

Change is Good
Romans 12:1-2 ZCC 3.1.15

Therefore I urge you, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service. Don't be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what is the good, well-pleasing, and perfect will of God.

Y'all know I love cartoons and I've used them as illustrations in the past. I remember one that was probably a Merry Melodies or one of the others that were a series of vignettes set to music. Anyway, in this one there was a chameleon. They put a red background behind him and he turned red and then they did blue and then another color and finally they put some simple patterns behind him. The last one was a plaid background and he went totally crazy.

Of course no chameleon could really do that—of course in cartoons anything is possible.

The title of today's message is “Change is Good” but I'll bet that lizard didn't think so by the end of the cartoon.

Paul was, of course, writing about a different kind of change—a total transformation.

During the Easter holidays, we are reminded again and again that our relationships to God are made possible by the sacrifice of Christ—the sending of the Son to make a way for you and me to re-claim that relationship to the Father.

Our acceptance of his work changes us—moves us from the dark to the light.

Christians are supposed to quit being conformed to the world and be transformed into something more—be transformed into the image of Christ. We are to be different from the rest of the world, not like them.

We are not even supposed to be conformed to the world's idea of church and religion—not necessarily, anyway.

Even our religion is supposed to be transformed instead of conformed.

As I talk about transformation, I will use a few of the players in the passion of the Christ and in the early days of the church. Each of them is an example, either positive or negative. Some were conformed and some were transformed.

The Pharisees were good solid religious people. They took their faith seriously, especially the rules. They are not that different than us Christians. We like to see those in our group keep the rules--to be conformed to the religious status-quo. This can be very good. It can be very bad. It all depends on what is being conformed to and why.

From Matthew 23: 25, 28, 22b:

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, Hypocrites! For you scour the outside of the cup and bowl, but inside they are full of robbery and self-indulgence. Even so you look like religious men to others, Yet there is nothing but hypocrisy and crime in you. How, then, can you escape judgment and damnation?

The Pharisees were conforming in a legalistic way—they were holding to tradition because it was tradition. They thought they were righteous because of the image they put forth. They may have not fooled Jesus and they may have not fooled the common people—but they had themselves fooled.

Jesus did not meet their expectations—he did not see or do things the way they thought he should and he was rejected. He wasn't the Messiah they were expecting.

Jesus confronted them directly. He confronted their hypocrisy. He confronted them with miracles and with words and with challenges. Still they continued to conform to the old and refused to transform into something new.

It is possible that some of them did eventually come into the new faith of Christianity. Scripture tells us that many of the Jewish priests became Christians. It may be that more than one of the Pharisees were transformed but we only have one record of such a transformation. In Acts, there is a story of how one Pharisee was confronted and transformed.

First, I want to point out the front side of his life—when he was conformed.

This is from Acts 8 and talks about Saul—who would become Paul—right after the stoning of Stephen: *Saul was consenting to his death. A great persecution arose against the assembly which was in Jerusalem in that day. They were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except for the apostles. Devout men buried Stephen, and lamented greatly over him. But Saul ravaged the assembly, entering into every house, and dragged both men and women off to prison. Therefore those who were scattered abroad went around preaching the word.*

Paul writes elsewhere that he was a Jew of Jews—a Pharisee of Pharisees. He was as conformed as you could get. He had studied and he had learned and he got busy in his faith.

Once the Christians came along, he began to attack them—to try and wipe them out. After all, they didn't conform to his legalistic rules.

He was conformed until he met Jesus.

Acts 9:1 and following: *But Saul, still breathing threats and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest, and asked for letters from him to the synagogues of Damascus, that if he found any who were of the Way, whether men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. As he traveled, he got close to Damascus, and suddenly a light from the sky shone around him. He fell on the earth, and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" He said, "Who are you, Lord?" The Lord said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But rise up, and enter into the city, and you will be told what you must do."*

Saul had an experience so profound, so transforming that even to this day we use it in our vocabularies. If someone has a dramatic, transforming experience—we call it a “Damascus Road” experience. We know that Saul was one thing and then he became another. His experience with Jesus made him a new and different person—no longer conformed to the old, but transformed into a new creature, through Christ.

[Matt 26:47] *While he was still speaking, behold, Judas, one of the twelve, came, and with him a great multitude with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and elders of the people;*
[Matthew 27:3-4] *Then Judas, who betrayed him, when he saw that Jesus was condemned, felt remorse, and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders, saying, “I have sinned in that I betrayed innocent blood.”*

Judas was also conformed—at least if you agree with the majority of scholars. Did you ever wonder what caused Judas to betray Jesus? If you have, you are not alone—and unfortunately we are not told by any of the Gospel writers.

Many scholars believe that Judas was focused on a political takeover—that he was a Jewish zealot who was trying to force Jesus’ hand—to make him use his power and might to establish the kingdom and overthrow the Romans. Of course, we don’t know if that is true or not.

Even so, if it was true—then Judas was only conforming to popular Jewish understanding of the Messiah and his function.

Judas was not the only conformist—in fact it seems that most of the disciples misunderstood what Jesus was going to do—for most or all of his ministry. Even as late as the Last Supper, they were arguing over the temporal and physical positions they were going to have in Jesus’ earthly kingdom.

In this, Peter was such a conformist to that understanding of the Messiah that he literally tried to convince Jesus or tempt him not to go through with such a thing—not to allow himself to be sacrificed. In Mark 8 we hear Jesus’ strong rebuke: “Get behind me Satan!”

Later though, he was totally transformed. In the second chapter of Acts we read that he

However, things changed—and in the book of Acts, we see a transformed man of God: *A certain man who was lame from his mother’s womb was being carried, whom they laid daily at the door of the temple which is called Beautiful, to ask gifts for the needy of those who entered into the temple...Peter, fastening his eyes on him, with John, said, “Look at us.” ...Peter said, “I have no silver or gold, but what I have, that I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, get up and walk!” ...Leaping up, he stood, and began to walk. He entered with them into the temple, walking, leaping, and praising God.*

Jesus’ brothers were not believers—in fact, they came after him one time, to take him home and get him straightened out. Mark 6:1-3 tells us about Jesus’ experience when he went back to Nazareth to teach. His people, as well as his family were conformed to their understanding of who he was—they were conformed to the human, physical understanding of this man. They had seen him grow up.

They had seen him play. They had seen him be human—no way could he even be a real rabbi—let alone the Messiah.

Yet, it may be that the author of the book of James was one of Jesus' brothers. No one knows for sure, but the author seems to be a man of authority. It also seems to be someone well known. Many scholars believe it was James the half-brother of Jesus.

Earlier I said that the brothers of Jesus did not believe—at least not in the beginning. If this is the same James, what happened? Again, a transformation.

See, though James did not believe at first—he is listed as one of the ones who saw Jesus resurrected. He saw Jesus after his death, burial and new life, in his glorified body. Maybe this is the key to all of them, to all of these transformations.

Each one of them—Saul, Peter, James—and many of the others lost their conformity because they met the risen Jesus. They met the resurrected Messiah. It seems that REALLY seeing him and REALLY meeting him bring about transformation.

How about us? Are we conformed to religious legalism?

If we are more concerned with the rules than the rule-maker as the Pharisees were--maybe we need transforming.

If we are more concerned with the political agenda of religion than the spirituality—as Judas was—maybe we need transforming.

If Jesus and the Gospel has become too common, too everyday for it to make a real difference in our lives—as was the case with the people of Nazareth and even Jesus' brothers, then maybe we need transforming.

As we go into a time of commitment, to a time of listening and responding to God—a time of remembering the reality of Jesus' sacrifice, I encourage each of us in this group today to seek a new transformation through God's power and Christ's work.

What that chameleon couldn't do for himself, God can do in our hearts and lives. He can change us from the inside out and the outside in.

Maybe we need a closer relationship to replace our religious conformity.

Maybe we need a relationship—maybe we know who Jesus is but we haven't embraced the fact that his sacrifice—his birth, death, and resurrection—is the way to a relationship with God.

Also, I always want to hold up Zion Christian Church as a place to serve and to work for others and for God—and I promise that such service will transform you and me.