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DR. ED YOUNG

6 WEEKS TO CHANGE YOUR LIFE

Transformation: 6 Weeks to Change Your Life

Dr. Ed Young



the **winning** walk

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Transformation: 6 Weeks to Change Your Life

Copyright © 2015 by Dr. Ed Young
Published 2015

ISBN: 978-1-942464-17-4

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Introduction

Let's say one day you decided you wanted to give a gift to God. What could God use? What does He need? After all, if there's ever been anyone who has everything, it's Him!

But the truth is there's one gift He desires: **you**. And it's not just some of you. God wants all of you... your mind, your soul, and your body.

I remember when I was a kid and my friends and I would "play fight," and with our fists up we'd always say, "You want a piece of me?" But God hears that question and He says, "Nope... I want all of you!"

You see, most religions of the world—primarily the Eastern religions and even Greek philosophy—hold to the idea the body is irrelevant. To them, the body is nothing more than something to be thrown away when we die.

But Christianity has a different view—one that gives our physical bodies a real and lasting purpose as they're continually transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit.

As you read the pages ahead that examine the apostle Paul's vivid description of that transformation in Romans 12–14, I pray you will discover how God wants to transform you—your mind, your soul, and your body—as you joyfully submit to Him.

I urge you to take these scriptural truths one at a time—spend that week reflecting on them daily so they can soak in and start to take hold in your life. There are no shortcuts to true life-change. It's a marathon, not a 50-yard dash.

Most of all, I pray the time you spend in the coming weeks in this book will strengthen you and

encourage you to lay your plans and ambitions on the altar of faith and experience a newfound walk with your Savior, Jesus.

*I had walked life's way with an easy tread,
Had followed where comforts and pleasures led,
Until one day in a quiet place,
I met the Master face to face.*

*With station and rank and wealth for my goal,
Much thought for my body but none for my soul,
I had entered to win in life's mad race,
When I met the Master face to face.*

*I had built my castles and built them high,
With their domes had pierced the blue of the sky,
I had sworn to rule with an iron mace,
When I met the Master face to face.*

*I met Him and knew Him and blushed to see,
That His eyes full of sorrow were fixed on me;
And I faltered and fell at His feet that day,
While my castles melted and vanished away.*

*Melted and vanished, and in their place,
Naught else did I see but the Master's face.
And I cried aloud, "Oh, make me meek,
To follow the steps of Thy wounded feet."*

*My thought is now for the souls of men,
I have lost my life to find it again,
E'er since one day in a quiet place,
I met the Master face to face.*

—Lorrie Cline, "I Met the Master Face to Face"

Week 1

Climb Onto the Altar:
Becoming a Living Sacrifice

It's a fact—*God wants all of you.*

He doesn't just want your church life or your work life. And He's not content with having just your family or social life.

He wants everything—all of you, surrendered completely to Him.

Now, that truth makes a lot of people uncomfortable. But that discomfort with the idea almost always stems from a misunderstanding of why He wants all of us. We don't complete God. And He's not seeking to maliciously control us to accomplish some hidden agenda.

So why does He want all of us? What's the ultimate purpose for surrendering ourselves completely to Him?

The answer begins in Romans 12:1:

Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship.

The apostle Paul here wrote, "...present your bodies." Not just your mind. Not just your heart. Your whole self. As what? A living and holy sacrifice.

Sacrifice... what is that!?

Well, we know a sacrifice always involves death. Many pagan religions even today have a role for animal sacrifice in order to honor their gods, to make atonement for their sin, or to gain favor.

Animal sacrifice was also an integral part of life for the Jews. The religious leaders would take a lamb

or goat, cut its throat, and let it bleed out right there. Then they'd burn the flesh of the animal on the altar of the temple. And they felt the smoke from the sacrifice would go up to God as a sweet aroma for Him. That was their idea of shedding blood and making atonement for their sins.

But Paul takes this to a whole new understanding—that of a “living sacrifice.” In other words, if we're to present our bodies to God, a death must be involved. So what death does he have in mind? What do we have to kill? What sacrifice must we make in order to present ourselves to God?

The answer is “us.” *We* are what must die!

Now, I'm clearly not talking about a physical death. After all, we certainly can't be a living sacrifice if we're dead! What Paul is talking about putting on the altar of our faith is our very attitude of self-sufficiency, self-reliance, and self-focus. That is what we have to kill.

In other words, we remain alive; but we're to kill our fleshly desires, our selfish agendas, and our egocentric ideas. We kill the choices that we make in the flesh and instead submit them fully to God. And it's not just some of them that we kill... it's all of them.

Intense, isn't it?

Now, you might be thinking, *Whoa! Wait a minute! I'm comfortable with surrendering some of my life. But I've got goals, ambitions, and plans. Do you really expect me to put every single one of them on the altar of God, kill them, and let Him have control in every area of my life?*

Yes.

This is no small thing. But the Bible promises that if we'll submit to Him in every area and make ourselves fully available, then a miracle will happen. God will supernaturally transform our hearts and minds to align with Him.

This is described in the very next strokes of Paul's pen:

And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.
(Romans 12:2)

One of nature's greatest miracles takes place when a caterpillar goes up into a tree, climbs out on a limb, forms a cocoon around itself, experiences metamorphosis, and emerges two weeks later as a butterfly.

I read an article not long ago that said the details of this process are still very much a mystery. In fact, zoologists and biologists have x-rayed these cocoons and found the caterpillar essentially liquefies from the inside, experiences a radical change, and emerges completely transformed. Some scientists now even believe the caterpillar actually dies in the process, and a new organism is formed. It's fascinating!

As we reflect upon the remarkable transformation of a caterpillar into a butterfly, I believe we're getting a small glimpse of the kind of transformation you and I can experience in Christ—one in which we essentially die and emerge completely new.

But what does our transformation look like when it's lived out? What do you and I look like as butterflies? The answer is found in the phrase, "that you may

prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.”

For a long time, I had a hard time understanding what this phrase meant. After all, how can the transformation we experience in the Christian life actually serve as proof of what God’s will is?

Here’s how I like to think about it:

When we study math, we have proofs that tell us this or that is right. The proof serves the purpose of determining the truth of the matter. It defines the truth for what it is and nails it down for all to see. And once something’s been proven, it’s absolutely irrevocable.

So what does this have to do with our transformation? Well, when we surrender our entire body to God and let Him begin renewing our mind, we ourselves become proofs of what God’s will is because our affections are turned toward the things that are good, acceptable, and perfect. We start to agree with His plan!

Let me give you an example.

When I was about 12 years old, I went over to a friend’s house to have lunch. His mom made some chocolate pudding that was different from anything I had ever tried before. It was dark, thick, and not very sweet. But being a 12-year-old boy, I still ate the whole bowl!

After lunch, my friend and I decided to go out and play. It wasn’t long before my stomach began to churn. That pudding wasn’t agreeing with me—and my stomach was proving it!

Being transformed means God’s will agrees with you—and your heart will prove it as you live it out!

It's kind of like a tadpole and a frog having different appetites. A tadpole is an herbivore and eats plants in the water. But when it becomes a frog, its tastes change. It no longer has a taste for plants but now becomes a carnivore.

In the same way, when you and I begin to experience transformation, we'll develop a whole new appetite—one that hates sin and loves the good, acceptable, and perfect things of God.

What the apostle Paul is saying here in Romans 12:2 is when you surrender your body and let the Holy Spirit begin to renew your mind, you'll naturally start walking in the will of God. That's because you discover it's good, and you're naturally attracted to following it. Like a butterfly's natural inclination is to fly, yours is to walk in the will of God!

My wife is the best in the world at fitting every last dish into the dishwasher. I'll go over sometimes and put a cup in, and she'll quickly pipe up and say, "No, no, no... that cup needs to go there." That's because she has an idea in her head of how the dishwasher should be loaded. And in her mind, that's the perfect way to do it.

The Holy Spirit living inside of us has a perfect way of arranging our lives. If our focus is in the wrong place, He tells us, "No... you need to focus here." If our thoughts begin straying in a direction He doesn't want them to go, He tells us, "No... put your mind on these things."

But this guidance comes, again, when we lay our own agenda down on the altar of sacrifice. The Holy Spirit renews our minds. Our old hurts, habits, and addictions—those things we once felt compelled to do—begin to be changed day by day.

We're being transformed from the inside out!

So the decision the Christian must make is this: Are you going to let the Holy Spirit transform you from the inside out—or will the world transform you from the outside in?

It's like an example I heard recently with a tube of toothpaste and a balloon. You see, the toothpaste is shaped from the outside. You take it, you squeeze it here and there, and it takes the shape of whatever squeezes it.

There's nothing on the inside of the tube that resists being conformed from the outside. And that's the way many Christians are today—conformed from the outside in.

But a balloon is different because it's formed from within. It's shaped from the inside, not the outside. So while you may be able to squeeze it here and there, it's always going to spring back to its original shape.

That's exactly what the Holy Spirit does for us if we let Him. When the pressures of the world try to conform us, the Spirit's transformation from within helps us keep our shape just like a balloon.

God wants something from you. He wants you to surrender your body, your heart, and your mind to Him. He wants you to kill the desire within you to run your own life and do everything your way. He wants to transform you through and through by renewing your mind daily.

And the end result? You'll fly.

You'll no longer be enslaved to crawling on the ground like a caterpillar. But you'll experience a metamorphosis in your life—a radical change on your most basic level that transforms everything about you. And

day by day, you'll start to stretch your wings and experience greater and more abundant life in the Spirit.

But just like a butterfly was never meant to stay in its cocoon and a frog was never meant to spend its life in the water, real transformation takes getting out of our areas of comfort. It isn't just an inward change, but an outward manifestation of that change—and it must be expressed both in us and through us into the world.

This ongoing transformation begins in ourselves. Yet as we live it out, then our very world around us begins to transform as well.

- Our churches are transformed as we seek to serve God according to the gifts He's given us.
- Our relationships with others are transformed as we love others sacrificially.
- We'll see our nation and government transformed through our biblical submission to its authority.
- People will be transformed as we invite them in and accept those who are weaker into the community of faith.
- And our very world will be transformed by our loving and compassionate response to suffering.

When you and I put our lives on the altar, we wake up and declare to our Lord that we are not our own, but His. We become less conformed to this world and more transformed to His good, acceptable, and perfect will. That's the whole point of this transformation process. His will is so much better than ours. And as our Father, He wants what's best for you and me!

For next week, we'll see what this transformation looks like in how we serve in our churches.

Week 2

Use It or Lose It:
Discovering and Using Your Gifts

There's something that's just so beautiful about orchestra music, isn't there?

It's the kind of music that you can sit down to, listen, and think about deeply. The strings are doing one thing... the woodwinds another... and the percussion is keeping everyone together. It's wonderful!

And it's a beautiful picture of the Church—the body of Christ.

You see, within the Church (both the local gathering of believers as well as the people of God worldwide) we have various individuals to whom the Spirit of God has given different gifts for serving Him. The apostle Paul outlines the giving of these gifts in Romans 12:4-8:

For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, each of us is to exercise them accordingly: if prophecy, according to the proportion of his faith; if service, in his serving; or he who teaches, in his teaching; or he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness.

When we begin to experience transformation by the Spirit of God and our affections are inclined to what is good, acceptable, and perfect, then we start to understand where our skills fit within the body of Christ.

You might be a violin, carrying the melody of the orchestra. Or, perhaps you're a tuba, supporting

the violinists by adding volume and richness to their sound. Or you might be a drum keeping everyone together.

Whatever your role, there's one thing that's certain. As believers, we're all playing the same music, and the Holy Spirit is our great conductor.

Now, one thing that's critical to realize is every member of the body of Christ has an equally important role to play. Imagine if the percussionists didn't show up to the concert. Who would provide the beat against which all the other members played? Likewise in the Church, every spiritual gift is needed for the music to be played well.

And if, by the transformative power of the Holy Spirit, every member of the Body uses the giftedness God has given them, whatever that role may be, whatever instrument they play, then the sound will be magnificent!

Not only that, people outside the Church will want to be a part of it!

But imagine if everyone in the Church was just like you. What kind of Church would we have? It would be like an orchestra full of first violins... all playing the exact same notes together. There would be no harmony, no backbeat, and no richness to the sound. It would be bland and ultimately, ineffective in the world.

The Church of God *must* be diverse if she is to be who He created her to be.

So what does that mean for you and me? Well, as we're transformed, one of the biggest changes that takes place is in how we see ourselves. We become

less focused on being our own person, and more on being—as Paul stated in the passage above—“members of one another.” Essentially, we become more humble.

That means we no longer feel like we have to have the “most important” roles in the body of Christ, but are content in the skills God has given us to serve the purpose He has for us in order to advance His Kingdom. What a relief!

So what are some of the ministries the Holy Spirit may give us? Let’s look at the ones Paul lists for us here in Romans chapter 12.

Prophecy

Most people will probably tell you that prophecy in the Bible means to predict a future event. But that’s not what it means. The actual meaning of prophecy from a New Testament perspective is to proclaim forth or to speak God’s truth.

And it’s not just thinking you have the gift that’s important—it’s the fact that your gift is affirmed by others. If you’re the only one who thinks you have the gift of prophecy, then you most likely don’t have it.

In 1 Samuel 3:19, the Bible describes the young prophet Samuel and says, “*Thus Samuel grew and the LORD was with him and let none of his words fail.*” That is the essence of prophecy—that the words one claims to speak for God actually are from God, and they have the power to convict others.

The picture we get here is that of an arrow. When Samuel spoke, his prophetic words hit the target exactly where God wanted. They were words filled with power, not of the speaker, but of God Himself.

Samuel's words hit home with his listeners. And if you have the gift of prophecy, yours will too.

Service

A person who has this gift sees something that needs to be done and starts doing it. Just think for a moment how important that is in the body of Christ today. We can't have a bunch of prophets—or else nothing will get done. We need people who will take on projects that move the mission of the Church forward.

As a pastor, I have a special appreciation for men and women who have this gift of ministerial service. I spend so much time alone throughout the week getting ready to preach on Sunday, it would exhaust me if I had to also make sure the logistics of the service went on without a hitch.

But it's not only on Sunday that servants are needed. Each week, I'll spend about twenty to thirty hours studying the Word of God in preparation for the Sunday sermon. There's no way I could organize every weekday program of our church in addition to that. It would be impossible!

In fact, I'd go out on a limb and say that people with the gift of service are one of the greatest needs we have in the Church today. So if God's given you that gift, rejoice... you have a big role to play!

Teaching

Teaching is different than the gift of prophecy, though they often go hand in hand. One way I think about it is that prophecy speaks more to the heart, while teaching speaks more to the head. Teachers really spend time in God's Word doing work in the original languages and studying the historical background of the text.

Churches have a huge need for teachers in the area of small group Bible study. This gives teachers the chance to use their skills to pour into the lives of others.

One very important thing about the gift of teaching is that it must be maintained. It's like a muscle that, if not used, begins to experience atrophy.

I met not long ago with a man who taught for several years in our church. He was a terrific Bible teacher, but he hadn't taught for about four years. And I could tell... his gift of teaching had started to shrivel up.

So if you've been given the gift of teaching, make sure you use it!

Exhortation

Exhortation is the gift of bringing comfort and encouragement to others. This gift was critical in the life of Paul. That's because one thing that many people don't know about Paul is that ten years after his dramatic encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus, Acts chapter 11 tells us he was sitting on the bench. He was hiding out back in Tarsus.

But his friend Barnabas had the gift of exhortation. He said, "Where is that guy, Paul? We need him. He's a Roman citizen. He's familiar with the Jews. He knows the Greeks. Let's go get him!"

So Barnabas encouraged Paul to come back and get in God's game. And he did, becoming one of the most effective instruments the Lord has ever used in His Church.

Barnabas had the gift of exhortation. He was a cheerleader—and his cheerleading made a dramatic

impact for the Kingdom. This kind of encouragement is so badly needed in our churches today. So if this is you, use your gift liberally to encourage fellow believers to stay in the game!

Giving

Most people think of giving in terms of financially contributing. But the truth is there are many ways we can give. One of the most important things we can give is ourselves—our time, our energy, and our abilities.

Someone who has the gift of giving will take time for others who are struggling. If another person is hurting, givers will stop what they're doing and say, "Let's talk about this. How can I help you?"

And of course, givers have the heart to help meet physical needs whenever they can. If they see a problem, they'll immediately start thinking about what they can give to help fix it. This gift is critical in our churches. So givers, give liberally!

Leadership

Leadership is one of the most misunderstood spiritual gifts. That's because many people think it's a gift you can just learn. But it's not a switch you can simply turn on. It's a gift!

Now, if you have the gift, your giftedness can be enhanced. But it's still a gift—and we need gifted leaders in the body of Christ who make a difference in the world.

One way I see the impact of this gift in the Bible is in the principle of gleaning. We read about it in the book of Ruth. It's a practice where if you owned a field, you would harvest only the center of your field. You

left the corners of the field untouched so that the poor could come and harvest. In other words, you share your profits with others.

Imagine if every Christian business leader in our world today did something like that—using their profits to make a difference in the world. What a strong witness that would be!

Now, don't misunderstand me—I am a capitalist. But I am saying this should be part and parcel of a Christian leader's DNA. If the boat rises, everybody in the boat goes up with it proportionately to their contribution and their responsibility.

That's what we need in the marketplace and in our churches—leaders who will share the credit and profits with others and glorify Christ in how they lead!

Mercy

And the last gift mentioned is mercy. It says we are to be merciful with cheer. What does that mean?

Well, imagine you hear that someone you know to be a dishonest person gets caught. Now, most people might say, “Good! It's about time you paid the price for what you've been doing!”

But then, someone with the gift of mercy will come in and tell that person, “I'm broken with you—and I'm here for you. Let's walk through this together.” That's the gift of mercy and compassion. And if you have that gift, it needs to be exercised among believers and nonbelievers alike.

Open Your Gifts

A little girl named Kathy went with her mother to the store one day and noticed they were selling a bottle

of perfume her mother particularly liked. But it was expensive. So Kathy waited, saved her money, and had a chance to go back to that store and buy that special perfume for her mother.

Her mother's birthday came, and Kathy was so excited to finally give her that gift. But when the time came, she looked at the gift from her daughter and said, "I know what's in that one. I'll save it and open it later."

Kathy was sort of disappointed. So a few weeks went by and she still saw that little gift box there on the counter in her mother's room. She asked, "Mama, when are you gonna open my gift?"

She said, "Oh, I know what's in it. I'm saving it to open later."

Years passed and Kathy was now 16 years old. She had almost forgotten about the gift until she came across it one day in her mom's drawer. So she asked her, "Mom, I'm 16. Why don't you open my gift?"

She said the same thing, "Kathy, I know what's in it. I'm saving it for later."

Years went by and Kathy's mother died. As she was going through all her mother's things, she saw the gift she'd given her as an 11-year-old girl. She began to cry... her mother had never gotten to experience the fragrance Kathy knew she would have loved.

You have a unique gift to share within the body of Christ. And as God transforms you from the inside out, He gives you a chance to open that gift, refine it, and implement it for His glory. But don't leave it unopened!

Yes, you are part of the orchestra of God—the body of Christ. And with your spiritual gift, you'll be part of a music, a message, a mystery, and a magnificence you never imagined!

Next week we will turn our attention to another area of transformation Paul shares with us: how we love one another.

Week 3

Brotherly Love and Otherly Love:
Loving One Another

The doorbell rang. Mary opened the door and couldn't believe what she saw. Two policemen were standing there. "Ma'am, may we come in?" they asked.

All she could do was sit and listen as her life changed forever. The news was horrifying—her teenage son had been shot and killed in a drug deal gone wrong.

How could this be? He had his whole life ahead of him.

She went to the trial and was there when her son's killer was found guilty and sentenced to 25 years in prison. But God was working in this woman's heart. She was a devout Christian, and she knew God was leading her to begin the healing process for her—and for her son's killer.

Writing her first letter to this incarcerated young man was one of the hardest things she'd ever done. But she did, and she asked for permission to visit him in prison.

"Absolutely not," he wrote back to her.

But Mary remained diligent until he finally agreed to meet with her—one time only.

The young inmate immediately knew something was different about Mary. He'd expected to hear words of anger, hatred, and judgment. But instead, he experienced forgiveness, love, and mercy like he'd never seen before. This woman had an honest desire to help him.

And after a series of visits, Mary led that young man to faith in Christ.

God began working in his life. His entire time in prison, he had no one there for him. No family, no friends, only Mary. He served 17 years before his parole was granted. And it was no surprise that she was the first person he called as soon as he was out.

Mary helped that young man get a job and find a place to live—not far from where she lived herself. She even helped him apply for college and get an education. And so it was that the two became very close friends.

What does it take to show that kind of mercy? We obviously can't do it through our own power. It happens when we start to understand the mercy that Christ has shown to us. That's what Paul gives us as the next area of transformation—the ability to show supernatural love:

Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor; not lagging behind in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; rejoicing in hope, persevering in tribulation, devoted to prayer, contributing to the needs of the saints, practicing hospitality. (Romans 12:9-13)

C. S. Lewis wrote a great book many years ago entitled *The Four Loves*. In it, he talks about four great words for love in the ancient Greek language. The one above all others is the word *agape*, and it refers to supernatural, sacrificial love that is beyond measure.

Other words Lewis identified for love are *phileo* (visible, brotherly love), *storge* (familial love), and *eros* (sexual love). But only two of these words are used in the New Testament: *agape* and *phileo*.

Agape

The most popular word for *love* throughout the New Testament is *agape*. John 3:16, for example, tells us, “*For God so loved [agape] the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.*”

Then Romans 8:28 turns that love around when it says, “*And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love [agape] God, to those who are called according to His purpose.*”

God loves us with *agape* love, and we’re to *agape* Him back.

But *agape* isn’t just used for love between God and man. Romans chapter 12, for example, refers to *agape* love between people.

So what does that kind of love look like within the body of Christ?

In the ancient Middle East, they had various ways of expressing love between one another. One was to say, “I love you with my mind,” meaning I think about you. Another was to say, “I love you with my lips,” meaning I speak of you often. Or they might say, “I love you with my heart,” which would be a more emotional attachment.

Agape love among people means loving others with our minds, our lips, and our hearts together.

Phileo

That brings us to the second love Paul refers to here—*phileo*, translated “brotherly love.” He’s saying yes, *agape* one another. But he then adds this idea of brotherly love to show what that love will look like when it is lived out.

My brother went to be with the Lord years ago, and he was a great guy. But he and I were as different as we could be. For years, I wondered who his mom and dad really were!

But you know what? I loved him completely. He enriched my life by being so different from me, and I enriched his by being different from him. He and I were completely devoted to one another.

That's what the love of Christ in the body of Christ looks like. We're different, but we're completely committed to loving each other!

So let's work our way through the teaching in this passage and look at how Paul describes the actions associated with *phileo* (brotherly) love within the body of Christ.

Honor one another

Do you know what I dislike about my job more than anything else? It's standing up on a platform to preach.

Now, I realize there's the issue of sight and sound for the people listening, but I'd much rather be level with everyone than on a platform. That's because I want to foster a culture in our church where everyone is equally honored.

Time and time again, the Bible shuns the idea of giving preference to a few individuals over the rest. Instead, we're told here to give preference to one another. Give everyone an equal seat at the table!

Be diligent, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord

Colossians 3:23 says when you and I go to work in the morning, we should "*work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men.*" God has hired you and put you

wherever you are. So we're to show up at work with fire and with fervency unbelievers don't have. That's a part of the contagious brotherly love we have in the church and the witness outside the church.

I loved it when I heard that a member of our church was being praised with these words, "You know, that's the most conscientious person I have. They're on time. They don't look at the clock. They're on fire!"

Do you approach your work as worship? That's what we're to do!

Rejoice in hope, persevere in tribulation, and be devoted to prayer

We all experience tribulation at some point or another, don't we? We have problems and challenges, as well as good days when things are going well.

In any season, it's wonderful that we have people cheering for us, offering us hope, and praying for us. And I'm convinced that if the body of Christ has a chance to show you love no matter what your situation is, your burden will be lifted.

Now, we can't do everything. But we'll love you and care for you. That's what the church does: feeds, clothes, houses, ministers, gives hope, prays for, loves, and listens.

That's brotherly love.

Contribute to the needs of the saints and practice hospitality

Giving is one of the spiritual gifts we discussed in the last chapter. But what Paul is talking about here is having an openness in our relationships, our time, and if possible, our homes.

This act of love was particularly visible in the lives of Priscilla and Aquila in the book of Acts. This husband and wife were hospitable to Paul and kept him in their home. And when Paul left, Apollos moved in to stay with them. Their home was open!

So when we think of brotherly love, we think of love in action. It's a love for others within the body of Christ that's evident to the outside world.

“Otherly” Love

Now, let's watch as Paul turns our attention from brotherly love to what I call “otherly” love—an *agape* love for those outside the body of Christ.

Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men. If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men. Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,” says the Lord. “But if your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.
(Romans 12:17-21)

Do not overcome evil with evil. You'll lose every time. Instead—overcome evil with good. That's the love that He commands us to show to those who are our enemies. It's not just love for others, but an otherworldly love for those who are furthest from deserving it.

I don't know about you, but that's hard for me. In my flesh, I want to be the one who takes revenge on my enemies.

But that's what transformation does—it enables us to live above and beyond our flesh and walk according to the Spirit. Through Him, we're empowered to love those who spitefully use us.

Now, one of the more confusing phrases in this passage is this idea of heaping “burning coals” on our enemy's head.

This phrase is taken from Proverbs 25:21-22, and many commentators think it refers to a tradition in the ancient Middle East when if someone was repenting, they would put a container on their heads and put burning coals in it. Then, they would go out and walk through the village at night, and people would see the coals and know they were repenting.

If that's right, then what Paul is saying here is that if we feed and help those who've just treated us badly, we're actually helping lead them toward repentance. We're helping them see the problems they created. We're helping them understand they've been vicious or unfair. And most importantly, we're showing there's room for them at the table of grace. That's “otherly” love.

But how in the world do we do all this? Again, it goes against every intuition our flesh has. Yet, Paul has already told us from the very first verse of Romans 12 that this happens “by the mercies of God.”

It is the mercy of God in your life and in my life that transforms us and gives us the ability to have this kind of radical, “otherly” love even when we're spitefully used and abused.

God's radical love transforms us—and we can never be the same.

During World War II there was an infamously brutal Japanese prison camp near the River Kwai in Thailand. Captured British soldiers were sent there to labor intensely as they built a jungle railroad.

Many soldiers died during the construction because of the impossible work conditions. And most of the ones who lived were constantly at each other's throats due to the incredible stresses they were facing.

In his book *Miracle on the River Kwai*, Ernest Gordon recounts how a shovel went missing one afternoon. The Japanese officer in charge was mad with rage, and he demanded whoever took the shovel to produce it immediately or he would kill every member of the squadron.

Finally, one man stepped forward and admitted he'd taken the shovel. The officer holstered his gun, picked up a shovel, and beat the man to death with it.

After another tool check, it turned out there was no shovel missing. There had been a miscount at the first check.

Word spread throughout the camp about this innocent man who was willing to die in order to save his squadron. From that point forward, the prisoners in the camp treated one another like brothers. And many of them became believers in Jesus Christ thanks to the witness of other faithful soldiers.

In the final days of the war, the victorious Allies swept in to rescue the prisoners and found them starving, emaciated, and nearly dead. And with their Japanese captors lined up and shackled in front of them, these soldiers elected to forgive them rather than exact their revenge.

When unexplainable love and mercy are shown to us, our appropriate response is to show that same love and mercy to others—whether they deserve it or not.

Friend, I'm convinced that if you'll let the goodness of God's mercy fill your heart, put your own agenda to death, and submit to God's transforming work in you, you'll find the strength to love like you've never imagined.

Next week, let's look at what that transformational work in us does when it comes to our relationships with authority.

Week 4

Remember the 7 'Ups':
Handling Government, Taxes,
and Neighbors

Percy Harvin is a talented football player. He played for the Seattle Seahawks when they won the Super Bowl in 2014. In fact, he returned the opening kickoff in the second half 87 yards for a touchdown. He's an amazing player!

But later that year, the Seahawks traded him to the New York Jets. When I heard that, I couldn't help but wonder why.

Then I read he had problems with authority. It was reported he argued with his coaches, couldn't get along with his teammates, and would sometimes sit himself out of games just because he didn't want to play.

You see, talent is trumped by those who can't live under authority. You and I are put under the authority of the government—the authority structure God has created to superintend our lives. But there are also other authorities in our lives, whether they're at work, at church, or in school.

And the question we must ask ourselves is, “How are we to live under these authorities as transformed believers in Christ?”

Continuing on the subject of transformation, Paul turns his attention toward how we, as believers, interact with authority:

Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. Therefore whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves. For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil.

Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good and you will have praise from the same; for it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil. Therefore it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of wrath, but also for conscience' sake. For because of this you also pay taxes, for rulers are servants of God, devoting themselves to this very thing. Render to all what is due them: tax to whom tax is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor.

(Romans 13:1-7)

Respect for governing authorities is a timeless principle in both the Old and New Testaments. And every single time I preach on authority, I inevitably get the question, “Well, what if the authority is evil? Do we have to obey it?”

And my answer is simple: Throughout history, God has called His people to live under both benevolent and malevolent authorities. Yet, they were still told to obey. God’s people in the Old Testament lived under pagan rulers in Babylon and Persia. And God used those rulers to turn His people back to Him. And of course, the entire New Testament was written under the rule of the pagan Roman Empire.

So I want to give you what I see are the 7 “ups” of transformational obedience to authority in our lives.

Number 1: Look Up

Now, I know you’ve been there. I have too. You’re driving down the road and you see a police car ahead of you. What’s your first inclination? Well, it’s naturally to

slow down and make sure you're not speeding. That's fear of punishment. You don't want a ticket!

But my wife is a rare breed. She doesn't slow down at all when she sees a police car. Why? Because she never breaks the speed limit! She obeys because of her conscience.

When we look up to the government God has placed over us, we don't just obey it out of fear. We follow it because our conscience tells us it's right.

Now this conscience-based obedience isn't just to our governments, but to any authorities placed over us. It may be a teacher, a mall security guard, or your boss at work. Wherever you are, the Bible tells you to be a faithful and loyal subject to those in authority over you.

But I'm often asked if there's ever an occasion to disobey the authorities over us. Is there ever an area where we can stand up and say "no" to those in power?

Absolutely.

First of all, we are free to disobey authority if it hinders the free expression of our faith. If you're told, "You can't wear that cross around your neck," or "You're not allowed to share Christ with your coworkers," that crosses the line. The apostle Peter faced a similar confrontation with some authorities in Acts chapter 5. And he told them in verse 29, "*We must obey God rather than men.*"

Next, when it comes to moral issues, we can't be forced to compromise. Just because it's legal—or even mandatory—according to the authorities, that doesn't make it moral for us as members of God's family.

Take, for example, the case of a Christian nurse who is ordered by her superior to perform an abortion. But she refuses, knowing she will very likely lose her job over it, and might even be prosecuted because of her decision. Yet, she is completely in line with the Bible's teachings regarding her decision.

So there's free expression of our faith, moral decisions, and then the third instance when it's acceptable to rebel against authority, and that's civil disobedience.

In the book of Exodus, God commanded an act of civil disobedience when He told Moses to take the children of Israel out of Egypt. And in Joshua chapter 2, Rahab disobeyed the king's command to hand over the spies, and instead helped them escape.

Civil disobedience has been a critical component throughout history in bringing justice to oppressed people. In the Civil Rights era, Dr. Martin Luther King disobeyed the laws of our land in order to help bring an end to the institutionalized racial discrimination that plagued our country for so long.

So that's the first principle of obedience to authority. Now, let's look at the subject of taxes.

Number 2: Pay Up

The Gospels record an interesting debate on the subject of paying taxes. It took place between two political parties: the Herodians who were loyal to Caesar and loved Roman control, and the Pharisees who were against being ruled by Rome.

Now, neither one of these groups were very fond of Jesus. So they let Jesus in on this debate one day to see if they could find a reason to either have Him

arrested for treason, or get Him rejected by the Jews. They asked Him in Matthew 22:17, “*Is it lawful to give a poll-tax to Caesar, or not?*”

Jesus, however, knew what they were doing. And Matthew records what happened next:

But Jesus perceived their malice, and said, “Why are you testing Me, you hypocrites? Show Me the coin used for the poll-tax.” And they brought Him a denarius. And He said to them, “Whose likeness and inscription is this?” They said to Him, “Caesar’s.” Then He said to them, “Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s; and to God the things that are God’s.”

(Matthew 22:18-21)

What’s Jesus saying? He’s saying that the coin was minted by the Roman government with Caesar’s picture on it. And you were minted by the Almighty God with His image in you.

So if the government asks for our money, we give it to them even if we disagree. Remember, your ultimate treasure is not on earth, but in heaven. Live that way when it comes to your taxes!

Number 3: Straighten Up

Our Christian witness may very well rise or fall on how we behave as subjects under authority. Paul addresses this directly when he continues in Romans 13:9:

For this, “You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,” and if there is any other commandment, it is summed up in this saying, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Now, Paul is telling us what not to do. No adultery, no murder, no stealing, and no coveting. That's four of the Ten Commandments right there, and it covers a broad spectrum of immorality.

And he ultimately sums up our behavioral responsibilities under authority with the simple command to love your neighbor as yourself.

Now the government is in the business of justice, not love. But as transformed believers, you and I are in the business of love. And a way to express that love is by living above reproach under the authority given to you. It's the whole balance between love and the law.

Here's how I think about it...

Picture a river. And flowing through this river is our discernment, our conscience. On one bank of the river, you have love. On the other bank, you have the law. So for us to operate, we must follow the parameters set by both love and the law.

In other words, if I obey the law only without love, I am a legalist. If I have love without the law, I am unrestrained. So love and law go together. And when it comes to state-administered justice, we're to exercise love by obeying the law.

Now that doesn't mean there's no room for mercy in our legal system. It just means the primary responsibility of our government is to administer justice under the law. This is the delicate balance we must seek the Spirit's guidance in navigating.

Number 4: Wake Up

This is a very practical teaching. Look at Romans 13:11:

Do this, knowing the time, that is already the hour for you to awaken from sleep; for now salvation is nearer to us than when we believed.

Many people think this verse is referring to the second coming of Jesus Christ, but I don't necessarily see it that way. I think Paul is simply saying to Christians in Rome, "Wake up! It's later than you think!" He's giving them a sense of urgency because their time to impact the world is growing smaller and smaller every day.

You see, a lot of people say, "Well, when my children leave, my wife and I will get more involved in the church, in evangelism, in ministry projects." But Paul is saying now is the time to get going. It's later than any of us can imagine.

My good friend, Jerry, told me that when he was a teenage boy, his mother and dad were strict. His mother told him, "You can stay out 'til midnight, but not a minute later."

Well, he was out one night with some buddies, and all of a sudden he looked up to see it was a little before 3:00 a.m. So he flew back home, opened the door, and as he snuck to his room, he heard his mom say, "Jerry, is that you?"

"Ye-ye-yes, Mom."

"Thank you for being home on time."

He couldn't believe it. She didn't know it was after midnight!? He thought he had gotten away with it... until the old grandfather clock in the living room struck three.

“Bong! Bong! Bong!”

Jerry froze in fear... and did the only thing he knew to do. Imitating the clock as best he could, he let out nine more loud bongs—twelve in total. And you know what? He got away with it!

Many Christians are living like it's early—like they have all the time in the world. Don't be deceived. Your time will be up sooner than you think!

Number 5: Light Up

Years ago there was a TV show called *The Twilight Zone*. It was so eerie and mysterious. Well, that show takes its name from a scientific term for the area of transition between light and darkness.

When we look at planets, for example, and see the sun shining on one side and darkness on the other, that little boundary in between is called the twilight zone. And in oceanography, when divers start to get deeper into the water and the light above begins to fade into darkness, that's the twilight zone.

Paul tells us next that we, as believers, are living in this zone—this area between light and darkness, the now and the not yet. He says,

*The night is almost gone, and the day is near.
Therefore let us lay aside the deeds of darkness
and put on the armor of light.* (Romans 13:12)

Understanding this truth makes a huge difference in how we live under authority. You see, we have a choice in how we're going to walk. Do we continue to live as if it's still night, walking in the darkness? Or do we put on the armor of light and get ready for the day that's coming?

The answer is clear—let’s get ready for the day!

Unfortunately, many Christians are content to live in the grays of life. They’re good people; they obey the law; and they’re faithful employees. But they’re doing nothing substantial for the Kingdom.

What Paul is saying here is that transformed believers aren’t content with living that kind of gray life and just doing the bare minimum. So let’s put on our armor of light and get the world ready for the day that’s coming!

Number 6: Clean Up

Now, Paul tells us exactly what it looks like to live under authority as citizens of the light. He says in Romans 13:13:

Let us behave properly as in the day, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual promiscuity and sensuality, not in strife and jealousy.

This is the difference between those who live in the light and those who live in the darkness. You see, you could be a good Roman citizen and still get drunk, be sexually promiscuous, and live in strife and jealousy.

But transformed people are called to live far above that!

Most of the authorities you and I will ever live under give us a firm baseline for living with others. But we can’t look to them to give us purpose and meaning for life. That’s only found when we’re transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit.

That brings us to our final “up.”

Number 7: Dress Up

This is a fantastic way for Paul to finish his reasoning on this issue. He says in Romans 13:14:

But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts.

Now, the word *provision* is one of those big words in the Bible. And it's actually a legal term for a loophole. Paul is telling us to not leave any loopholes in our Christian lives for the lust of the flesh to come out.

I saw a news story a while back about the doctors and nurses who were treating Ebola patients in West Africa. They were showing how they suit up to go into the treatment wards. There's not an inch of uncovered skin.

When it comes to living for our heavenly authority, we can't afford to leave any skin uncovered in our lives because that gives a loophole for the flesh to come in.

So what do we do? We put on Jesus Christ!

The Spirit-empowered obedience and disobedience of believers to authority has brought about a tremendous amount of transformation to governments and societies over the centuries.

From Christians in the Roman Empire to the modern civil rights struggle, believers transformed by the Spirit of God have followed His leading in obedience to benevolent and malevolent powers alike.

And the single guiding principle that's enabled them is the same that empowers you and me today: Remembering where our citizenship really lies.

Seek first His Kingdom, and all else will be added.

Next week we'll look at what Paul teaches about the struggles believers face on the essentials and nonessentials of the Christian life.

Week 5

Don't Major on the Minors:
Dealing With the Nonessentials

A number of years ago when I was pastoring in South Carolina, I led a tour of the Holy Land in Israel.

I had a busload of church members and were on our way up to Capernaum, the headquarters for Jesus' earthly ministry in Galilee. He spent more time in Capernaum than He did in any other city throughout His life.

This ancient city is amazing. You can actually visit the remains of the synagogue where Jesus would have worshiped. You can also see the remains of a wine press that would have been active in His day. It's an incredible place to visit.

So we visited the town and were getting ready to leave. But as the bus pulled away, a man came out and stopped us. He got on and said, "I want to give each of you a little cup of wine from the press."

Now, this wine came from the descendants of the grapes that were used to make the wine Jesus Himself drank. Just imagine being able to taste the very same flavor of wine Jesus would have tasted 2,000 years ago. What an experience!

So he started handing out these little cups of wine to everyone on the bus... a bunch of Southern Baptists! I was just waiting for someone to pipe up and say something. And then she did.

There was a member of our church who was president of the Temperance League of Columbia, South Carolina. And man, did she let us know it! She went up and down the aisle preaching on the evils of alcohol. She dangled us over the fires of hell and threw matches at us!

Well, some people on the bus drank the wine. In fact, most of them did, much to the chagrin of that woman. And then they came back and handed the wine to me.

What do you think I did?

It's interesting to me the nonessential battles many Christians choose to fight. And it's not just on drinking. I've heard preachers wax eloquently on things like what's appropriate to wear. Too high here... too low there... yet not a shred of biblical evidence to back up their staunch opinions.

Then there's the issue of Bible translations. That's a big one! I've been called a heretic because I use something other than the King James Version.

Then there's sports. That's the real problem today. You men need to turn off your televisions and quit worshiping at the altar of sports!

Or my favorite battle... music in the church. "That music is too loud! It's not God-honoring! Those praise choruses aren't what God wants." Then they're shocked when I let them know that many of the tunes of their favorite old hymns were actually secular songs before people like Charles Wesley put Christian words to them. But a lot of churches split over that!

These are just a few of the nonessentials that have sadly divided Christians over the years into silly camps that argue incessantly with one another. This attitude is completely contrary to the priestly prayer of Jesus in John 17:22-23:

The glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, just as We are one; I in them and You in Me, that they may be

perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent Me, and loved them, even as You have loved Me.

But unity is a challenge, isn't it? It was a challenge in Jesus' day. And it was a challenge in the early church.

When Paul was writing to the believers in Rome, he was addressing a very diverse group of people who were worshiping together. There were the Jewish believers, and there were believers of Greek, Roman, and other ethnic backgrounds.

The Jews were a very religious bunch. They woke up in the morning and began performing their rituals. Then, they would recite the *shema* at night from Deuteronomy 6:4-5. And in between, how they dressed, how they ate, what they said, and when they worshiped were all a matter of religious ritual.

The Gentile Christians, on the other hand, came in from a totally pagan background. They worshiped their pagan gods or goddesses, lived decadent lives, and had no sense of religious reverence or ritual.

And these two groups were now meeting together in church. Is there any wonder there were disagreements?

So Paul addresses this, saying,

Now accept the one who is weak in faith, but not for the purpose of passing judgment on his opinions. One person has faith that he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats vegetables only. The one who eats is not to regard with contempt the one who does not eat, and the one who does not eat is not to judge the one who

eats, for God has accepted him. Who are you to judge the servant of another? To his own master he stands or falls; and he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand. (Romans 14:1-4)

Here's the essence of what Paul is saying: For transformed believers in Christ, there is unity in essentials, diversity in nonessentials, and love in all things. That's the formula for unity in the body of Christ.

Now, I'm pretty sure most people would agree with that.

But the disagreements usually come in when believers are trying to determine what are the essentials and what are the nonessentials. What must we believe to be considered part of the body of Christ?

The Greek word for these doctrines is *kerugma*, that which is preached or proclaimed to the world. Some of these include the pre-existence of Christ; the virgin birth of Christ; the perfect life of Christ; the atoning death of Christ; His bodily resurrection, ascension, and second coming.

Paul walks us through many of these from the very first chapter of Romans. So if you want a good idea of what the *kerugma* is, read Romans from the beginning.

The point I'm making here is that there *are* absolutes—areas where the Bible has spoken clearly and it's a closed issue. There are essential doctrinal beliefs.

But when it comes to nonessentials, there's diversity. These are issues where Scripture doesn't speak specifically—like how to manage alcoholic beverages, exactly what defines “modesty,” different Bible translations, worship music style, and so on.

So what I want to do is give you three guiding principles Paul shows us here in Romans chapter 14, for remaining unified even when we disagree on nonessentials of the faith. Here's the first one:

Accept one another

Growing up in First Baptist Church of Laurel, Mississippi, we had a fantastic and faithful pastor by the name of L. G. Gates. He baptized me and led our Body faithfully for many years.

Well, he was invited to a Presbyterian church one day, and Communion was served while he was there. So he took it—real wine, not juice as found in Baptist churches.

Many people in our congregation were outraged when they found out. They had a meeting of the deacons to see if they were going to throw our pastor out of the church for drinking Communion wine at a Presbyterian church.

So there are all kinds of problems like these that come in, and Paul has given us instructions here on the nonessentials. He says simply, we are to accept one another.

Now, the issue here was different than what the New Testament church in Galatia faced. In Galatians, Paul is addressing a doctrinal problem between Jewish and Gentile believers. Gentiles were becoming Christians, and a group of Jews had risen up that was telling them they had to become Jews to be accepted in the Body.

But Paul dealt with the issue directly and told the Galatians that no, Gentiles absolutely do not have to become Jewish in order to join the church. In fact,

there was a whole council convened in Acts 15 to rule decisively on the issue and hand down the decision that Christians do not have to become Jews.

It was a turning point for the Church.

So in the nonessentials, we're to accept one another in the faith. But Paul takes it a step further in his next point.

Don't judge one another

Two great men of faith preached in London during the Victorian era: Joseph Parker and Charles Spurgeon. Both of them pastored very large churches, and they became good friends and even exchanged pulpits from time to time.

But then division crept in when Spurgeon found out that Joseph Parker had been going to the theater—a big taboo for Christians during that era. So he used his pulpit one Sunday to castigate Parker for going to the theater. How could he, as a Christian, do such a thing?

Well, when Parker heard about it, he turned on Spurgeon and said, “How can Spurgeon say anything about me going to the theater? He smokes cigars!”

So the press went to Spurgeon and said, “Pastor, is it really true you smoke cigars?”

He said, “Yes, I smoke cigars, but I don't smoke to excess.”

So the reporter asked, “What is excess?”

And Spurgeon said, “No more than two at a time!”

Who was right? Parker? Spurgeon? Or were both of them wrong?

What's the answer here? Issues like these can get cloudy very quickly. That's why Paul gives us a guiding principle for judging others' behavior in Romans 14:5-6:

One person regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind. He who observes the day, observes it for the Lord, and he who eats, does so for the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who eats not, for the Lord he does not eat, and gives thanks to God.

You can accept someone begrudgingly. You can invite them into your home or your church, yet behind their backs you're talking about them and slandering them. That attitude is detrimental to the unity Christ wants for His people.

So when it comes to these nonessentials, Paul is telling us here simply to give others the benefit of the doubt. Unless you have some compelling reason to disbelieve their intentions, trust that they've taken time to seek the Lord's will and are acting based upon His guidance.

Now, let's look at Paul's next point on unity.

Don't trip your brother or sister

I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but to him who thinks anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean. For if because of food your brother is hurt, you are no longer walking according to love. Do not destroy with your food him for whom Christ died. (Romans 14:14-15)

What Paul's saying here is that it's destructive to our unity when we put a stumbling block in a fellow

Christian's way. Now, I hear this verse quoted all the time with regards to drinking—which is right. But there are other ways you can cause your brother or sister to stumble.

Take, for example, the situation of a man or woman whom you know struggles with overeating. Now, if you were to invite them over to your home, unity tells us that you're to be conscious of what you offer them.

And it's not just in food or drink. This unity principle leads us to be sensitive to any struggle someone might be having. And the overarching guideline is simple: love always wins. If you have a choice between expressing your Christian freedom and showing love, your freedoms come second.

That brings us to Paul's final, and perhaps most important, point on this subject.

Build up one another

A number of years back, our church had a singles Bible study class taught by a very handsome fellow. He was a good teacher and led the class very well.

Well, a young girl who had just accepted Christ and was new in the faith decided to join his class. So this guy asked the girl out on a date. It was the first time she had ever gone out with a Christian. They hit it off and decided to go on a second date... then a third.

And on that third date, they slept together.

Can you imagine how confused that girl must have been? Here she was, new in her faith, and expecting to go out with a guy who will lead her in honoring Christ in their relationship. It was such a sad situation.

So what would have been the unifying thing to do in this situation? Let's look at what Paul has to say:

So then we pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another. Do not tear down the work of God for the sake of food. All things indeed are clean, but they are evil for the man who eats and gives offense.
(Romans 14:19-20)

The most unifying thing we can do when it comes to the nonessentials is ask the question, "How can I build up this other person?"

This young man wasn't sinning by going out with this girl. But imagine if he had stopped to think after the first date, *Okay, is this relationship on a trajectory to build us up or tear us down?*

He probably would have made some better decisions that wouldn't have led them down the wrong path they took.

Unity in essentials. Diversity in nonessentials. But in all things, *love*.

Whether we like it or not, the world is watching how we love one another in the body of Christ. Let's make them amazed at the Spirit-empowered love we show one another. We accept; we don't judge; we're not a stumbling block; and we build one another up.

Did I taste that wine in Capernaum? Man, I wanted to ... just to have a taste of the wine of Jesus. But I didn't - and not because of that temperance lecture I received. That made me want to do it even more!

But why didn't I? Because right across the aisle was a couple who I knew had been struggling with

alcohol addiction their entire lives. It had caused them so much hardship in their marriage. And I knew it was a struggle for them. So while I was 100 percent free to taste that wine, I declined for the sake of building up my friends.

In all things, love.

I'm convinced that if we'll live by that principle, our churches will be unshakably unified by the power of the Spirit.

For our last week in this study, let's look at what happens when our transformed lives overflow into the world.

Week 6

A Tale of Two Cities:
Giving Hope to the Hopeless

I came across an article a while back about the Hope Diamond. It's one of the largest and most famous diamonds in the world, and today it makes its home at the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, D.C.

Like most objects at the Smithsonian, the Hope Diamond is kept under bright lights and unbelievable security. But when they shut the lights off, the diamond has an unusual quality and brilliance that makes it actually glow in the dark.

Hope shining in the darkness—what a great illustration!

As I look at the cities and towns across our nation, there's so much darkness. And at the same time, there's such great opportunity for hope to shine in that darkness.

But sadly, communities across America are closer akin to the Charles Dickens novel, *A Tale of Two Cities*.

You've probably heard how that story begins:

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way—in short...

Whether we want to admit it or not, our country is a tale of two cities. You have one segment experiencing the best of times. There's prosperity, affluence, hope, and peace. That's one city.

Then there's another segment—a city experiencing the worst of times. This is the part of America characterized by poverty, hopelessness, chaos, and crime. It's in the ghettos and the inner cities across our nation.

And the contrast between these two cities has never been starker.

So what's being done about this problem? Well, the United States spends more than \$600 billion every year on welfare programs. Yet, the overall well-being of impoverished men and women has essentially remained unchanged, or gotten worse, for decades.

The numbers speak for themselves!

In 1965, the poverty rate in the U.S. was 15.2 percent, with 20 million living below the poverty line. And today, the poverty rate is 15.1 percent with more than 40 million in that category. That comes out to around 15 million children living in poverty.

Throwing money at the problem is simply not helping. So what can we do?

I saw an interview not long ago where a guy took a camera and a microphone into the inner cities of Houston. He walked up to people in the middle of the day and asked them, "What are you doing? Why are you here?"

No one could give a coherent answer.

That's because so many of these suffering people simply have no purpose for their lives. Their goal in life is simply to continue existing.

And it's hard to blame them. This mind-set has stacked up generation after generation. Most of them have never been taught differently!

Now, there are two extremes on how we can deal with this issue. One is to just do what we've been doing—throw more money at it. This provides some temporary relief, but does little or nothing in the long term.

The other extreme is just taking all the money away and letting these people find work for themselves. But these people have no marketable skills, and many of them are felons who can't get a job. What would we have them do?

I believe both of these extremes are radically wrong. But there is an answer to how you and I, as transformed believers in Christ, can compassionately respond to the issue of poverty.

Let's look at Romans 15:1-2 where the apostle Paul gives you and me some guidance on this critical issue:

Now we who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength and not just please ourselves. Each of us is to please his neighbor for his good, to his edification.

Now, if you have a car, a place to call home, and can read the words on this page, you're the "strong" category here.

You and I are on the top side of the economic spectrum in the United States, and this is talking to us and telling us we're to "bear the weaknesses of those without strength." That's a good place to start.

And we don't just do it so we can feel good (though helping truly does feel good), but we do it for the good of our neighbor with the goal of—don't miss this—his edification.

So what does it mean to edify our neighbors? It means our job is to help build them up. And we can only know how to build them up when we begin to understand what it's like to walk in their shoes.

That means getting out of our world, getting in the trenches, and sharing their struggles with them.

This goes back to the same principle we discussed last week: acceptance. Look at Romans 15:7, *“Therefore, accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God.”*

This is how we glorify God when it comes to helping the poor. It's not just tipping our hats by helping out now and then. It's using our strength to take the weakness of the weak upon ourselves.

And the hard truth is that the vast majority of help given to suffering people—even that given by most churches today—is little more than a tip of the hat.

Almost nothing is being done to get to the bottom of the inner-city poverty problem which has left thousands fearful, hopeless, and with no real chance at a better life. It's a gaping, cancerous wound we're trying to treat with a Band-Aid.

Fearful... hopeless... no chance. That kind of sounds like us before we had Jesus, doesn't it? But what Paul is saying here is that just as Christ accepted us when we were hopeless, we're to accept others in their hopelessness!

Now, how in the world do we do that? How do you and I today bear the burden of the weak? How do we shine the light of hope in the midst of so much darkness?

Again, it's all on the basis of love.

I struck up a conversation with a young African-American man named James several years ago. I told him what I do, and he told me he had a vision for a ministry in inner-city Houston.

So he started coming to our church to just pray in the parking lot. Week after week, he'd be out there praying and asking God to give him a vision for a church among the urban poor.

I've kept up with James through the years—who is now called Bishop James. He pastors a big church in the inner city.

One day, some people from our church and I had the chance to go visit his ministry and see what his church is doing.

We met with James, talked awhile, and I told him my burden for the urban poor. I said, “James, I need to know more about what you're doing here. And most importantly, I want to know if there are any answers to the struggles these people are facing.”

And he answered me by telling me a story.

You see, just a few days before, he had some ministry going on in one of the toughest areas of Houston. It's a place where slum apartments stretch for miles and miles—as far as you can see. These one-bedroom efficiencies are filled with single mothers, drug dealers, and criminals.

James was standing outside with his ministry teams around him. He was giving them instructions and he heard an ice cream truck in the distance. He looked around, expecting to see kids pouring out of

the apartments to come get ice cream, but none came out.

Not one.

Then he came to a sobering realization. These kids don't have enough money to buy a 50-cent Popsicle.

So he chased down the truck, asked the driver to come back, and told him, "Park right here. I'm gonna buy ice cream for any kid that wants it."

First one kid came, then two. Within minutes, the line was 16 or 17 kids long. And one thing James noticed was that almost every one of those kids had their head down. They were looking at the ground, as if embarrassed somehow.

The kids went up to the truck, pointed at what they wanted, and then James would order.

Then he told one of the kids, "Just tell the man what number you want."

That's when he understood why they had their heads down. Most of them couldn't even read the numbers on the side of the truck.

4, 8, 15, 19... they didn't know what those were.

This wasn't in some third-world country. *This is happening in America!*

James took me to this neighborhood one day to show me those slums for myself. We got there Friday afternoon when the kids were getting off the bus. And not one of them was greeted by an adult when they got home.

I looked across the street, and there were some guys leaning over the rail of a second-story apartment.

They were watching everything. James nudged me and said, “Those guys... they’re ‘Bloods.’ The gangs run everything here.”

That’s when I began to understand the kind of hopelessness these people face every day.

What’s happening in the inner cities? Hope is crushed. And when hope is crushed, it’s a whole different world.

So what can you and I do about it?

Well, ask yourself this question: If you had all the power and all the resources in the world, where would *you* begin to bring hope?

Do you think you could make a difference in the lives of those single moms? Do you think you could clean up those neighborhoods? Could you bring them the hope of salvation?

Sure you could!

Now back to reality. You don’t have all the resources in the world. But you have some. And while you can’t make a difference for everyone, you can do it for someone.

So that’s number one—you can bring hope to someone.

Number two, find the champions that are in these areas and join them. Give your resources. Give your time. Get involved in helping them get the word out to churches, Christian business leaders, and politicians who can help bring about real change to the area.

One way this change is happening is through vocational training. Organizations are teaching people how to do things like work on cars, do carpen-

try, or pour asphalt. And this is making a tremendous difference!

And number three, we need to turn loose God's people as mentors, as counselors, and as helpers in these neighborhoods. The problem here isn't resources. The resources are in your life and my life. The problem is getting the resources we already have to those who need them.

I look at the body of Christ today, and I see a wealth of potential for people to become surrogate fathers to fatherless kids. I see people who can go spend time with boys and girls whose parents won't give them the time of day. I see men and women who can accept a young child into their lives and disciple them in God's truth.

Where there's desperation, poverty, despair, and hopelessness, we have the power to make a difference by shining God's light of hope in our dark world!

I don't know how it will end. But I know where we can begin. As transformed believers in Christ, we have more power inside of us than any relief effort our government could ever drum up.

So let's get in the trenches. Let's cut out a space among the hopeless and give them hope. Let's share with them about the redemption they can have in Christ.

When we do, I know beyond a shadow of a doubt the transformation that's happening within us will overflow into the world.

The night is nearing an end. The day is coming. So let's put on the Lord Jesus Christ—our armor of light—and point the world to Him.

A Final Word

What does God want from you and me?

Just one thing: all of us.

It's so basic. Yet for many, it's so difficult. That's because it means putting ourselves second. It means getting out of the driver's seat and letting Him decide where we're going.

And you know what? I've never met a man or a woman who's completely achieved it. Every single one of us is a work in progress.

Yet day by day, and even hour by hour, if you willfully submit to your heavenly Father, you'll discover a brand-new life that is remarkably different from how you used to live.

And it will completely transform you.

It will change how you see yourself. It will change how you love others. It will change how you live under authority. And, it will change how you respond to the world's need.

I want to lead you in a prayer as we close this brief book. And I want you to pray earnestly and diligently that this would be absolutely true in your life.

Lord Jesus, I give You my body. Renew my mind. Help me to discover the new paths You want me to walk. Remind me that the old things have passed away and I am becoming new day by day. I'm a new creation in You. I am being transformed from the inside out every day. And because of that, You can do anything through me.

Do you want a new life? It's already yours. You just need to trade in your old one. Lay it down at the feet of Jesus. Make yourself a living sacrifice.

Friend, the old life is gone. The new is here.

And it's waiting for you!

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