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Romans 12:1-2
Making Change
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I was at the cashier's counter, just trying to pay for my lunch, when a man came running up saying, "I need to make change." The cashier replied, "Don't we all?"

Well, yes, we would all love to make a few changes in life. What about you? What would you like to change? Do you want to look different? Skinnier? Younger? Do you want to get organized? Get your finances under control? Do you want to live with more self esteem, less fear or pain? Trust me, the marketing departments of every corporation in the world know you would like to make every one of these changes and they have just the products to help you. Not only are we bombarded with advertisements on our TV's, newspapers, and billboards, but even our e-mail is filled with spam promising to make us different. Here are a few promises I received over one week in the junk mail box of my e-mail: "Get Rich at Home," "Find Love in Prague," "Watch Unwanted Pounds Melt Away," "You Can Be Ordained this Week." (Silly me, wasting all that time in seminary.) Most of us have learned by now, that it is mythological thinking to assume another product has the ability to change our lives substantively.

Some of the people who come to talk to me as a pastor aren't interested anymore in shedding a few pounds or adding a few more dollars. They want a completely different life. But we don't know how to make even successful minor changes in our life, much less get a different life. We've tried a lot of the self help books, Dr. Phil and Oprah. We've tried getting a different job, going back to graduate school, yoga and a new health club. Even when we succeed in making some alterations to life, it's still the same old self who keeps showing up in the mirror every morning.

Isn't it fascinating that we live in an age and a part of the world in which people have so much freedom, more freedom than any other people in history, and yet our greatest fear is that we are stuck with ourselves? We do not know how to make change, and we are not even sure if we can.

Actually, it is quite in vogue now to claim that you cannot change or fix your life. "You got the wrong parents," they tell us. "You have the wrong color skin, chromosome, or gender." "You grew up in the wrong neighborhood." So instead of calling people to improvement, some would just bestow upon them the honor of being a victim and tell them to wear it proudly. This is what Wendy Kaminer was getting at in her book *I'm Dysfunctional; You're Dysfunctional*:

There is something very mean spirited about this cult of victimization. The pay off in claiming that you're a victim is that you always get to put your own problems first. Primarily self help is a movement of middle class people saying "I'm tired of hearing about the

homeless and all those poor children in poverty. I have problems too. My father wasn't very nice to me." It is as if they are saying "Me too. Me too." Everyone is vying for the crown of thorns.

I am not saying that you have not been victimized in life. Maybe you have. But I am saying that the Gospel claims you don't have to settle for being a victim, and you don't have to settle for self help in trying to make change. You don't have to settle for self loathing, misery, or boredom. You don't have to settle for life without compelling mission. And you don't have to settle for working so hard that you come home too tired to think about how unhappy you are. You don't have to settle at all. Because God doesn't.

Our text today begins, "I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God." You do not understand the mercy of God until you realize that it is very un-settling. Grace and mercy mean that God is up to something in your life. He will not leave you alone but is continuing to intervene, interrupt, unsettle your life. God does not settle for helping us make a few changes. To the contrary, God wants to unsettle and overturn the tyranny of trying to conform to some cherished image we have of ourselves. As Paul continues in our text, "present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God." In other words, just cut it out. The only change God is asking you to make, the only one that is holy and acceptable, is to sacrifice the despairing idea that it is up to you to get life just right.

"Do not be conformed to this world," the Apostle tells us, "but be transformed." For those of you who enjoy grammar, this word "conformed" is in the middle voice, which means it is something we do to ourselves. "Don't conform yourself," Paul says. Don't squeeze yourself into the model identities of the society in which we live. Don't conform yourself into Vogue's image of your life, and don't conform yourself into the corporate image, academic image, or even a religious image of life. You cannot make those changes because you are not a creator.

But if it is change you want, then sacrifice all of that conformity so you can be transformed by God. (The word transformed is in the passive voice.) The Greek word that he uses is "metamorphou" from which we get the word metamorphosis. This word was originally used by Aristotle to describe the true essence of a thing. When something undergoes metamorphosis, it changes, but only to one thing — to what it really is. A tadpole can only become a frog. A caterpillar can only become a butterfly. It doesn't matter how cool frogs are, the caterpillar can never be one. And why should it try?

So to paraphrase Paul, "Don't keep trying to change yourself into some cherished image of our society but become who God has created you to be." We have to become who we are.

When my daughter and I were hiking in the Rocky Mountains last summer, we saw several bald eagles, soaring high among the peaks. It is such an incredible blessing just to see this magnificent bird in flight. But if you have ever seen a baby eaglet, well, that is not a blessing. After it hatches, it is just a ball of fuzz with a huge mouth attached. If I were holding one of those fuzz balls up in front of you today and I asked, "Is this an eagle?" you would have to say, "Yes, sort of." But if we were to take it up to the roof of the church, throw it off and say, "Soar!" it would not be a

pretty sight. The eaglet will have to experience some change before it soars. It has to become what it is. That is what Christian transformation is about also. It will take some time — a lot of time. But God is committed to his promise: “Those who wait upon the Lord will mount up with wings like eagles.”

How then do you inherit the destiny God has designed for your life? How do you become who you are? According to Paul you are transformed “by the renewing of your minds [to renew the mind simply means to re-mind yourself, or to re-think] so you may discern what is the will of God — what is good and acceptable and perfect.” In other words, it is time to stop thinking about the changes you want to make and the changes others want you to make in order to get your mind focused on what is good, acceptable, and perfect. What is that? Only God is good, acceptable and perfect.

Here then, finally, is my thesis today: You will never be able to experience changes in your life, until you change and re-think your image of God.

You are made in the image of God, and you will never know yourself, until you know the God in whose image you are made. This also means that if you have a faulty image of yourself, it is because you have a faulty image of God that needs to be re-thought. But in either case, the image of God will determine the image of self. Those of us who struggle with being too judgmental worship a God who they believe is never satisfied. Those who struggle with loving others have never heard the voice from heaven calling them the beloved. Those who cannot forgive do not really believe that they are forgiven. Those who think that all change is about self improvement have never considered the image of God revealed on the cross of Christ. You will never become who you really are until you take the time to know the God in whose image you are created.

It was for this reason that John Calvin began his monumental *Institutes of the Christian Religion* with the simple statement that all wisdom begins with the knowledge of God and the knowledge of self. But notice this order — there is no knowledge of self without a prior knowledge of God.

This is not a mystical process, and it is not even particularly complicated. It is just a matter of getting to know God. That is why we come to worship, do the daily readings in devotions, attend educational events at the church, care for others, and volunteer in mission projects. It is all a way of knowing God and along the way discovering ourselves.

Benediction: If you want to see where all of God's changes in your life are heading, look at Jesus Christ — the image of God made flesh. Amen.