more highly of ourselves toward others on things as basic as our taste in art, on what food we like to eat, or the music we like to listen to. How are you doing? I'm already at the cross needing mercy. Are you? Well, I've got just a few more. How about this one? Have you ever done this? Have you ever been proud with respect to your age? How about being proud with respect to your generation? This is one I occasionally hear, especially in a church like Kenwood where we have four generations. I can walk right down the hallway and go past one group of

people who are lamenting this generation coming up. They're looking down on them. Then, I round the corner, and I see a different group of people saying things that are less than flattering about the generation ahead of them or the couple of generations ahead of them. Sometimes, even in church, we can rank ourselves on the strength or compelling power of our Christian testimony or the level of our discipleship or our spirituality. Okay, are we all in place of mercy? Do I need to keep going? Are we an in-need-of-mercy group? All of us? We need transformation and mercy because all of these variations of pride have the implication of dividing the world up into "us" and "them," "my people" and "those people."

I want to add another level that Paul faced in an acute way in his ministry context. In the world of the New Testament, there was a mutual and increasing hostility that existed between Romans and Jews. Paul grew up inside this cultural and ethnic conflict. On the one side, Romans slandered Jews, ridiculed Jewish customs, and mocked Jewish beliefs. Cicero, the great orator and statesman, referred to Jews as "a nation born to slavery." He said: "Their religious rights are repugnant to the splendor of our empire and the institutions of our ancestors." Horace, who wrote a number of satires, mocked the Jewish eagerness to convert people to their religion. Seneca attacked the Jewish Sabbath. He not only denied the utility of the Sabbath, he considered it harmful, and he said, quote: "By taking off every seventh day, the Jews lose 1/7 part of their own life in inactivity. Tacitus was the official historian of Rome and one of the most widely read authors of the first century. He says: "Jews acknowledge one God only." He gives an account of Jewish origins that says that Jews were in Egypt, but they suffered from leprosy and disease. When Pharaoh asked how he could get rid of this disease and plague in his society, he was told to expel the victims of them, namely the ancestors of the Jews. He says that they fled into the wilderness where they were about to die from lack of water, and a herd of wild donkeys appeared and scuttled in to a place where there is a forested area and they found water. He said that is why Jews worship donkeys. A first-century piece of slander, repeated by many, was that inside the Jerusalem Temple, there was no image of a god, but there was a donkey. The very first slanderous graffiti against Christianity is inscribed in a Roman piece of graffiti where an early Christian is postured in front of the cross, worshipping a man with the head of a donkey. It comes from this this slanderous tradition.

Tacitus says that Moses invented a novel religion. He says Jews avoid eating pork because they got leprosy and diseases from it. He says that the Sabbath Day was for idleness. He said that Jews increase their wealth because of their stubborn loyalty and benevolence only toward other Jews, but the rest of the world they hate with an enmity reserved for their enemies. He says everything that we hold sacred is profane to them. The Roman world despised and hated Jews and Judaism, and Paul grew up in this world, though he was a Roman citizen. Now, on the other hand, Jews objected to Roman culture and religion as idolatrous and immoral. They

resisted Roman imperialism, and they even prayed regularly for the removal of Roman power and idolatry in the world. A text from the intertestamental period called "The Wisdom of Solomon" says that "the idea of making idols was the beginning of pornography or fornication." The invention of idolatry was the beginning of the corruption of life. The Dead Sea Scrolls pray for the destruction of Roman power. In the Jewish synagogue service, the liturgy ends with a prayer that's called the *Alēnu prayer*, which in Hebrew means *upon us, it is incumbent upon us; it is our duty*. This prayer is prayed at the end of every service, so three times a day. It starts off with the prayer:

"It is our duty to praise the Master of all, to acclaim the greatness of the One who forms all creation. For God did not make us like the nations of other lands, and did not make us the same as other families of the Earth. God did not place us in the same situations as others, and our destiny is not the same as anyone else's.

"Our God is truth, and nothing else compares. As it is written in Your Torah: 'And you shall know today, and take to heart, that Adonai is the only God, in the heavens above and on Earth below. There is no other.'

"Therefore we put our hope in You, O Lord our God, to soon see the glory of Your strength, to remove all idols from the Earth, and to completely cut off all false gods; to repair the world, Your holy empire. And for all living flesh to call Your name, and for all the wicked of the Earth to turn to You.

"May all the world's inhabitants recognize and know that to You every knee must bend and every tongue must swear loyalty...

"As it is written in Your Torah: 'The LORD will reign forever and ever.' And it is said: 'The LORD will be Ruler over the whole Earth, and on that day, God will be One, and God's name will be [the only] One.'"

I am pointing this out because this is a really important aspect of the New Testament world. Hatred of groups of people is not unique to the New Testament world, but it's a further manifestation of the fallen pride of humanity. Saul of Tarsus, the apostle Paul, grew up as a devout Jew, though he was a Roman citizen. He devoted himself to the traditions of his ancestors. He saw the pagan world as trapped in idolatry. He saw the only hope for the Roman world was to repent of idolatry, to convert to Judaism and have a share in the world to come. He grew up thinking that Israel alone had received the Torah, the Scriptures. They alone knew the will of God. They were to be a guide to the blind, a light to those in darkness, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of children. He believed in hope, for the hope of Israel; he longed for the coming kingdom. He anticipated that the Lord would send the Redeemer, that Israel would be vindicated and the nations of the world judged. That's how he felt. He grew up knowing he was right and the whole world was wrong, and sometimes we're tempted to think the same.

Everything changed for Saul of Tarsus in a flash on the road to Damascus when he realized that he needed mercy. His life was changed when he saw Jesus Christ alive. He had set out on the way to Damascus sure that he was right, which is a lot easier to think in your early 20s, and he was stopped by the glory of Jesus Christ. He realized that he was a sinner just like the rest of the world and needed forgiveness, that though he had claimed to be a guide to those who were blind, **he himself** was blinded by the glory of Jesus Christ. He was led into Damascus by the hand, and he was baptized, confessing his sins, and then he began to proclaim Christ in power. He proclaimed Him to the Roman world and to his own kinsman. As he did that, as he proclaimed Christ to both Jews and Gentiles, Israelites and Romans, something remarkable started to happen. Remarkably, both Jews and Gentiles, Israelites and Romans, began to confess their need for mercy. Both of these groups find forgiveness at the cross and discover a new identity in Jesus Christ. Remarkably, both of these groups, who previously would not associate with each other, actually begin to gather together in worship. They begin to care about each other as a redeemed family. They begin to pattern their lives after the example of Christ.

This is transformation. How so? Romans viewed themselves from a place of cultural dominance as rulers of the world, and now they are publicly identifying themselves as believers in Jesus, a Jewish Messiah, Savior of the world. This is not a small transformation, and this comes with a social cost for them. Israelites viewed themselves from a place of religious superiority against the rest of the world. But now they are identifying themselves publicly as believers in Jesus who died for the sin of the world, including their own, and they welcome their enemies as brothers, even calling them fellow descendants of Abraham. That is not a small transformation. In humility, both groups repent of their sins and find forgiveness at the cross, and their shared identity in Christ actually produces a new name. The new name is given to us by the surrounding society. The surrounding society calls us for the first time *Christ-ians*. That wasn't our choice. Remember, we already had a name. We had a website. We had a logo: *The Way*. That's what we called ourselves, and now the surrounding society gives us a new name: *Christ-ian*. That name designates a group of people. It's almost like there's a new ethnicity on the planet, a people with a new origin: *Christ-ian*, and the visible unity of the church shines brightly against the societal background of an increasingly hostile and volatile relationship between Jews and pagans. That volatility will erupt into a full-scale war within a generation of Paul's writing Romans.

Paul laborers to build and maintain the unity of the church based in the humility of Christ. Let's say Romans 12:3 one more time together:

*“For by the grace given to me
I say to everyone among you*

*not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think,
but to think with sober judgment,
each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.”*

In Romans 12:3, the first ask of this passage is to turn away from all kinds of pride. Going down that checklist, we abandon those things. Why? Not just because humility is a virtue or more attractive, but because we are all recipients of the grace of God. All of us, and as recipients of the grace of God, it doesn't really matter, does it, if you're a brand-new Christian or if you're a fifth-generation Christian? It doesn't matter if your dad was someone who dealt in grievous sin, or if your dad was a pastor. It doesn't actually matter. What matters is that we are all recipients of the grace of God, and we are brought together in this diverse, very different, group of people who are recognizably one in Christ. That's the second sentence of our text.

In Romans 12:4, Paul says:

“For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function,”

The human body is remarkable, isn't it? It's interesting. It's amazing. The human body has nine major systems. It has 78 organs, 206 bones, 650 muscles, and, if you're counting, 40 trillion cells. There's a lot going on in here, and there's a lot happening unconsciously as we function together. Paul uses the image of the human body as having distinct parts, and yet one body. Not all of the members have the same function. The expression he uses is not all of them have the same praxis, which means we don't all have the same function, but we actually don't have the same exact behaviors as well. We do have differences of taste in music and food. We have great differences among us, and that's okay. We have great differences of opinion, we have differences of gifts, we have differences of social standing, we have different education, we have different training, we come from different families, we come from different ethnic backgrounds, and yet, in Romans 12:5, Paul says something remarkable. He says:

“So we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.

Though many, we are one body in Christ. We need one another. We know one another, and what is remarkable is that we care about one another, and even further, we love one another. This is God's intention. It's to mold us, to transform us, so that the character of Christ is on display in His humility. Then, God intends to mold us, different though we are, into a grace-filled body of Christ. Notice that the differences are eliminated. You don't have to like all the same music. You don't have to have the same opinions on everything. But what we share is a people who are in need of grace and who receive grace, and receiving grace, something remarkable happens. Grace, which in Greek is the word *charis*. *Charis* means grace, and as a recipient of grace, every single member of the body of Christ receives *charis*. *Charisma* is an

outward expression or a gift of grace. So, we will see next week that every one of us is charismatic, because a *charisma* is a manifestation of grace. We all received grace, and we manifest grace, and that manifestation of grace has to be put to use in the body for the body to be healthy and alive.

But, this morning, I want to tell you the remarkably good and exciting news that we belong to each other and that unity is not the same thing as uniformity. Are you glad? I'm glad. Do you really believe that we need all of the different generations in the church? Do we need different musical styles? Do we need the different types of testimonies and backgrounds? Do we need people coming fresh out of paganism? Do we need people who have come from a strongly religious tradition? Yes! Are we all grace-dependent? Is there a way specifically that God wants to transform you this morning and take a little pride out and replace it with a grace-saturated humility, a humility that says in awe: "I have received mercy as a person in need of it"? Are we willing to say that Kenwood Baptist Church loves each other and it doesn't bother us if we have different opinions on a whole bunch of things?

Uniformity and a pressure to uniformity is troubling because we often substitute something other than Christ-likeness as the template. But, beloved brothers and sisters, we are family. We are blood-bought by the shed blood of Jesus Christ, and we belong to each other. We need each other, and we grow together, and we exist in the world as the body of Christ. In Paul's day, to gather together as a church with Romans and Jews in worship would have shaken the foundations of assumptions on both sides, and yet Paul says this is the implication of the gospel. Grace-recipients of all types gather together in worship, and we together present ourselves as living sacrifices. We are transformed into Christ-likeness. God starts to mold in us a humility so that we don't think of ourselves more highly than we ought to or think that some gifts and roles in ministry are more important than others. Any list of ways by which we think of ourselves more highly than others is antithetical to the gospel. You know what? I can't will myself into humility, and neither can you, but you can be saturated with mercy, and I can to. I can look to Jesus Christ and then humility just comes because humility rises up in our souls when we're filled with grace and gratitude. Then, as a body of Christ, we are molded together into a recognizable people that continue to showcase the incarnational reality of what God has done in Jesus Christ—that He came to proclaim peace to those who were near and those who were far and to build the church as His living body in the world. There's nothing more exciting than to be part of this people, this people who are alive in the world and invite all people to receive mercy in Jesus Christ. When we live that way, Beloved, it will get very, very exciting around here! Let's pray.

Lord Jesus, we stand in awe of You, who You are, what You have done. Lord, we want to ask for

Your forgiveness for wherever we have thought of ourselves more highly than we ought. Lord, every one of us does this because it's a characteristic of a fallen man, and we ask, Lord, we confess to You, and we ask You to forgive us, so that You can remake us. Make us, Lord Jesus, a grace-saturated people filled with gratitude, and mold us together here at Kenwood into a living, fully-functioning, thriving body of Christ, so that the presence of Christ is felt in our neighborhoods and in our homes, so that, Lord God, we would be those who reflect You to the world, calling people who are like us and unlike us to follow You together. Lord, may Your grace triumph in our lives and in our church.

We pray in Jesus' Name, Amen.