

Reflection on the Scripture: Romans 12:1-8

[\[The video of the reflection.\]](#)

Very early on in my computer career, I was given a project that had stalled. It was a retirement planner that was going to come out on 3.5" disks. It was back when dinosaurs roamed the earth. I got it done, working such crazy hours that I fell asleep during the car ride back from the pressing plant, where I went with the head of quality assurance with the master disks.

As a reward, I guess, I was given a much bigger project that had stalled and a team of four people to manage. The first project I had completed pretty much by brute force. But this one was going to have to be different. There was too much work, it was too complex. I had to rely on the folks who worked for me as well as 70 or so other engineers and designers to get it done.

Those four people who worked for me were really amazing. They had come from entry level positions around the organization, with very specific, very deep knowledge in their fields. They saw this assignment as their chance to move up in a big organization and they were going to do everything they could to take advantage of the chance they had been given.

But for that to happen, I had to stop doing what had made me successful in the previous project, and much of my career beforehand, and I had to rely on my team. And once I figured out my job was to remove as many obstacles from their paths as I could, I had to encourage, cajole, influence, finesse them into relying on each other and on me. Which is a stupid thing for an individual contributor to do in a hierarchical, competitive organization. But they did it. And by hard work and charm and a certain amount of collusion during demonstrations to the top brass of the company to keep the funding flowing at key junctures, we shipped that product too, although it shipped via the internet, back when the internet didn't *do* anything, just offered marketing materials, chat rooms and naughty pictures.

In today's reading from Romans, Paul says *Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds* (Romans 12:2). *Do not be conformed to this world* means don't change your external self while leaving the inside unchanged.¹ Think of your teenage self, you conformed to the world around you while your inside self was totally unsure of what it was doing. Or when you dress up for a special occasion, wearing clothes that aren't really you. It's that kind of external change. *But be transformed by the renewing of your*

¹ William Barclay, *The Letter to the Romans*. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975), 157.

minds means to change your mindset,² change your inner self,³ even as your external appearances don't change much at all.

That's what happened to me when I took over the team. My outer self didn't change, but my inner self, how I saw what my job was, completely changed. I think all of us have an experience where we realize that if we're going to get through it, we have to stop focusing on the outer and really rearrange what's inside us. We go into combat or become a parent or get a divorce or run for office or start collecting mountains and we realize that the way we look at the world is going to have to change if we are going to be able to meet the challenge in front of us.

I think Paul is building off that common human experience to get folks to see what is available to them as followers of Jesus Christ. This world that we are not supposed to conform to is a competitive, hierarchical, your-gain-is-my-loss kind of place. It's definitely dangerous to rely on other people because they routinely drop the ball. We can't even get them to wear masks. Small wonder it takes so many changes of our external self to just fit in so we can get on with what we're trying to do.

Paul wants us to take a big step back, a deep breath, and put that burden down. Renew our minds with the grace we have already been given and we'll find an amazing life waiting for us.

We are already holy, made so by Jesus Christ⁴ and the mercy of God (Romans 12:1). We have been given gifts by God, not least of which is the ability to discern the will of God. An all knowing, all loving God who is wide open to us understanding the divine intention for the world!?!⁵ We have been given a community made of all sorts of people, all with different gifts. No one is superfluous,⁶ we need all those gifts. And those gifts, prophecy, teaching, compassion, all those gifts are ones that we need a community to identify.

I firmly believe God gives all of us gifts. But when a talent, a skill, is God given, it's like a humongous, exquisitely cut diamond in a glass of water. We can't see it. Or we can see it and it's just so easy for us that we dismiss it as anything

² Beverly Gaventa, "Proper 16: Romans 12:1-8" in *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV – Year A*, ed. Walter Brueggemann et al. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 457.

³ Barclay, 158.

⁴ John Knox, "The Epistle to the Romans: Exegesis," vol. 9 in *The Interpreter's Bible: The Holy Bible in the King James and Revised Standard Versions with General Articles and Introduction, Exegesis, Exposition for Each Book of the Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1954), 581.

⁵ Gaventa, 457.

⁶ Anders Nygren, *Commentary on Romans*. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1949), 423.

special. I can say now that I was a great manager, but I was terrible at teaching anyone how to manage. Because it was so intuitive to me that when people would ask me for advice in managing their own staff, I had to learn how to keep the eye roll out of my voice. “It’s perfectly obvious what you should do ...” We need the community to say, “You know, you’re really good at explaining stuff, you should do more of that.” Because otherwise we literally dismiss the gifts we’ve been given by God.

When we use our gifts to help each other, when we rely on each other, we are living the life God is calling us to. We are the living sacrifices, the living offerings that Paul talks about (Romans 12:1). And the particularly cool thing is by living that life of gifts we’ve been given by God’s grace, we don’t have to sand off all the unique edges and ridges that make us who we are in order to conform to the hierarchical, competitive, I-got-mine-too-bad-for-you world we’re surrounded by.

In fact, this reality is so awesome that Paul points out that we need to be chill about it. *Don’t think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned* (Romans 12:3). Just ‘cause God gave you a gift, don’t get all big headed. Get out there and share the Good News, and teach and give and be compassionate. Get on with the work. You’ve been given a gift from God. But so has everyone else. And if you have a little extra time on your hands, then help them develop their gifts.

Those two early projects in my career? I will always remember them, because they taught me about the power of transforming my mindset. Only much later, over drinks, did I find out that neither one was ever meant to ship. Both of those projects, indeed the whole team I was a part of, was meant to put in a great effort and show it couldn’t be done. Because what we were doing was clearly impossible. So maybe the transformation Paul’s talking about is the only way to get impossible things done. Maybe grace is what’s needed to resolve all the impossible things we’re facing in this world.