



## You're Better Than You Think You Are

### Romans 12:2

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In this opening season of the new year, we are looking at Romans 12 to see what it means to live a spiritual life committed to faith in Christ, while at the same time rejecting the religious identity that was so heavily critiqued by Jesus. Throughout the Gospel texts, we read about the interactions between Jesus and the Jewish leaders, which makes clear that Jesus was dissatisfied with the 'holier than thou' example offered by those who tried to give off an *appearance* as the most righteous, but who failed to live such teachings in their own lives.

Last week, Rev. Tim Tate offered us a message on the first verse in Romans 12, challenging us to be committed in these next four weeks to really seeking God's will. He invited us to be actively praying that we might know God's presence in our midst, that as we enter into this year, we may better understand how God is calling us to faithful living. Such a commitment begins with a foundational claim – ***faithful living is what God wants of us***. Paul makes this clear in verse 1, appealing to us, "present your bodies as a living sacrifice, which is our spiritual worship." God wants us to commit full to the will of the Almighty ... God wants us to be spiritual people who seek to live God's will.

To live faithfully into such a commitment, to work toward understanding and living into God's will, we need to start with a foundational understanding of where we are today. Do you know who you are today?

I think the biggest hindrance for most people that keeps them from making a commitment to faithful living is that we think such authentic and faithful spirituality is unattainable. It's not that we disagree that such a life is God's desire for us, it's that we think we're too far removed from it to make it worth our time and effort to work toward it.

Do you know the name Susan Boyle? At the age of 51, in 2009, Susan Boyle became an overnight sensation on the TV show, *Britain's Got Talent*. She grew up believing she had a learning disability, which was diagnosed later in life as Asperger's. She never thought her life would amount to much because of the mis-diagnosis. Beginning in the mid-90s, she began taken singing lessons and attending an acting school, and she started auditioning for different shows and trying to produce her own record. But after 15 years of singing with only moderate success, at the age of 51, it seemed Susan would be known only as a member in her church choir and would be heard only on b-rate radio stations. In her pursuit of a career in singing, she had already backed out of an audition on *The X Factor* because she believed a contestant's looks played a large role in their chance to win, and she didn't think she looked good enough. She almost backed out on her audition for *Britain's Got Talent* because she thought she was too old for the show. Yet, persuaded by her singing coach, she went on the show. Her performance was simply astonishing.

The video clip of her first performance, in which she sings “I Dreamed a Dream” from *Les Mis*, has been viewed over 220 million times on YouTube. Yet, because of her fear that she wasn’t good enough, didn’t have the right look, or was too old, her gift was almost lost for fear of failure.

We are told around every corner of our lives that we’re just not good enough. No aspect of our lives is off-limits today. It seems every new product to hit the consumer market is aimed at *fixing* some part of our lives. We’re not fit enough, so we need to buy all these new exercise machines to get in better shape. We’re not skinny enough, so Dr. “Get-thinner-now” has just published a new diet regimen. We’re too hairy, so a new laser-hair-removal spa has just opened up down the street. We’re not wealthy enough, so now there are new ways to pad your income “from home with only 10 hours a week ... just buy my book for \$19.99!” We’re not pretty enough, so the plastic surgery company is offering a two-for-one special – have your nose and ears reshaped together (not where you thought I was going with that one, but we’re in church, so let’s keep it clean).

So much of our discontent with who we are, so much of what drives how little we think about ourselves, so much of our own self-disappointment is driven by our engagement in the world. Some of us deal with this more than others.

I have found the beauty market to be especially brutal toward women. Cosmetics and clothing companies don’t want you to be happy with your appearance, because your dissatisfaction leads to your spending more for a better look. I have found the intimacy market to be especially brutal towards men. Your lack of relational satisfaction leads to your willingness to find substitutes for intimacy, like gambling and alcohol, which come at very expensive costs.

Such degrading talk isn’t just driven to convince us to spend our money. We use shaming language all the time to keep subsets of the population from thinking they’re good enough to be our equal. By degrading those around us, we justify our self-promoting ways and mask our own insecurities. We refer to whole racial communities by the color of their skin, as if their skin color prohibits them from being our equal. We refer to whole groups of people by their marital status or choice of partner, as if their choice of partner or decision to even have a partner somehow lessens their humanity. We refer to whole nations as ... well, you know how we refer to entire nations, as if everyone who lives in or has immigrated from the country is somehow unworthy of living in our community. Then we get into debates about whether our language is actually offensive or not, as if the problem is our language and not our belief that some people will just never be good enough. But I digress ...

To aid our rhetoric, we use images of beautiful people, idyllic locations, luxury cars, and mini-mansions to define what is ‘best.’ We have these mental images of how we *should* be living based on what we’ve been told and what we’ve seen. We watch shows like MTV’s *Cribs* and Jay Leno’s *Garage*, or we watch HGTV’s *Property Brothers* and *House Hunters*, and we mentally form these ideals of what kind of life we should be striving toward. We allow the world around

us to define perfection, and then we contrast our own lives, which either seem to pale in comparison, or make us feel all haughty about ourselves because *we have arrived*.

It is these worldly descriptions of perfection that shape our ideals and leads to our lack of belief that we could ever live into God's perfect will. If we can't even attain earthly perfection, how could we ever attain Godly perfection?

We know we're supposed to be committed to such a call toward faithfulness, but if we can be convinced that the gap is too large, we can be convinced it's just not worth trying. Or, if we can be convinced that living in to such a call would hurt our striving toward worldly perfection, we abandon such a path.

Paul, in calling us toward such commitment, speaks these words, "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."

Paul here is offering two imperative demands – first, do not be conformed, and then second, but be transformed.

*Do not be conformed ...* let's start here. For Paul to say, *do not be conformed*, we must understand Paul to believe we have not already been conformed. His beckoning call does not begin with an assumption that we have already given in to the will of the world.

Paul begins with a very Biblical assumption – that you and me, as part of God's created humanity – have been created in the image of God. The image in which we were made is not one that was already conformed to the world. We were created by God in the perfect ideal – in the image of perfect love. Only through our submitting to the culture that inundates us with advertising, images, and spiteful rhetoric are we conformed to this world.

The Greek word for this phrase says do not be conformed to this *aion*, which we translate with this general word, *world*. Keeping in mind that Paul was writing this in the first century, we should be mindful that Paul isn't speaking about 1<sup>st</sup> Century Palestine. He wasn't worried about the church conforming to the ways of the Roman empire that dominated the world in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century any more than I think Paul would be worried about us succumbing to a governmental beckoning for allegiance today. For Paul, it was obvious that the ways of the empire were not compatible with Christ's teaching. The problem for Paul was greater than one political empire or another.

In a more holistic understanding, Paul is referring to the temporal age ... that is, to the present time that exists only in the anticipation of the full revelation of God's eternal kingdom. Paul is saying, don't be conformed to the ways of this world that are marked by self-righteousness, personal power, and self-gratification. These attributes span humanity on earth, not any one era.

See, I don't think Paul is worried about the micro level attributes that define us as people. He's not talking about hair color, clothing styles, job pay, retirement funds, or anything of the like. Paul isn't talking about the visible markers, he's talking about the self-righteousness which, from the days of Adam, has claimed we are sufficient in and of ourselves. He's not focused on the differences that we use to define ourselves; he's calling out the pride that hides underneath that says the differences can and should be used to rank us. He's not focused on our self-identifiers; he's focused on the worldly belief that our identifiers qualify us or disqualify us from being welcomed into the family of God. He's not focused on the surface level attributes; he's talking about the desires of the heart.

So he continues, in the image of God you were made, do not be conformed to the ways of the temporal age, *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.*

If we are not to be conformed the ways in which we pit ourselves in competition with one another, then we are instead to go in the other direction ... we are to be transformed through the renewing of our mind to better discern the will of God.

I love that Paul says be transformed in mind, and not be transformed in heart. The heart has long been said to be the home of our knowledge of God. There are multiple texts in the Old Testament wherein we are told the law of God has been put on our hearts. Thus, it is not the heart that needs to be transformed, but the mind. "It takes transformation, renewal of the mind, to detach ourselves from the world's attempts to occupy us with things that do not matter. Paul implores us to shake off the effects of the this world, attend to the things that do matter, and 'discern ... the will of God, what is good, acceptable, and perfect.'"<sup>i</sup>

I also love that Paul says be transformed by being *re-newed* in the mind. Again, we're not being invited to strive for some unattainable state of being. We aren't being invited to work toward something that's impossible, or something that has never been. We are being called back to the mind in which we were first created.

And this is the invitation of the Lord – this is the invitation of Christ to the table – this is the invitation of the church to baptism and membership – this is the invitation of God to faithfulness ... the invitation is that we reject our conformity to the world, and be transformed by re-claiming the mind that we were given in our creation by the Almighty God.

So as we continue to commit ourselves to seek God's will, don't sell yourself short, you're better than you think you are, not because you are a stud, or because you've made it, or because you are the slicer that slices the bread ... but because you are claimed, called, and created by the God who can do all things. For the glory of God, we give thanks that the Lord came to call us to faithfulness, to transform our lives, and to lead us in faithful living, doing what is good, acceptable and perfect in the eyes of the Lord. In the name of Father, Son, and Spirit. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Frank L Crouch. Workingpreacher.org. Retrieved January 10, 2018.