

## Living Word Small Group Study Guide

May 10-16, 2020

Sermon Series: U R The Church

### Week Three: “Virtual is the New Reality”

Study groups can choose to use the daily Scripture readings and associated questions from either the current or previous week’s Daily Study Guide, or to focus on the Scripture reading from Sunday’s sermon. This study guide delves more deeply into the Scripture from the Sunday sermon.

#### **Suggested Opening Prayer:**

*Both the opening and closing prayer are offered as suggestions. Feel free to offer spontaneous prayer instead.*

*Holy Lord, You have ordered this wondrous world, and You know all things in heaven and on earth. Fill our hearts with trust in You, so that by night and by day, at all times and in all seasons, we may, without fear, commit all that we have and hope to Your never-failing love, for both this life and the life to come. We pray through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.*

#### **Sermon Series Theme:**

Where is God leading us as a church? In light of what we’ve gone through as a community/country/world, what are the ways God is moving us to be a new or renewed church?

#### **This Week’s Sermon Theme:**

The Internet learns its place in our lives – not dominant, but a tool. Shopping, calling, ministry, and theaters are all gone. Is Sunday morning gone too? The church is called to new ways all throughout history. God leads us in new directions to bring the same message to an ever-changing people. We are transformed into the mind of Christ in order to discern the will of God – and God’s will is that the world would know Christ. How we get there requires a mind/heart/soul/strength change in direction... a course correction, but a change all the same.

**Sunday Scripture Reading:** Romans 12:2 (A group member should read the passage aloud)

#### **For Group Discussion:**

##### ***What does the text actually SAY?***

*The goal of this discussion is to make sure group members understand the actual content of the passage.*

What does Paul insist his readers not conform to? (12:2)

What part of us is to be renewed or transformed? (12:2)

What is the ultimate purpose of this transformation – to be able to do what? (12:2)

### **What questions does the text raise for us?**

*The goal of this discussion is to allow group members to respond to their own emotions and reactions related to the passage. Questions are suggestions, but open discussion is encouraged. These are “I wonder” questions that the group might want to pursue together.*

We probably wonder if there are specific things Paul has in mind that he calls “the pattern of this world.”

Noticing the words Paul uses, we might wonder about the difference between “conforming” and “transforming.”

We might wonder what the “renewing of the mind” really looks like!

We might wonder, what does it mean to “test and approve” God’s will?

We might ask, is Paul seriously suggesting that we can know God’s will? How is that possible?

And finally, what kinds of things does God’s will really care about? Does God really have a “will” concerning every little detail of how I live my life, like what color I decide to wear today? What does it really mean to be transformed such that we can know God’s will?

### **Commentary on the text:**

*The goal of this section is to provide further background that provides context for the content of the passage.*

See also: Romans 12:1; Jeremiah 31:33

Romans is a deeply theological letter. A deep study of it was transformational in Martin Luther’s understanding of salvation by faith, and it was strongly influential upon John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, as well, as he found his heart was “strangely warmed” at hearing a sermon upon Romans. The first eleven chapters of the letter are where Paul has given his lengthy theological exposition. Now, beginning in chapter twelve, Paul turns to more practical advice. It is the “so what?” response to everything that has come before – which is why the chapter begins with the word “Therefore”!

This is also why the verse we are studying this week uses verbs that are imperatives – “do this” verbs, verbs of command. These are not mere suggestions, but things that Paul insists his readers in Rome must do in response to the theology of the preceding eleven chapters. The first verse of the chapter had given the first imperative – “offer your bodies as living sacrifices.” He calls this a “spiritual act of worship.” The Jewish reader would have understood that what Paul was commanding was a change in their understanding of “sacrifice.” Rather than “sacrifice” involving taking a bird or an animal to the Temple to offer to God to make peace with God, the Christian’s “sacrifice” is the offering of a daily commitment of our entire selves to the work of God. The Gentile reader would see in Paul’s words a way to understand this new Christian way of life, without a sacrificial ritual per se, as a life of SELF-giving – there may not be a rite of sacrifice, like nearly every other religion they were aware of had, but we give our bodily selves, and that is what is pleasing to God.

The next imperative Paul issues is “do not conform to the pattern of this world.” Paul recognizes that there are forces at work in the world that affect the way we live and the choices we make – things like

social groups, cultural norms, and traditions. These “patterns” exert a real force upon us – they really do mold our character and our conduct. By giving us an imperative, a command, to stop conforming to this pattern, though, Paul suggests that we have within us the ability to allow or disallow these forces to have an influence upon us. We can, and must, choose to “stop conforming” to this pattern!

Notice, though, that the alternative proposed is NOT something we actively choose to do! Whereas we are advised “do not conform” (something WE do, an active process), we are also advised to “be transformed” – a PASSIVE process! We are not the ones responsible for our transformation – rather, we are passive recipients of a transformation that happens TO us! In Paul’s theology, we have control over what we choose to “conform” to. Transformation is altogether different. It grows from within, as God works to change us from the inside out. It is wholly an act of God’s grace. Still, this transformation is something we must cooperate with, something we have to allow to happen – and something that only happens as we choose to not conform to the patterns of this world that are opposed to it.

Paul says this transformation happens through a “renewal of the mind.” Within the idea of “renewal” are ideas of both continuity and change. While “who we are” does not fundamentally change, our attitudes do. It is still “our mind,” but it is made new, with a new perspective on the world. The Greek word that Paul uses here to refer to the renewal of our “minds” refers primarily to our rationality, our reason, and our “inner world.” It is not the same as our “spirit,” which usually refers to our sensitivity to, and response to, God, but it is an essential part of humanity that has to do with our deepest, inner selves. It gets at what the prophet Jeremiah meant when he said a day was coming when God’s Word would be “written on our hearts” (Jeremiah 31:33). With this renewal of the mind, this re-orientation of our inner world, we become more willing to “offer our bodies as living sacrifices” – it is all of us, mind and body, that is to be transformed by God’s grace.

This transformation has a purpose, though – to ascertain the will of God! The Jews in Paul’s day were confident that they knew what the will of God was. In Judaism, to do the will of God was to live according to the law, in full obedience to all its commandments and ordinances. But if Christ has fulfilled the law, and Christians now live by grace and not by law (a fundamental point of the first eleven chapters of Romans), then what does it mean for Christians to do the will of God? For Paul, it meant moving from a dependency on written formulations of what is or is not permissible to an internal awareness of God’s will. Through a transformation that God accomplishes, we move to dependence on God Himself, who speaks into the heart of each believer through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. This willing submission of the self to complete dependence on God, not to dependence on ritual and law, is the necessary foundation for responsible Christian living. God is changing us, from the inside out, to become obedient followers of Christ. Paul will spell out more specifics on what this means in the remaining chapters of his letter – but the basis of his argument has been established. Stop conforming to the pattern of the world, and be transformed by the power of God renewing your mind, so that you can become living, bodily sacrifices!

### **Final Thoughts for Discussion:**

*The goal of this section is to get people thinking and talking about how the passage should affect their behavior after they leave the group.*

What attitudes, traditions, cultural norms, or actions do you see around you that are examples of “the pattern of this world”?

Do you have a sense of actively choosing not to conform to them?

As you think back over your Christian journey, do you have a sense of your mind being renewed? What examples of this could you cite?

How have you seen attitudes, traditions, and cultural norms changing as a result of the COVID-19 crisis?

Are there any of these changes that you think we should not conform to? Are there any of these changes that can help put us in a better place to be transformed by God?

**Suggested Closing Prayer:**

*Holy God, help us to offer our bodies as living sacrifices. Show us the places in our lives where we continue to conform to the patterns of this world and open us to the transformational power of Your love. Renew our minds, that we might know Your holy and perfect will. We pray in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.*