

TEN Vital Verses: “God Willing...”
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Our culture is invested in and entertained by the concept of transformations. The word “TRANSFORMATIONS” beams out brightly from a huge building on the far west edge of the beltline where plastic surgery procedures that happen daily result in external transformations. There is also a movie franchise called the “Transformers” that somehow keeps coming up with 2 hour movies based on toy cars that turn into robots. Indeed, the notion of changing our external reality into something different is prominently featured in our culture. This is further evidenced by those make over and weight loss reality shows with their ‘before and after’ reveals that ever so subtly promote the notion that some of us regular joes and janes, just may discover someday that we too could be transformed into something more beautiful or powerful or appealing.

When we encounter Paul’s invitation to a transformation in today’s vital verse from Romans chapter 12, we find ourselves in entirely different territory. Indeed, he sets up the contrast between how the world views life and the renewal God offers, when Paul writes to the Romans, “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.”

The first step to understanding what Paul is calling us toward in this verse is understanding what it is not. Paul’s reference to transformation is not the external change that marks an individual or the acquisition of something that promises to enhance one’s self esteem. Rather, this is a new way of being in relation to God and our brothers and sisters. Though Paul is often remembered for his dramatic personal conversion experience, many scholars argue that his most striking quality was in fact his ruthless and determined efforts to create communities of inclusion and grace where those raised in traditional Jewish synagogues would make room for the Gentile believers who were coming to faith from outside of that tradition. It was a monumental task encumbered by many external traditions and cultural differences that made the vision of a new community based on God’s revelation in Jesus Christ challenging, to say the least. But his unparalleled missionary zeal never wavered as he urged believers to

become people who live in connection to others differently because of their encounter with Jesus Christ; to discard all the differences put upon them by their culture and traditions and remain open to God's will that believers live new lives. The word he uses to describe this process is "transformation."

Now, during this summer sermon series it is Pastor Charlie's hope that you would be moved to take a vital verse, write it on a piece of paper that fits into your wallet or purse, and let it remind you of an important scripture. And I would say this is a great verse to carry close to your heart. But I have to add a bit of caution – applying this verse to your daily lives will undoubtedly lead to change. And change can be scary. Paul is asking a lot of us with this verse, he is rattling the comfortable conformity we have gotten used to. But that is precisely why it is so vital. Vital to how we live our daily lives as individuals and most importantly as a community of faith.

Now lest I usher in unnecessary anxiety, let me be clear, this is not an assignment that we have to pass or achieve, it is instead a process initiated by God's mercy, and sustained by God who does the transforming by virtue of God's very living presence.

Many of you know Eugene Peterson's re-write of scripture in his book "The Message." This is Peterson's re-write of our vital verse:

"Fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what God wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you."

This transformation is a result of living centered in God, rather than culture. Or as Peterson says, "fixing your attention on God." As we do so, we discover or rather receive, this renewal of our minds, this transformation, as we access the precious love and invincible grace that is present to each of us no matter our brokenness or fragility. In fact, some of God's best work can be done in us precisely when we stand firmly immersed and naked in our weakness and wounded-ness. When we fix our attention on God and open ourselves up to God in our vulnerability, we will discover, right there, that God stands with us; that we are loved; that we are not defined by the worst thing we've done, or the weakness that we most want to hide. But rather, that in that raw experience of grace; in that undeserved and invincibly penetrating experience, our hearts are broken open and we cannot help but be changed, transformed into the kind of people who see everything through

the lens and experience of love. We live transformed lives as we encounter the grace and love poured out through this generous God.

It is loving with God's love that generates renewal. It really does change everything: how we relate to strangers and our most beloved friends and family. We live into a reorientation of our guiding influences and shaping principals. But lest this seem too self-driven, let us remember that our source and grounding place is in the experience of God's loving presence. Without this starting point, the Christian life becomes a to-do list we can never achieve. Psychologist and Professor James Finely has found a way to express this process rather succinctly with this sentence: "We spend ourselves in love and return to our grounding place in prayer."

This grounding in prayer is a lifelong process. It involves creating a stance of least resistance to having God enter our hearts. Least resistance. That means, quieting the mind, shutting out the noise, stopping the incessant thoughts that promote cultural conformity, and resting in the presence of God. Men and women have forged a path for this across the years, for some it is the chanting of scripture, or meditating on a holy word, for others it is walking meditation, or sacred movement, or song. But common throughout these spiritual disciplines is the intention to put ourselves in the stance where we can be most readily accessed by God, for the renewal of our minds. Our thoughts won't get us there; Our best attempt to be "good" Christians will fall short. This isn't an idea we have to learn; it is a practice which will take intentional discipline.

The verses that follow this vital verse add flesh to what this mature spirituality looks like when lived out in community. Within these verses are many vital verses worthy of our attention, for in them we see that this renewal of our minds leads us to be humble, generous, forgiving, quick to offer hospitality to strangers, and seek harmony when faced with discord. There is no room for vengeance or selfishness. This renewal leads to transformed relationships.

It must have been so for those early Christians. They must have been so transformed by the living presence of God's radical love and forgiving grace, that it emanated or glowed from their fellowship. How else could the world have been so changed by this small group of followers? And I would add that herein lies the key to unlocking the next chapter for Christ's Church. It isn't in the style of music

we play in worship, or the architecture of our buildings, but in the demonstration of this counter cultural love. In a sermon on this passage, Martin Luther King Junior described this new way of living as being “transformed nonconformists who are dedicated to justice, peace, and brother and sisterhood.” JR. (Martin Luther King_Jr., *Strength to Love*).

We find hope for the future in knowing the transformative power of grounding our lives in God, not because we have merited God’s favor through some transactional system of belief or activity, but rather because we know ourselves, in our brokenness to be so loved, that we cannot help but be loving in response to all whom we encounter. In this community, we allow ourselves to die to the last trace of finding security or identity in our culture, in anything less than the never ending love of our Creator.

Let me be clear. None of us will ever get this right. What Paul indicates at the end of our verse is “good and acceptable and perfect” does not refer to us, but to God’s will. Tuning in to what God wills for all of us is a lifelong journey. But this journey isn’t about getting something right. Thank God, because I would be first in line among those who have good intentions and can’t quite live up to them. I am reminded of this by a card I bought years ago and can’t give away because it speaks so deeply to my heart, it says:

“Dear God,
so far today, I’ve done all right.
I haven’t lost my temper.
I haven’t been greedy, grumpy, nasty, selfish, or overindulgent.
I’m very thankful for that.
But in a few minutes, God,
I’m going to get out of bed...
And from then on,
I’m probably going to need
A lot more help. Amen

So we do our best to love with Gods love; to die to anything but love. And in the end, because LOVE has died for us, we find a way to start anew. Together we can commit ourselves to being a transformed people, whose minds are renewed by God’s generous love and whose actions reflect God’s justice and gracious welcome to and ministry with all. With God’s help, may it be so.

