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HOW TO CHANGE FOR GOOD

Romans 12:2

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April 22, 2012

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Romans Lesson 77

How to Change for Good Romans 12:2

Every New Year's Day, millions of Americans make resolutions to change. Every year by April, those same millions have given up their resolutions as unattainable. As Christians, all of us would say that we want to change so that we will be more like Christ. And yet, when it comes right down to it, change is hard. It's like climbing up an icy slope—just when we think we've made some progress, we slip back to the bottom. So how can we change for good? By *for good*, I mean both permanently and for good in terms of our character and behavior. How can we change to become more like Jesus Christ?

In addressing this question, let's be honest: the playing field is not level. Some of you have a much more difficult battle than others do. If you grew up in a home where there was frequent conflict, or where your parents split up, or where you were verbally, physically, or sexually abused, you've got a lot more issues to deal with than those of us who grew up in loving Christian homes. Or if you've fallen into certain sins, such as drug or alcohol abuse or certain sexual sins, you have a tough battle to change for good. But while the battle may be more difficult, the good news is that the Bible promises change to all who have trusted in Christ.

That's the next thing that we must address in dealing with change: Romans 12:2 follows Romans 12:1. In verse 1, Paul addresses his readers as *brethren*, which assumes that they have experienced the new birth. God has changed their hearts from being hostile towards Him to loving Him. They have believed in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, so that they are no longer living according to their own selfish desires. They have presented their bodies as living sacrifices to the Lord. You must have experienced that change of salvation and total commitment of your life to God (Rom. 12:1) before you can experience the change of sanctification, or growth in godliness (Rom. 12:2).

Also, as we saw last time, your *motive* for why you want to change is crucial. Often people want to change because they're un-

happy with life and they want to be happy. That's understandable, of course. God gets our attention when we disobey Him by allowing the negative consequences of sin to make life miserable. But the danger is that you just want out of the misery, but you don't want to surrender to the lordship of Christ. You don't want to present your life as a living sacrifice to glorify God. You just want to use God to get out of your problems, and then you put Him back in the closet until the next time you're in a jam. This is often called a "foxhole" conversion. But it doesn't result in lasting change because your motive is wrong.

As we saw in verse 1, the right motive for wanting to change is that you have experienced God's abundant mercy in Christ. You were a sinner deserving His judgment when He graciously opened your eyes to see that Christ died for your sins (Rom. 5:8). You heard that He is "abounding in riches for all who call on Him" (10:12). And so you cried out to Him and He saved you. Now, out of gratitude for His mercy and out of a heartfelt desire to please the God who rescued you from judgment, you want your life to bring glory to Him. That's the right motive for wanting to change.

Romans 12:2 shows how to develop the response to God's mercy that 12:1 calls us to make: "And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect." I think that J. B. Phillips' paraphrase captures the meaning of this verse (*The New Testament in Modern English* [Geoffrey Bles], p. 332), "Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould, but let God re-mould your minds from within, so that you may prove in practice that the plan of God for you is good, meets all his demands and moves towards the goal of true maturity." Paul is saying,

Rather than being conformed to this evil age, be transformed by renewing your mind so that you prove in practice God's good, acceptable, and perfect will.

Paul gives a negative command and then a positive one:

1. Don't be conformed to this evil age.

World is literally, *age*, referring to the present evil age, which is passing away, in contrast to the coming eternal age in which right-

eousness dwells (2 Pet. 3:13). In Galatians 1:4-5, Paul says that the Lord Jesus Christ “gave Himself for our sins so that He might rescue us from this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory forevermore. Amen.” Christ did not die to leave us to be conformed to this present evil age, but to rescue us from it, so that our lives would glorify God.

God has permitted this present age to be under Satan’s dominion. Paul says (2 Cor. 4:3-4), “And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, in whose case the god of this world [lit., *age*] has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.” (See, also, Eph. 2:2, NASB margin.) So the change that we need to make is to live in distinct contrast to this evil age.

But what does that mean? If you grew up in a fundamentalist environment, “worldliness” was identified by certain external behaviors. The “big 5” were no smoking, drinking, movies, dancing, or playing cards. I wasn’t allowed to dance or go to movies until I was 16, when my parents gave me the freedom to decide for myself, but warned me of the dangers. The first movie I saw at a theater was Alfred Hitchcock’s “The Birds,” which almost cured me of watching any more movies!

One of my classmates in seminary told me that when he first met me, he thought that I must not be a Christian. When I asked him why, he said, “Because you have a mustache and you go to movies.” I would have had a beard, but the seminary didn’t allow beards back then. And, we had to wear a coat and tie to class, because all ministers must wear suits. Why? So that we don’t look worldly! I never could figure that out, because the guys on Wall Street are about as worldly as you can get, and they all wear suits. But having grown up in Southern California, the notion of wearing a suit every day almost kept me out of the ministry!

I’m not suggesting that not being conformed to this age has no relation to outward matters. We should look respectable and not draw undue attention to ourselves by outlandish appearance or dress. We should not wear seductive clothing. Even some of the “big 5” have some validity: We should take care of our bodies as temples of the Holy Spirit, which means not smoking or getting

drunk. (Of course, it also means watching our weight, which I never heard about in fundamentalist circles!) We should not go to movies that defile us with profanity, violence, or sexual scenes (which eliminates most movies these days). We could add to the "big 5" not using illegal drugs. So not being conformed to the world includes many outward matters.

But at its core, not being conformed to this evil age is a matter of how we think. John Murray (*The Epistle to the Romans* [Eerdmans], 2:113) explains, "Conformity to this age is to be wrapped up in the things that are temporal, to have all our thought oriented to that which is seen and temporal.... If all our calculations, plans, ambitions are determined by what falls within life here, then we are children of this age."

Harry Blamires, in his insightful book, *The Christian Mind* [Vine Books], p.44), wrote, "To think secularly is to think within a frame of reference bounded by the limits of our life on earth: it is to keep one's calculations rooted in this-worldly criteria. To think christianly is to accept all things with the mind as related, directly or indirectly, to man's eternal destiny as the redeemed and chosen child of God." In his also excellent follow up, *Recovering the Christian Mind* [IVP], p. 117), Blamires explained, "The characteristic of 'secularist values and judgments' is that they give pre-eminence to man-centered and world-centered (as opposed to God-centered) criteria, to limitedly temporal (as opposed to eternal) standpoints."

Martyn Lloyd-Jones (*Romans: Christian Conduct* [Banner of Truth], p. 73) says, "by 'world,' the New Testament means life as it is thought of, organized, and lived apart from God, without reckoning on God, without being governed and controlled by Him."

So Paul tells us, negatively, do not be conformed to the kind of godless thinking that characterizes people who have no knowledge of the eternal God. Always live in light of eternity.

2. Be transformed by renewing your mind so that you prove in practice God's good, acceptable, and perfect will.

Note three things:

- A. The process of transformation is a lifelong work of God for which you are responsible.

I base this point on the tense, voice, and mood of the verb. It is present tense, indicating an ongoing process. We're not talking about a quick fix or a dramatic, instantaneous change, but steady, lifelong progress toward godliness. The verb is in the passive voice, indicating that this is a work of God in us. But it is also in the imperative mood, indicating that we are not totally passive in the process. We are responsible to discipline ourselves for the purpose of godliness (1 Tim. 4:7). The balance is (Phil. 2:12-13), "So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure." We have to obey and work out the salvation that God has given to us, but He is also willing and working in us at the same time.

I grant that sometimes God works instant, permanent change. I've known alcoholics who got saved and never had an urge to take another drink. I've heard of drug addicts who got saved and never used drugs again. On rare occasions, a man with a fierce temper gets saved and he never explodes in anger again. But those are exceptions, not the general rule. Generally, the process of change is a lifelong battle where the saved person has to learn to depend on the Lord daily. At first there are usually many setbacks. We learn through failure, as Peter painfully did. But as we learn to walk by means of the Holy Spirit, we should see progress in transformation as His fruit is produced in us (Gal. 5:16-23).

Also, God does not change our basic personality type; rather He changes the sinful manifestations of our personality. Before he was converted, Paul was a hard-driving, everything-for-the-cause man. After he was saved, he was all out for the Lord. But he mellowed and became more gracious as he grew in the Lord. When Mark abandoned Paul and Barnabas on the first missionary journey, Paul wouldn't consider giving him a second try. He and Barnabas had a fierce conflict and parted ways over the matter. But later in life, Paul told Timothy (2 Tim. 4:11), "Pick up Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful to me for service." God will use your personality, but He will sandpaper off your rough edges. Study the weaknesses that you are prone to, so that you can be on guard against them and work to overcome them.

B. The means of transformation is the renewing of our minds.

“Be transformed by the renewing of your mind....” We act as we think. All sin and all obedience begin in the mind. So the key to overcoming sin and to growing in godliness is to change your thinking. How you think about God is immensely important. For example, if you think daily about the fact that God is with you and that He knows your every thought, word, and deed, it would have a profound effect on your behavior. Before you stretched the truth or lashed out in anger, you’d stop and think, “I can’t act like that because God is here with me.” So the process of change is directly linked to changed thinking, which stems from two main sources:

(1) The primary source for changing your thinking is God’s Word.

I cannot emphasize enough that if you are not saturating your mind with God’s Word, you will not change for the better. You must come to know God as He has revealed Himself in His Word. Satan is always trying to distort our view of God. He got Eve to sin by slandering the goodness of God and by casting doubt that He would follow through with His threatened punishment (Gen. 3:1-5). Also, you must come to know your own propensity toward sin as revealed in God’s Word. Even David, the man after God’s own heart, after he had written many of the psalms, was capable of adultery, deception, and murder. Do you think that your heart is immune toward sin? “Let him who thinks he stands take heed that he does not fall” (1 Cor. 10:12).

The Bible speaks to virtually every area of life. How should we think about trials or success? How should we think about our relationships, especially when we’ve been disappointed or wronged? How should we think about money and possessions? What priorities and goals should we adopt in life? What moral standards should we hold to? What entertainment is wholesome and renewing? How do we process world news of terrorism and threats to our freedom? What political position should we adopt? Should we be concerned about the environment? What is good art? Should Christians be involved in the media? How should we educate our children? The Bible speaks to these and many more issues.

This means that you should have a regular habit of reading through the Bible over and over again, to get the balance of the totality of Scripture (Ps. 119:160). God is love, but He is also a God of wrath. You are prone to sin, but you're also a saint in Christ Jesus. You need the balance. Meditate on God's Word and how it applies to your life. Memorize the Word so that you can evaluate any situation or decision in light of Scripture. Without a steady diet of God's Word, you will not change for the good.

- (2) Secondary sources for changing your thinking are gifted teachers and examples of God's Word.

I have heard some sanctimonious saints say, "I only read the Bible; I don't read the writings of other men." That sounds really pious, but it's a denial of Scripture, which says that God has given gifted teachers to the church (1 Cor. 12:28; Eph. 4:11-12). I am blessed to have a library full of commentaries written by men who are far more gifted in biblical languages and theology than I am. Listen to the sermons of godly preachers. Read good books on the spiritual life.

Also, God has given us godly examples of men and women, both in history and people we know who can mentor us. The Bible has many godly examples, but also we have biographies of saints who have walked with God. I have gained more help by reading Christian biographies than from any other source outside of the Bible. The stories of George Muller, John Calvin, John Bunyan, Jonathan Edwards, William Carey, Adoniram Judson, Hudson Taylor, C. H. Spurgeon, Martyn Lloyd-Jones, and others have deeply impacted me. The best biographies show you the warts and all of these dear people, so that you can learn from both their strengths and weaknesses. (See my article on the church web site, "Mining for Gold.") I also have two bibliographies on the church web site. One is for books in general; the other is exclusively on Christian biographies and church history. I encourage you to become a reader of good Christian books.

If you protest that you don't have time to read, consider this: I just listened to an interview that Mark Dever conducted with Greg Beale, who was in my class in seminary. He is now a renowned New Testament scholar and seminary professor, author of many books and commentaries. At one point Dever mentioned a schol-

arly book and Beale said that he read that book while he was brushing his teeth! Dever was surprised and asked him about this. Beale said that he read a page in the morning and another page at night while brushing his teeth, and got through the book in that manner! So you can find time to read if you want to grow!

- C. The result of transformation is that you will prove in practice God's good, acceptable, and perfect will.

Scholars debate whether "so that" introduces a purpose or a result. It seems to me that Paul is describing the result of being renewed in your mind: "so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect."

- (1) You are to prove in practice what God's will is.

"The will of God" here does not refer to issues like whether you should go to college or not, or what career you pursue. Paul is talking about the moral will of God as revealed in the Bible. This would include that you marry only a committed Christian, but it does not include whether you marry Christian Bob or Christian Bill. That is another (difficult) subject!

"Prove" means to discern and approve by testing. The NIV translates, "to test and approve." Phillips has, "prove in practice." Douglas Moo comments (*The Epistle to the Romans* [Eerdmans], p. 757), "'Approving' the will of God means to understand and agree with what God wants of us with a view to putting it into practice." H. C. G. Moule (*The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans* [Cambridge University Press, 1903], p. 207), "Here the meaning is that the Christian's intelligence has been so 'renewed' by grace that he now, by a holy instinct, can discern, in conflicting cases, the will of God from the will of self or of the world."

- (2) God's will is good, acceptable, and perfect.

Good refers to moral goodness or holiness. It is also good for you, because sin always damages you, whereas holiness always restores and blesses you.

Acceptable primarily means, "acceptable or pleasing to God." Some authors object and say that this would be a tautology. But I don't see their point. In Ephesians 5:8-10, Paul says, "for you were formerly darkness, but now you are Light in the Lord; walk as chil-

dren of Light (for the fruit of the Light *consists* in all goodness and righteousness and truth), trying to learn what is pleasing to the Lord." "Trying to learn" is the same verb that is translated "prove" in Romans 12:2. We are to prove in practice what pleases God. Of course, this is also pleasing to us in the long run. Often obedience to God's moral standards is difficult at the moment. You don't cheat on the test and those who do get the better grades. You refuse to compromise your moral purity and your boyfriend leaves you for a girl who will sleep with him. But in the long run, God's will is always more pleasing for you than disobedience is.

Perfect refers to God's absolute moral perfection, which we will never attain to perfectly in this life. But the word also means "mature" or "complete." As Phillips paraphrases, proving God's will in practice "moves [you] towards the goal of true maturity."

Conclusion

Columnist Sydney Harris (source unknown) said, "Our dilemma is that we hate change and love it at the same time; what we want is for things to remain the same but get better." For things to get better in your life, you must change. To change, you must be involved in the process of renewing your mind by God's Word, so that you are proving in practice God's good, acceptable, and perfect will. I encourage you to set a reasonable goal to begin growing in the process. Begin a daily time in the Word. Aim at reading five good Christian books this year. Link up with a mature mentor who can help you grow. Don't let the world squeeze you into its mold. Be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

Application Questions

1. If you could change just one thing about your walk with God, what would it be? How can you begin to change it?
2. How can a believer know whether an outward matter is conformity with the world or just culturally and spiritually neutral?
3. Must growing Christians be reading Christians? Practically, how can a non-reader become a reader?
4. What criteria can we apply to determine whether a matter not specified in the Bible is worldly or godly? (See 1 Cor. 6:12-20.)

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