

What's Forming You? Rom. 12:1,2; Ps. 1:1-2; Josh 1:8 1/20/19

On an old Seinfeld show, George is in love with a young woman, but the relationship has hit a snag.

"She says we can't go out anymore," George says.

"Why?" Elaine asks.

"Because I'm not Latvian Orthodox," he says. "Her parents won't let her date anyone who's not Latvian Orthodox."

"She's limiting herself to Latvian Orthodox? That's too bad," replies Jerry.

"I know!" George exclaims. "This was the only woman I never lied to! Well, that's not entirely true, but she knew I didn't have a job. She knew I lived at home. Didn't seem to bother her. I think I could have married this woman...I actually thought about converting."

"To Latvian Orthodox?" Jerry asks.

"Why not? What do I care?" George replies.

"You do know it's not like changing toothpaste, right?" Jerry responds.

George continues to think about converting. "You know what? I could probably do this. What's the difference? I wouldn't even tell her. I could surprise her! How hard could it be?" George asks. "You make a little

contribution, you have a ceremony. I'm gonna think about this. I'm really gonna think about this."

This humorous situation raises a serious question about Christianity. Does Christian faith only require a "little contribution and a ceremony?" Maybe attend worship occasionally and help out with an activity or two? Is that all that's required? Well, if we're talking about authentic Christianity, the answer is a resounding "No!" Christian faith is about transforming us to be the people God created us to be. Listen to Paul's words in Romans 12.

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. ²Do 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. (Rom. 12:1,2)

Don't be **conformed** to this world, but be **transformed**. We're going to talk a little bit about being conformed and being transformed this morning.

(Begin demonstration) A couple Christmases ago, Bonnie got me a new product called "Form Card." When you put one of these plastic cards in hot water for a little while, it softens and you can then shape it into useful implements or art objects or repair broken plastic on most anything you own after it hardens again. The Form Card slogan is "Melt, mold, shape, mend."

In Romans 12, the Apostle Paul says that we need to resist being shaped by the world. Beginning with Jesus, Christians were warned to be wary of the world, a realm that exists apart from God's ways and values. This world in which we live tends to value getting ahead, status, accumulating more and more stuff, and putting yourself first. God's kingdom values serving others, being good stewards of what we have, and putting others before yourself. The world often encourages us to give in to our worst impulses of lust, greed, or revenge. God's kingdom encourages us to deny our impulses and replace them with virtues like self-control (my "star word" this year), contentment, and love. You can see how the world and God are trying to shape our hearts and desires in very different ways.

The world around us is constantly twisting and forming us. (Continue demonstration) Let's think about how. Certainly, our peers have an influence on us. We talk a lot with young people about peer pressure to act in ways that are not in line with God's values, but it holds true for adults, too. "Keeping up with the Joneses" is a kind of adult peer pressure that pushes us to value status and acquisition, for example. Our jobs can shape our thinking and values, too. For example, is honesty valued at your work? Or, are you expected to lie or shade the truth?

Then there is media & arts- books, music, theater, film, TV shows, newscasts, newsfeeds, and our smartphones. Often the content of what

we see and hear on media is at odds with what Jesus wants us to do. And that includes the ads as much as the featured content! Often media shapes our hearts so that we learn to desire and love the wrong things! And the constant distraction of social media shapes us, too.

Nicholas Carr, an expert on how technology is shaping our minds, laments how the internet and social media is “chipping away at his (mental) capacity and contemplation.” He says, “I once was a scuba diver in the sea of words. Now I zip along the surface like a guy on a Jet Ski.” The constant distraction of electronic media can cause us to lose the ability to actually reflect deeply on anything including what’s really going on in our hearts. Media, both in its content and in the form of media itself, is shaping us in hundreds and thousands of unnoticed ways every day. And once these worldly ways take root in our hearts, it is very difficult for us to change them.

In the show “24,” Jack Bauer is a federal agent charged with protecting a presidential candidate from an assassination plot. In the very first show, his integrity is put to the test. He faces great pressure, even from his boss, to tone down his morality. Jack refuses to budge. He tells his partner, “You can look the other way once, and it’s no big deal, except it makes it easier for you to compromise the next time. And pretty soon, that’s all you’re doing- compromising- because that’s how you think things

are done. You know those guys I blew the whistle on? You think they were the bad guys? They weren't the bad guys. They were just like you and me, except they compromised once."

The world exerts tremendous pressure on us to conform to its ways. And most of us are helpless to do much about it. That's the bad news.

The good news is that God is in the business of re-shaping us, reforming us, making us new- both inside and out. ²*Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, (Romans 12:2)*

This is God's work, because we lack the power to do it ourselves! We can either thwart the work God is doing, or we can try to cooperate with it.

(Continue demonstration)

One of the ways we cooperate with God's re-forming work is through time-tested spiritual disciplines- for example, by being regularly exposed to God's Word. Listen to these words from the first Psalm.

¹*Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers; ²but their delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law they meditate day and night. (Ps. 1:1,2)*

The Psalmist encourages us to immerse ourselves in God's Word rather than subject ourselves to the constant calls of the world.

There are other spiritual practices that also “warm us up” so to speak so that God can more easily re-shape us.

- Regular prayer. Speaking honestly to God and listening for his response.
- Regular participation in worship. You may have noticed in the Romans passage that there was a link between worship and God transforming us. Worship can help align our hearts with the heart of God.
- Fellowship with other Christians through activities or Bible Studies or small groups or serving others together allows peer influence to work in the right direction!
- Observing the Sabbath day is a spiritual practice that doesn't get much attention. What would happen if you turned off your phone on Sunday so that you could focus on other things? Or refrained from shopping when possible? Or went walking on a country road? Or made attending worship a priority each week?
- You might also enjoy working with a spiritual mentor or director. Such a person can accompany and enrich your spiritual journey.

And, of course, at some point you need to actually practice all that you are learning about what God expects from you! That's where the good life really begins. Joshua 1:8 puts it like this.

⁸This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth; you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to act in accordance with all that is written in it. For then you shall make your way prosperous, and then you shall be successful. (Joshua 1:8)

Here is another command to know and reflect on God's Word, but this time there is an additional call to act on it. Just do it! In Barb Sanders' children's message last week, she talked about mission. She had the kids find and pick up various objects that represented different facets of mission trips. The last object was a wand. She said it represented the magic that happens on a mission trip. She concluded by saying this, "When you help other people, it changes who you are." And that's exactly what happens when we act on God's Word, his values, his priorities for his world and for our individual lives. It begins to change who we are, so that doing these things becomes more natural for us. Pastor Kent Carlson says, "The goal of Christian spiritual formation is to be intentionally transformed in such a way that my instinctive response is the same as Christ's would be if he were living my life." (repeat) (End demonstration.)

In Anne Tyler's novel, Saint Maybe, 19 year-old Ian tells his parents of his decision to leave college and become an apprentice cabinetmaker. You see, Ian's brother recently died and he wants to help his sister-in-law raise her young children. Ian has arrived at this decision because of the influence of Rev. Emmett and the Church of the Second Chance. When Ian tells his parents about his life-changing decision and the role that his renewed faith and church have played in this decision, they have some concerns.

"Ian, have you fallen into the hands of some sect?" his father asked.

"No, I haven't," Ian said. "I have merely discovered a church that makes sense to me, the same as Dober Street Presbyterian Church makes sense to you and mom."

"Dober Street didn't ask us to abandon our educations," his mother told him. "Of course we have nothing against religion; we raised all of you children to be Christians. But our church never asked us to abandon our entire way of life."

"Well, maybe it should have," Ian said.

Like fictional Dober Street Presbyterian, many of our mainline churches have lost the ability to challenge people to allow God to re-shape their hearts and lives, and to support them as they do it! Too often we

simply reinforce the prevailing values of our culture without much question. That's not what God wants the church to do! We are partners in God's mission to re-shape the hearts of his people.

How does God want to re-shape your heart? How will you cooperate with God's work through the spiritual disciplines?