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Surrender – Romans 12:1-2, Mark 8:34-38

Let's Pray.

**This morning we are going to begin a series of sermons on transformation.** Transformation or change is a fundamental element of the Christian life. **The phrase, "I will never change" has no place in the life of a Christian.** We cannot be faithful people if we do not constantly change.

**There are two fundamental changes that should occur in the Christian life.** The first is the moment that we change our lives from being self-directed to directed by God. We step over the line and admit that we are sinful and in need of a savior.

**The next level of change, however, is not so clear.** It is the continual churning of our souls by which we constantly change into people that are more Christ-like. It is a churning in the sense that as we see a clearer picture of Jesus, we recognize how far from that picture we are and how much in need of transformation we really are.

**This type of change is all around us. No matter how hard we fight it, nothing stays the same. As you know I received a grant to work on a farm in Northern Indiana once a month.** (It is a great deal, the grant pays the farm so that I can work) The farm is self-sustainable in the sense that everything feeds upon itself. The pigs root the ground, which readies the soil for the vegetables. The chicken's waste fertilizes the grass, which becomes food for the cattle. Everything on the farm works in a cycle together. There is very little waste, but there is a lot of change on the farm. There is daily change and since I only go back once a month . . . the change can be spectacular. The last time I was there, there were hundreds of chickens to feed. This time they were in the freezer ready to feed people. Last time, garlic was everywhere to be harvested. This time it was green beans. Change is a part of the cycle of all of God's creation.

**One of the most common metaphors that Jesus uses in the Bible is that of the natural world – of God's creation.** You might remember that last year at about this time of year I gave a sermon entitled "God Grows Things." (Now I know that you all remember everything I say and are probably already thinking . . .

yes that sermon . . . ) That sermon was based upon an analogy that Jesus uses in Mark 4:26-29. **"This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come."**

**"All by itself the soil produces grain . . ."** It is this amazing, unexplainable thing about creation. About the nature of God. **We can't make things grow.** I have actually been trying to grow taller for years . . . but no matter how hard I will it . . . it never happens. No matter what – I can't manipulate a seed and make it grow . . . all I can do is put it in the ground, nurture it and let God's creation do its thing.

**It is God that grows things.**

**So if we believe that the Christian life is primarily about change . . . if it is primarily about growth. And if we believe that God has something to do with it. How is it that we grow? How is it that we change? How is it that we become people that are regularly transformed?**

**How do we overcome deep sins in our lives? God's Word tells us that no one is exempt - "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."** How do we get over our selfish ambition . . . our tendency to treat others poorly because we want to win? How do we avoid treating our spouses with disrespect? How do we stop the biting sarcasm we use to communicate? How do we stop our reliance on alcohol to relieve stress? How do we stop looking at pornography in the darkness of our homes? How do we stop lying to get others to like us or to get what we want? How do we truly fall in love with God's Word and talking with Him through prayer?

**Every single person sitting here today and standing up here preaching has areas of their life that are deeply broken and in need of serious repair. How do we change?**

**Over the next several weeks we are going to talk about transformation. We are going to talk about how we change and become more like Jesus.**

**I don't know about you, but when I discover areas of my life that need changed . . . the first thing I usually do is try to change that area.** Sounds logical doesn't it? When we are doing something that we should not, we try really hard not to do it any more.

**I can get really creative too.** I often believe if I simply try harder that I can fix whatever problem or sin that I am struggling with. I search Amazon.com for the best and latest book on the topic. I search for sermons online that might help. I try some new spiritual disciplines that will make me closer and closer to God. I'll want to go to the soup kitchen to serve meals every day . . . I'll work harder and harder . . . and I believe that will help me to overcome my struggle.

**One of the struggles I have often had is that I can have a hard time experiencing the moment.** I am often in my mind reliving and analyzing past events in my mind and how I could have handled things differently, or the converse where I am preparing and planning for the future aggressively . . . and because I spend so much time mentally in the past and the future . . . I can struggle to be in the moment.

**So I heard about a friend that incorporated lots of silence in their day as a way to focus on the immediate. At the time I heard this I was driving about an hour to work several days a week.** So I decided one day that the solution to my struggle was that I needed to drive all the way to work and back in complete silence. No cell phone. No radio. Just as silent as possible. It wasn't 10 minutes into the trip that my cell phone rang . . . and I resisted the temptation to answer it. But all I could think about was who it was that was calling me. And what they could have wanted. And the silence was killing me. I thought I was losing it. I wanted to turn the radio on so badly . . . I just wanted to hear the news or Sports talk or something. And I can remember getting about half-way to work and turning the radio on . . . and both feeling great at being able to listen, but also deeply guilty that once again I had failed at slowing down and experiencing the moment.

Have you had instances like this? John Ortberg describes it this way, **“You hear about someone who gets up at four o'clock in the morning to pray, and you feel guilty because you think you don't pray enough. So you resolve to do that too, even though you are not a “morning person” - at four o'clock you are dazed and confused and groggy and grumpy, and no one wants to be around you at that time in the morning. Even Jesus doesn't want to be around you at four in the morning. But you think, “Well, this is exhausting and miserable – I certainly don't like doing it – so it must be God's will for my life. It must be**

**spiritual.” You keep it up for several days or weeks or months, but not forever. Eventually you stop. Then you feel guilty. After enough guilt, you start doing something else.”**

**Ortberg describes a process that I think many of us have experienced. (PIC)** We discover an area of our life that we want to change. We come up with what we think is a great solution and we try really really hard to make it work. But over time we then get tired. We are fatigued and start to wear down. We eventually quit altogether. The moment we quit, though, we feel enormously guilty. We blame ourselves for once again failing to stop what it is that we believe we so desperately want to stop in the first place. So we usually try harder at a new solution or the same one again. And we enter into this pattern that we repeat over and over again in our lives.

I really think Paul is struggling with this cycle in Romans 7:18:19 when he says, **“For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do – this I keep on doing.”**

**Our will power is just not enough. Psychologist Roy Baumister has studied the nature and limits of willpower.** Baumister had certain subjects exert willpower by resisting the temptation to eat delicious, fresh, warm, gooey chocolate chip cookies – eating only radishes instead. Another set of subjects did not have to resist eating cookies. Then all the subjects were assigned complex math problems to solve – problems that were actually impossible to solve – in order to measure how long people will exercise willpower to persevere in frustration. The people who had to resist eating chocolate chip cookies gave up on problem-solving much more quickly than the other subjects. In other words, our will power is easily fatigued. **We can use our wills to override our habits for a few moments, but our habits will always beat willpower alone in the long run.**

**So if we cannot will ourselves to change, what hope do we have?**

**The Bible presents one of the most radical and counterintuitive solutions.** And this solution is made clear with different analogies in our two passages this morning. **Romans 12 says, “offer your bodies as a living sacrifice.” Mark 8 says, “whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross.”**

**The key to being people of change is to recognize that the first and biggest mistake that we often make in seeking change is believing we can do it alone.** We cannot truly change at the level of core brokenness in our lives without help.

**But in order to truly get help, we have to turn the reins of our lives over to God. This is where we struggle.**

**We acknowledge that we need God to make substantial changes in our lives, but then as we move into methods for that change to take place we “try harder.”** We rely wholly upon our own work ethic and will power and strength to do it. And sometimes we gut it out . . . but it is seldom lasting and it is even less regularly deep enough to change the root of the problem.

**True and lasting change requires the realization that God is in control . . .** and that God is far wiser and competent than we ever could be.

**You know there is a difference between inviting Jesus to be a passenger in the journey of your life and letting Jesus drive.** There is a difference between making Jesus one of your chief consultants and your boss.

**Jesus proposes an alternative route to change . . . one that is not wholly reliant upon super-hero will power.** Jesus does not call us to develop stronger wills to do what he wants us to . . . Jesus calls us to surrender our wills to him.

**In our world, surrender means defeat.** To surrender to someone means that we give up, we give in . . . we acknowledge that they are the winner. But this is exactly what we must admit in our relationship with God if we are ever to overcome the sin in our lives.

**From the moment of Adam and Eve in the Garden, we have continually and repeatedly sought to be like God. We have believed and acted as if we are the ones that understand what is best for our lives.**

**It is possible to receive power to become the person we want to be, but to do so, we must hand over the keys.**

**In our passage from Romans, Paul says, “Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship.”**

**In the Jewish law, the Jews would take an animal to the temple and that animal would be killed and placed upon the altar as a sacrifice.** If you put a live animal on the altar it would not stay. Obviously the moment the fire came near, the animal would jump from the table and run away. But Paul in Romans, calls us to be living sacrifices. He calls us to step upon that altar and to surrender. In the moment that we hand over the keys to our life it feels as if we are stepping off of a cliff, but it is the only way to healing and change.

**This past week, Dana and I took the girls to Columbian Park to play on the playground and as they were playing an older girl came up to play as well.** Adelaide quickly ran up to one piece of play equipment and she called out that she was going to stand behind this high perch and be “the captain.” The older girl quickly caught onto where she was headed, ran around her and into the spot, yelling “**I am the captain, I am the captain.**” Adelaide was devastated and looked at us with a puzzled look. She didn’t at all understand why someone would take away her spot like this. Then from the captain’s perch the older girl yelled down, “what’s wrong baby?” And Adelaide began to sob and sob. She came over to us and asked why she was calling her a baby. We talked with her and helped her to calm down and she eventually made friends with the girl and they played in other ways, but Dana and I talked about what had happened. We talked about how hard it is to send them into the world and to school. **And that some day she is going to go to school in her absolute favorite outfit, one that she picked out and has loved, and some kid is going to tell her it looks “dumb” or like a “baby” and she is going to be devastated. And might even decide she doesn’t like it either.**

**It is scary to let go. To surrender control of our lives to God. To lay on God’s altar ready for whatever might happen . . . trusting that it will ultimately be good.**

**This past week many of you sent your children off to school for the very first time.** Some on you stepped outside your houses and watched as that bus pulled up or you went to the school with your kids and you let them go into that classroom, watching their backs as they walked into that new world. And you know what you have taught them and you know their teacher and the school building . . . but there is

a deep sense that you are giving up control over their lives. You are letting them go . . . releasing their hand into this enormous world where you can't control what kids might say to them or how they will be treated . . . or how they will react . . . you simply let go.

**Our Romans passage refers to our lives as a sacrifice. This implies surrender, but it also implies difficulty. There is nearly always a price that is attached to surrender.**

**In our passage from Mark 8, Jesus says, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it."**

**Surrender does not mean everything will be easy. In fact, surrender will often mean that things will get harder before they get better.** Jesus words in Mark 8 are an illusion to the cross. In Jesus' perfect surrender to the will of His Father, he ultimately knew that he was participating in the redemption of humankind . . . but **the path it took to get there was not easy. The first thing Jesus had to do in the process of defeating death on our behalf was to pick up the cross that his executioners had given him and carry it. He carried the instrument of his death and followed God.**

**Our own acts of godly surrender will be deeply painful at first. Often surrender will involve an act of self-disclosure about a grudge, attitude, habit or sin.** When we are faced with the call of God to surrender in particular areas of our lives that we need change in . . . our immediate response is "no way."  
**I refuse to confess that sin to anybody. There is no way that I am apologizing to that guy . . . he will think he has won.** There is deep shame in confession. **There is deep pride swallowing in apology . . .** especially when the other person doesn't recognize their own faults. There is pain in admitting that you are not as good as you think you are.

**But the question for us is whether we desire change and transformation and Christ-likeness enough to pick up our cross – to do things that are uncomfortable.** To lay ourselves upon God's altar willingly . . . that is surrender.

**The thought of surrender is agonizing and painful. The act of surrender often is as well. The result, however, is exponentially freeing.**

**Back to the farm.** A hen got out of the pen. And I went running to through the field to catch it. It resisted and fought and ran . . . but eventually gave up. And when it gave up . . . I was able to pick it up and return it to the pen where it had food and water, shelter and security.

**In the drama that you saw this morning, the girl Ellen played like all of us was created by an infinitely good God that desired to be in relationship with her . . . but the temptations and sins of this world drew her in to a life that was hers and not God's.** And she fell further and further into darkness and despair. And she knew it. She made the choice one day to fight. She garnered all the will power that she had . . . every ounce of strength left in her body and she fought her demons. She fought physically wrested with them all and made some progress . . . but just some. **It wasn't until she realized she couldn't win that she fell to her knees for an instant . . . to have Christ, God move in to be the change. She surrendered and God took control. God took the steering wheel and new life was found.**

**This morning it is time for you to stop driving.** It is time for you to finally realize that you can work as hard as you want, but you are not strong enough to change yourself. A dirty person can't clean themselves. God created you. God knows you and God knows how to change you.

**Surrender.**

Sources Consulted:

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Ortberg, John. The Me I Want To Be. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2010.