

Devotions – January 4-10, 2015
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Sunday, January 4, 2015

*Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.
(Romans 12:2a)*

Are you a thermometer or a thermostat?

I'm not sure who first asked that question, but it's good for each of us to consider. A thermometer simply absorbs and reflects its surrounding environment. A thermostat, on the other hand, is designed actually to change the temperature. You set it, and it sends a signal to the furnace and thus changes its surrounding environment. Whereas the thermometer *tells* the temperature, the thermostat *sets* it.

When the Apostle Paul tells us not to conform to this world, but to be transformed, he is calling us to be thermostats to the world around us, not just thermometers. All of the devotionals this week will have to do with Romans 12, and particularly this idea of being cultural thermostats.

But first, let's give thermometers their due. We would not want to live without thermometers, such as the one which right now tells me that it is 8° F outside our front door, and 69° F in the living room. In a similar way, the arts and social sciences can help us see the world as it is, and to give insight into the hearts and minds of other people. Even in our own lives, we may need a period of reflection in which we take stock. If self-reflection reveals that we are at this point conformed to this world – well, then, that's where we start.

Yet Christians are told, "Do not conform...but be transformed." At the core of this, of course, is grace. (More on that tomorrow.) Paul dares to beseech Christians to be transformed because he knows God is in the equation.

May it be God who sets our dial, not anyone else.

Let us pray: Set my dial, dear God. May I be adjusted to Your will and Your ways, for the sake of the world. Amen.



Monday, January 5, 2015

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercies, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform

to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. (Romans 12:1-2a NIV)

Everything we say about transformation must be said “in view of God’s mercies”. God is overflowing with mercies toward us, and this is our only hope of transformation. For that matter, it is our only hope (period). By grace and mercy, we are made right with God in Christ. By grace and mercy, we are united with Christ in His death and resurrection through Baptism. By grace and mercy, we are not separated from God’s love. By grace and mercy, we have hope of transformation even in this life.

That word “therefore” is very important. What Paul says in Romans 12 is built upon what he wrote in Romans 1-11. He is saying, *since* the gospel is the power of God for salvation (Rom. 1:16); *since* all have sinned and fall short of God’s glory, being justified freely by God’s grace (Rom. 3:23-24); *since* God demonstrates His love for us in this, that while we were still sinners Christ died for us (Rom. 5:8); *since* the wages of sin is death but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus (Rom. 6:23); *since* there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:1); *since* nothing can separate us from God’s love in Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:31-39); *since* God is mysteriously faithful even to Christ’s own people who have rejected Him (chapters 9-11); *therefore* you can and should present your bodies as a living sacrifice, and really expect God to bring transformation out of this.

I have written of being a thermostat for our culture, rather than a thermometer. This process begins with forgiving grace, continues with empowering grace, and reaches fulfillment with preserving grace.

In short, it all depends on God’s mercy. It is when I start and remain there that I can hope to be changed by the renewing of my mind.

Let us pray: Father, I only have hope in view of Your mercies, brought to me through Christ. Send Your Spirit into my heart, that trusting in Your grace, I may be transformed. Amen.



Tuesday, January 6, 2015

Jesus said, “I am the Light of the world.” (John 8:12)

[Jesus said to His disciples,] “You are the light of the world.” (Matthew 5:14)

Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. (Romans 12:2)

The Western church calendar designates January 6 as the Festival of the Epiphany of Our Lord. “Epiphany” comes from a Greek word for “revelation” or “manifestation”. The New Testament bears witness to many ways in which Jesus was revealed, not just as a great teacher, not even just as the Hebrew Messiah; but as the Son of God and Savior of the nations.

Chronologically in the Gospels, the first manifestation of Jesus as Savior of the nations was the Star of Bethlehem, and with this the arrival of the Wise Men. (Contrary to many of our

Christmas pageants, crèches, and carols, the Wise Men seem to have arrived months or even a couple of years after the shepherds. Our spiritual ancestors have commemorated this by having a special day for the Wise Men and the Star, right after the twelve days of Christmas.)

So today, I wish you a blessed Epiphany.

And I wish for you a great many blessed epiphanies, that is, a great many times in which it is made plain to you that Christ is the Light of the world.

As I noted, Jesus was revealed as Son of God and Savior in many different ways – miracles, signs, the Transfiguration, the Resurrection, etc. With every act of love, power, and grace, Jesus shined His Light into the world.

Jesus still employs many ways of shining His Light. I believe that now, all of them involve His people, all of them involve His Word, and all of them involve the Holy Spirit. Isn't it interesting that in one place, Jesus tells us that He is the Light of the world (which isn't too surprising); but in another place, Jesus tells His disciples that *they* are the light of the world! Meaning *we*, fellow believers, *you and I* are the light of the world. Jesus means to shine His Light through us.

Let us remember these words that many of us use in our Baptism rite: "Let your light so shine that others may see your good works, and glorify your Father in heaven." (Matthew 5:16)

Let us pray: O God, may Your Light shine upon me, in me, and through me, through Christ my Lord. Amen.



Wednesday, January 7, 2015

Do not conform to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. (Romans 12:2 NIV)

I have written this week about being a thermostat in our culture, rather than a thermometer. The idea is that you and I are called to affect the world around us, rather than just being affected. While musing on this, I found myself asking an unsettling question. At first it seemed whimsical; then it came to seem serious, even disturbing.

What about Hitler? Was he a thermostat or a thermometer?

Obviously, Hitler was not the poster child for Romans 12. But think about the question. Was he shaped by the world, or did he shape it? Was he a thermostat or a thermometer? Certainly, he brought about lots of change. But "transformation" does not always equal good fruit.

I am not quite comfortable comparing you and me to Hitler. And yet – this is what disturbs me – we may not be as different as we imagine. Like Hitler, we are sinners (Romans 3:23) and we have deceitful hearts (Jeremiah 17:9). It is possible for anyone to become so intoxicated with "changing the world" that we may lose sight of whether the change is for good, or otherwise.

How do we avoid this? Paul gives us part of the answer right here in Romans 12:1-2: Keep God's mercies in view. Present yourselves to God for sacrifice (not self-indulgence). Understand up front that living for Christ will be countercultural. Seek to have your mind renewed by God. *Then*, Paul says, you will be able to test and approve what God's good, perfect and pleasing will is.

That's a good start, don't you think? (And it's plenty to keep busy with!) But I might continue to answer in Paul's own words from Romans 12: "Do not think more highly of yourself than you ought, but think of yourself with sober judgment.... Use the gifts God gives you, to God's glory and to help other people.... Love sincerely. Hate what is evil, hang on to what is good. Honor others above yourself.... Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share.... Don't take revenge.... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." (Romans 12:3, 6-9, 12, 19, 21)

Let us pray: I don't want to be fooled, dear Lord, even by my own good intentions. Center me in Your love, and in the Truth of Your Word. Amen.



Thursday, January 8, 2015

Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.... For just as each of us has one body with many members.... so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the members. (Romans 12:2, 4, 5 NIV)

I instinctively think about these things in individual terms. I'll bet you do, too, especially if you're from North America. All the things I've been writing this week, about being thermostats for our culture rather than thermometers; and all of Paul's words about not conforming to this world, but being transformed – it all seems like a project for you and me to take on, each as an individual.

It turns out Paul doesn't see it that way – and neither does God. The whole rest of the Letter to the Romans is about living as a Christian *community*. And Paul sees the Christian community not as a bunch of individuals lumped together, but as an *organism*. "In Christ we, though many, form one body," he says, "and each member belongs to all the others" (Romans 12:5). It would be going too far to say that the individual doesn't matter. Rather, we as individuals will find our greatest fulfillment when we find where we belong in the community. There are people who say they will do without the church, that they have their experience of God at home or in the woods. However that may be, such an idea is completely foreign to the New Testament.

It can be irksome and difficult to be part of a community. It's hard work. Paul knew that, which is why he devotes such a large portion of his writings to instructing about and doing that hard work.

It is not just you and me as individuals that are called to transformation in Christ. It is us as the church. It is not just individuals, but the Christian community, that is meant to be a thermostat for the culture, rather than a thermometer. Like it or not, we belong together!

Let us pray: Even as I sit alone, dear God, I realize that I am part of this organism, the church. Help me to take my place, faithfully and joyfully, as part of this one body in Christ. Amen.



Friday, January 9, 2015

Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind....If possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. (Romans 12:2, 18 NIV)

What comes to your mind when we talk about influencing the culture? What sorts of activity have you thought of while reading this week's devotionals about being cultural thermostats rather than thermometers?

I can imagine what some might say: Stand up for Truth; speak Truth into the public arena. Engage the culture by participating in the arts. Preach, teach, evangelize. These aren't the only answers out there. But what these particular answers have in common is, they have to do with trying to "change the temperature" by convincing others of our views. And there certainly is a place for such a thing

But might we have a call from God also to change the way conversation happens? One desperate need in our public square today is for a kinder, more even-handed, more thoughtful and more loving way of engaging those we disagree with. "Bless those who persecute you; bless, and do not curse" says the Apostle (Romans 12:14). How much media chatter, including from professing Christians, would be wiped out or transformed if all were to fully obey that one verse! But friends, if we stand for "truth" yet do not express it in love, are we not betraying our Lord? I grant that our words or our manner can be misunderstood; all the more reason to seek to talk or write in a way that can only be understood as loving.

One way to be cultural thermostats instead of thermometers is to change the way conversation happens – to change its tone. Our culture's way, increasingly, is to sling mud, and to avoid respectful, substantive conversation. To buck this trend is difficult! How much more reason not to conform, but to keep going back to God for transformation!

Let us pray: Dear God, in a world that curses and slings mud, raise up an army that stubbornly sticks to blessing and pouring out love. Make me a brave soldier in this force, for Jesus' sake. Amen.



Saturday, January 10, 2015

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform 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....Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (Romans 12:1-2, 21 NIV)

When Paul wrote these verses, he used some Greek verbs with a continuous sense about them: "Keep on being transformed... that you may keep testing and approving what God's will is....Keep on overcoming evil with good." We have to keep at it because of our broken and sinful world, and yes, because of our broken and sinful selves.

This can get discouraging at times. You might ask, when will I be fixed? And when will this beat-up world, which I love but get fed up with – when will this be fixed? The answer is, at the Last Day, when God will say, "Behold, I make all things new."

Meanwhile, we can remember that Paul starts Romans 12 by saying "therefore". It is not just because the world needs fixing that we seek to overcome evil with good. It is not just because our own problems seem so persistent that we seek transformation by the renewing of our mind. It is because of the "therefore", because of what it refers to. In short, it is because of the victory Christ has won over death and sin. It is because Christ has won us peace with God. It is because there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ. It is because God is working in all things for the good of those who love Him. It is because nothing can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus. It is because of the depths of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God. Read through Romans 1-11, and you will find all that and more.

God has won victory for us in Christ. Therefore I will not be conformed to this world. I will keep on being transformed by the renewing of my mind. I will, by God's grace, not be overcome with evil, but overcome evil with good.

Let us pray: O God, it is said that the most important thing to learn about living the Christian life is that I am not able to live the Christian life. It is only by your forgiving, saving and empowering grace that I dare even to try. My only hope has always been in Your love. Please do not stop transforming me into the image of your Son. Amen.

