

You Need Transformation Too

Spring Sermon Series on Romans

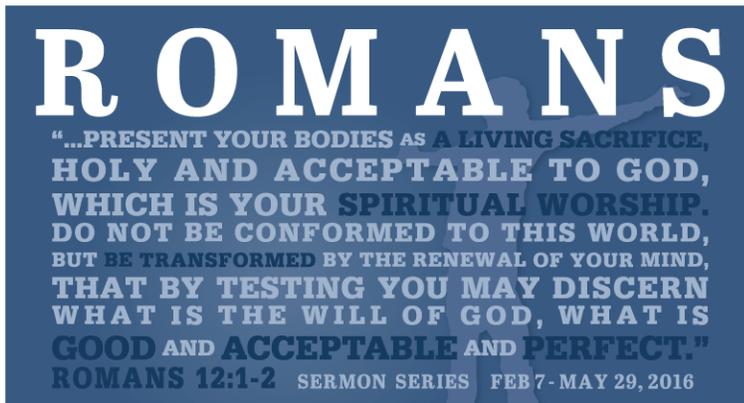
Kenwood Baptist Church

Pastor David Palmer

February 21, 2016

TEXT: Romans 2:1-29

We continue this morning in our sermon series on Paul's letter to the Romans: "Transformed by the Gospel." We are reading Romans this spring at Kenwood, seeking to allow this portion of



God's Word to change us, to transform us in radical ways. Last week we looked at how the gospel invites us to transformation by seeing the world around us as in need of transformation, and the prelude, if you will, to the good news of the gospel is the bad news that we all need the gospel. Sometimes we

tend to feel self-righteous and look down on those around us after looking at Romans 1, but this is the last day, in fact, these are the last seconds that we will be allowed to feel that way. As Paul expands on the plight of humanity in Romans 1, there is a radical shift in Romans 2. That shift takes place even on a linguistic level with the transition from 'they,' those people, to 'you' in the singular, so the transformation that we see is to realize that you need transformation too, just like the rest of the world, and I need transformation too. Romans 2 never leaves this very focused gaze on the religious person, the churchgoer who needs to know that they need repentance and faith in Christ, just like the rest of the world. So, let's look at this text, and let's pray that God will use this passage to plow right into us. This text has plowed into me all week, and it is my prayer for us.

Paul begins and says that we have no excuse, we are without defense. In Romans 2:1, Paul uses the same language that is used in Romans 1 of humanity in general, who has access to this constant stream of information about God and yet refuses to honor and thank God. He says:

"Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things."

When we condemn those around us for their behavior or conduct, Paul says we actually

condemn ourselves. He says in Romans 2:2:

“We know that the judgment of God rightly falls on those who practice such things.”

These are the things described in chapter 1. He knows the mentality of the religious mind who thinks: “God's judgment in some way does not apply to me.” We have a tendency in our fallen humanity to be critical of others and gracious with ourselves. Yet, this is exposed clearly Romans 2:3:

“Do you suppose, O man—you who judge those who practice such things and yet do them yourself—that you will escape the judgment of God?”

When we reason with ourselves that there is an exception for me, Paul says we fall under God's judgment. We make all kinds of excuses for our own sin. We offer things like: “Well, I was tired; or I was provoked; or it was the lesser of two evils.” John Stott says: “We work ourselves into a state of self-righteous indignation over the disgraceful behavior of other people while the very same behavior seems not so serious when it is ours.” This is very true for us, and it is a very real challenge, a barrier to the gospel, and it is something for which we need God's transforming power in our lives. Not only are we gracious on ourselves and quick to judge those around us, but when we notice God's grace on someone we think doesn't deserve it, instead of leading us to repentance, we tend to regret it as did the older son in Jesus' parable of the prodigal son. Paul says in Romans 2:4:

“Or do you presume on the riches of His kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?”

He says that this kindness on the sinful person should lead you, second person singular, to repentance, but the religious mind says: “Ouch, that makes me uncomfortable.” It gets worse in Romans 2:5. Paul says, in fact:

“But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed.”

Here we feel insulted by Paul. We say: “I need repentance too? My conduct is actually storing up wrath for me?” Paul wants this to be absolutely clear, that the ground in front of the cross of Christ is level, that all of us need forgiveness through Christ. There is an impartiality with God; there is no place, there is no status of most-favored-nation in the Kingdom of God. Paul says in Romans 2:6 that:

“[God] will render to each one according to his works.”

In Romans 2:7-10, he casts the categories before us that God:

“. . . to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, He will give eternal life; but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey

unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury. There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek.”

The first conclusion in Romans 2 is that God shows no partiality. There is no upper rung in the Kingdom of God. Its first conclusion is that all are accountable before God. In Romans 2:12-16, Paul describes that the nations of the world—the pagans around us that we are often inclined to think have no access to God's Word, no access to His will—even the pagan world around us, shows that the work of God's Word is in some way inscribed on the heart, that the presence of conscience among the people around us is adequate witness that God's will is sufficiently known. There is none who stands ignorant and justified before Him.

Paul disrupts the categories of the religious mind in Romans 2, and it is a religious position that he has encountered throughout his missionary journeys. We should remember that when he is writing Romans, Paul has been preaching and teaching and serving Christ for 25 years. He has just left Ephesus after teaching five hours a day for two years, 3000 hours of trying to explain the need that all of us have for the cross of Christ. Pagans need Christ, and religious people need Christ too. We all are on equal footing before God. Paul moves in very closely, beginning in Romans 2:17, to a position that he is intimately acquainted with. It is really his own position growing up as a devout Israelite, as seeing the world as outside the Kingdom of God. For us this morning, to hear the force of Romans 2:17ff, we have to hear these verses as though they are addressed to Christians, because it is the people that say they are God's people that he is challenging so strongly here. It is at this point that he labors to stack up all kinds of epithets that we would attribute to ourselves. He says that if you call yourself a Jew, in the first century that is a name that conveys a sense of identity, a part of the community of faith. *Judah* is one of the ancestral patriarchs. A *Judean* is a name given to people who live in a certain area, but in the first century, a *Jew* is a term that was used to describe membership in the community of faith. Paul says: “If you say, ‘Hey, I'm part of God's people,’ you rest on, or rely on, the fact that you have God's Word. Moreover you think, ‘I know God's presence, I boast in God, and I know His will. His covenant has been revealed to me and to my ancestors, and I am able to approve the things that are excellent, debatable matters. I know right from wrong.’” Paul says: “I know very well this position.” He says: “You say all these things because you're instructed in the Scriptures.” Paul continues with another crescendo of epithets, and he says: “If you are sure, if you are confident that you are a guide to the blind, that you are a light to those in darkness, you are an instructor of people who are foolish, you are a teacher of children. How? Because you have in the law the Torah and in God's Word the embodiment of knowledge and truth.” Here we see the swansong of self-righteousness has reached symphonic proportions.

I remember a time when I was traveling by bus as an international student. We were touring

around different sites, and a college student was sitting next to me. He was a seeker. He didn't have an active faith, and I felt at that time that I had the answers to all of his questions. I did 90% of the talking, and I thought: "There is just a torrent of truth washing over this man. At some point he is going to yield." I was thinking to myself: "I wish I had this recorded. This is so good! My points are tightly reasoned." I never asked him any questions, and after a few hours on the bus ride and we were moving around another historic site, his girlfriend said to him: "Why when you're talking with David is he the only one talking." I was in the posture of imagining that I had all the answers, all the truth.

When we hear the need of the world for radical transformation and forgiveness of sin that stirs and provokes the wrath of God, we might find ourselves saying something like this: "Hey, I'm a Christian. I'm from a Christian family. My father, my grandfather, were preachers. I know the Bible. I could quote chapter and verse. I know the ins and outs of theological debate. I know today's controversies, and I have the right views. I graduated from a Christian school, don't you know? Let me tell you besides, I've got the gift of evangelism, I've got a passion for outreach, and I lead small-group discussions in my house. Hey, hospitality happens in my house. I support Bible distribution, food for the hungry. I write letters to prisoners. I've created an app to track real-time prayer requests for missionaries all over the world. If God is keeping track of Christian activity, surely He is keeping track of me. I'm busy for Christ. Can't you see?" When we posture ourselves in all the right categories, we lose sight of the fact that at the core of our being we stand in radical need of God's forgiveness at the cross, and that one of the sins that God had to send His one and only Son to die a humiliating and shameful death for was our hypocrisy. Paul knows this view well, and he says in Romans 2:23:

"You who boast in the law dishonor God by breaking the law."

Instead of people walking around and saying: "Wow, what a wise answer. What a godly life, how can I be like you?" Paul knows well that sometimes religious people instead cause God's name to be blasphemed, that sometimes the religious life is built on a model in which our hypocrisy drives people away from Christ.

This is a hard chapter. I got a few emails this past week thanking me for taking on Romans 1 so boldly and directly, not avoiding the controversial issues, and I thought to myself: "You have no idea what is coming!" This is challenging! Are we prepared to hear this? Tim Keller says that God's name blasphemed among us raises this charge. It is very convicting. He says:

"A life of a religious person often is distasteful to those outside the faith. A moralist will be smug because they are good people. They will be oversensitive, because their goodness is their righteousness and must not be undermined. They are judgmental, because they need to find others worse than themselves in order to be good, and they are anxious, because

they constantly wonder if they have done enough.”

There is a call in this passage away from the devastating effect of hypocrisy. I was reflecting this week on an unusual man who sought to live a life of radical obedience and was deeply



convicted of the hypocrisy that he saw the Christian community. His name is Clarence Jordan. He was a very unusual man. He graduated from college with a degree in agriculture, then he went on to graduate with a PhD in New Testament from the Southern Baptist Seminary, so he's a farmer and a Greek New Testament scholar. He was distressed at the hypocrisy of the church and the difficulty in our country in the 1940s and 50s over the issue of racial segregation. This farmer, New Testament scholar, decided

in 1942 with racial tensions growing in this country, that an expression of the gospel would be to start a farm in Georgia that would be an interracial farm. He had whites and blacks working and living together on this farm that he called Koinonia Farm, the Greek word for *fellowship*. While he was there at Koinonia Farm, he published a translation of the New Testament. It is not a literal translation. It is creative paraphrase of the New Testament, and he wrote this with the intention that we would hear the language of the New Testament as though it were addressing his contemporary situation. It is called the *Cotton Patch* version, and it's very provocative. Ephesians 2:11-13 is a typical passage. Listen to how he is recasting it to address the specific issues around civil rights in the US:

“So then, always remember that previously you Negroes, who sometimes are even called ‘niggers’ by thoughtless white church members, were at one time outside the Christian fellowship, denied your rights as fellow believers, and treated as though the gospel didn't apply to you, hopeless and God-forsaken in the eyes of the world. Now, however, because of Christ's supreme sacrifice, you who once were so segregated are warmly welcomed into the Christian fellowship.”

This is a bold recasting of the implications of the gospel, and members of the churches of Georgia radically opposed the activities of Koinonia Farm. They were regularly bombed. Sticks of dynamite were thrown over the fence nightly. The Jordans had to instruct their children not to walk in the light at night. But the activity of Koinonia Farm changed many. It changed people like Millard and Linda Fuller who visited the farm and were so moved by what they saw there that they decided to start an organization to build low-cost housing for families who desperately needed it. This is the origin of the organization *Habitat for Humanity*. It started at Koinonia Farms. Clarence Jordan translates Romans 2:17-20, the portion that we been looking at, in this way. He says:

“If . . . you lean back on the Bible and you go all out for God and you know his will and are

able to make clear-cut decisions; if you are a good student of the Bible and have reason to believe that you yourself are a qualified leader of the blind, a light to those who are in the dark, an instructor of the unlearned, a teacher of the young; if you have the body of knowledge and truth contained in the Bible—all right, teacher of another, you are teaching yourself, aren't you? You who place such emphasis on the Bible, are you disgracing God by your violations of the Scripture? For it is written, you know, that 'it is because of you that Christianity is sneered at by non-Christians.'"

This is a very creative re-telling of Romans 2. Paul moves even further, and I hope you're uncomfortable. I'm uncomfortable. Do we need this? Do you believe this? If you do, it will change you. It will really change you if you believe at the core of your being that I am the worst sinner that I know, and that the gospel is for all, and that I need transformation too.

Paul moves in even closer to people that, we will find out in Romans 9, he loves but he also knows are resisting themselves to the gospel. He warns them that circumcision is valuable if you keep God's Word, but if you break it, then it is as though you are an unbeliever. He invites his hearers to open their hearts to the reality of what happens when an uncircumcised man, which we have to translate as meaning a pagan or a non-Christian person, starts living more faithfully to God than we are. Deep in Paul's ministry vision is the experience, reality, and conviction that in the end times God comes to save the nations of the world too and transforms them and brings about an obedience of faith that at times makes the obedience of God's own people look thin and shallow. Paul warns us powerfully at the end of Romans 2 that to be a Jew, which for him is a word of great compliment, to be part of God's people, is not something external. It is not just outward. In Romans 2:28, he says of circumcision, which is like baptism:

"For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical."

But, he says in Romans 2:29:

"But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God."

The reality is an inner transformation. This language of the circumcision of the heart he brings forward to people that he is addressing, who know the Bible well. If you know the Bible well, when you hear the language of circumcision of the heart, your mind should be singing with the words of Deuteronomy 30:1-3:

"And when all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse, which I have set before you, and you call them to mind among all the nations where the LORD your God has driven you, and return to the LORD your God, you and your children, and obey His voice in all that I command you today, with all your heart and with all your soul, then the LORD your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you, and He will gather you again

from all the peoples where the LORD your God has scattered you.”

In Deuteronomy 30:6, we read:

“And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.”

You and I need transformation, too. We will not be faithful, we will not be changed by the gospel without this transformation. When we read Romans 2, we can understand why Paul's teaching produced such hostility. The people that Paul angered the most were the synagogue attenders. The pagan world didn't really know what to make of them. They put them in prison occasionally, but the real suffering came from Paul's right. In 2 Corinthians 22:24-25, he says concerning his synagogue discipline and religious execution of being stoned:

“Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea.”

There is a strong challenge in Romans 2 for us who know Christ or have grown up in the church. That strong challenge is to never lose contact with our need for Christ, our need. If you lose contact with your need, forget about everyone else. If you lose contact with your own need for Jesus Christ and His atoning death, then you will presume on these privileges, and even more darkly, you will block the blessings from coming to others. We need transformation, the transformation of Romans 2.

I want to end this morning with a short story that I'm going to summarize. It is from one of my favorite authors, Flannery O'Connor. Flannery O'Connor was from Georgia, and she wrote a



number of novels and short stories that have a theme of faith and press issues of faith into public spheres. Last year, Flannery O'Connor was celebrated, and she has her own stamp now. One of her most provocative short stories is called “Revelation,” and this short story takes place in a doctor's office. The central character in the short story is a woman named Mrs. Ruby Turpin. Ruby Turpin is a churchgoing lady, and

she's in the doctor's office with her husband who has an ulcer on his leg. The story revolves around a collection of characters in the doctor's office, and Flannery O'Connor gives us access to Ruby Turpin's inner dialogue as she scans each person in the waiting room. She judges them, and she looks down on them: some for what they're wearing; some for not taking good care of their children; and some for being ill-mannered.

As you get to know this woman in the story, there is young girl on the other side of the waiting room. She is buried in a book, and Ruby Turpin's inner dialogue finally erupts onto the surface, and she says in the hearing of others: "Jesus, if there's one thing I am, I'm grateful when I think of who I could have been besides myself. Well, I've got a little of everything and a good disposition besides. I just feel like shouting 'Thank you, Jesus, for making everything just the way it is. It could have been different.'"

After hearing Ruby Turpin's inner dialogue of disposition to judge all around her, the young girl across the waiting room becomes so angry that she throws her book at Ruby Turpin and strikes her in the nose. Ruby is so flustered: "Can't believe it!" She gasps for breath and looks at this young girl and says: "What are you going to say to me?" and she regains her composure. This young girl raises her head and looks at Ruby Turpin, this dignified woman, and she whispers to her: "Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog." Ruby Turpin struggles to regain her composure, and she leaves the doctor's office in a huff and goes back to her farm. Yet she recognizes, somehow, in the voice of this young girl, there is a word from God to her. She starts taking care of the animals on her farm, and she's upset with God. As she's watering the animals on the farm, she looks up to heaven with a clenched fist at one point, and she says: "What did you send me a message like that for? How am I a hog? How am I saved and from hell, too?"

The sun begins to go down in golden light on the farm. It finally slips down behind the tree line, and Ruby Turpin, angry and upset, finally lifts her eyes up and the revelation comes, and the golden sun beam that she sees setting now looks to her like highway in the descending dusk. As she raises her hands from the side of the pen where the animals are, a visionary light settles in her eyes, and she sees a streak of light like a vast swinging bridge extending upward from the earth. Upon this bridge, Ruby Turpin sees a vast horde of souls tumbling toward heaven. "There were whole companies of white trash, clean for the first time; bands of black farm workers in white robes; battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs. At the end of the line, there was a tribe of people whom she recognized at once as those like herself who always had a little of everything and the given wit to use it right. She leaned forward to look at them closer. They were marching behind the others with great dignity, accountable as they had always been for good order, common sense, and respectable behavior. They alone were on key with the song, yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away. In a moment, the vision faded. She remained for a moment and then began to walk towards the house as the voices and the sounds of cricket choruses struck up all around her. But the chorus of the crickets was drowned out by the souls moving heavenward and shouting, 'Hallelujah!'"

Romans 2 is a forceful challenge for those of us familiar with the things of God, and Kenwood

Baptist Church will not be the community of faith we are called to be if we ever lose track of our need for transformation too. Let us pray.

Lord Jesus, we thank You for difficult portions of Your Word, portions that challenge us to become people who know that we need You too. We ask, Father, that You would forgive us for any stripe of self-righteousness, any false familiarity with the cross. Forgive us, Lord, for adopting a posture of judgment to others and grace on ourselves that would lead us to apathy, make us sluggish to share or even resentful to share. Stir our hearts anew, we pray. We love You, Lord, and ask Your blessing.

In Jesus' Name, Amen.