

Take your Bible and turn to Paul's letter to the church in Rome, Romans 8. Tonight I'm going to start by reading three verses, and the rest of what we will talk about tonight is a commentary on those verses. This is Paul writing to the church in Rome. Rome is kind of the center of the world, and this little group of God's redeemed people have been together. God has called them out. They're meeting and worshiping and so Paul's writing this letter to teach them and correct them and to spur them on towards love and good works. So, where we are picking it up, Paul has been encouraging them on how to persevere in the face of suffering. Persecution and suffering was a real thing for these early Christians. They're being fed to the lions and persecuted by the federal government. Paul himself would eventually be beheaded by the Roman government, history would say, and the Apostle Peter would be crucified upside down in Rome. Verse 29 is what we are going to hone in on tonight. Romans 8:28-30, "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified."

When I found out a couple of weeks ago that I was going to be preaching, what I thought I could do with this time, the way I could redeem it and use it to the advantage of our campus is to simply take this opportunity to talk about why we as a campus are going through the Gospel and Life study. This week our entire campus, all of our home groups, all of our Bible studies, a lot of our leadership teams started an eight-week Bible study called "Gospel and Life." So that's what I wanted us to talk about tonight, to give us a little bit of clarity, a little bit of focus, frame it a bit more and encourage us as to why we have decided as a campus to go through this study together. As we prayed last week, there was a number of things we brought up about why we've chosen to do this study and why we would choose to do any study. But we found that there is one overarching reason that we're doing this study. The overarching reason is simply for your spiritual formation and for my spiritual formation, that Christ would be formed in us.

Here's the definition of spiritual formation that I'm going to use. This is taken from a book by Kenneth Boa. It's actually a textbook, but it had some great definitions in there. Spiritual formation is "the grace-driven developmental process in which the soul grows in conformity to the image of Jesus Christ." Spiritual formation is motivated and driven by grace. It's not something we do out of guilt or our desire to be right and to be reconciled with God. It's in response to us being made right and reconciled to God through Jesus Christ. It's our response to grace. It's a grace-driven and motivated developmental process. In other words, spiritual formation is the progressive developmental process by which you and I, through the power of the Holy Spirit, are made more and more like Jesus Christ. The synonymous phrase for this that's spoken around here all the time is progressive sanctification. It's the process where the Holy Spirit is making us more like Jesus. As you read the writings of the early pastors and apostles, you'll see that this was their burden for the church. These men understood and read and listened to the teachings of Jesus. They took those teachings and worked them out into pastoral ministry. What you find is an overwhelming desire in them for the church to be made more like Jesus Christ, both individual members and the corporate church. This is most clearly seen in the Apostle Paul's letters to some of the churches of his day. You see this come out in Paul's writing as you've read his letters.

Let's go back to Romans 8 and read it again through the lenses of spiritual formation. Paul wrote this, and he said, "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good for those who are called according to his purpose."

If you're in a hard set of circumstances right now, just hear that from the Holy Spirit. "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good for those who are called according to his purpose." Then Paul said, "For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers." Here's what he predestined them for...to be conformed to the image of His Son, in order that He might be the firstborn among many." Simply put, what this Scripture teaches us is that God's ultimate intention for those he foreknew, predestined, called, glorified and justified is nothing less than that we become conformed to the image of His Son. That He's going to make us more and more like Jesus Christ until we'll all be resurrected with new bodies and we'll be there with Him.

If you think about this, it's staggering because you and I live in the trenches of life. It's very rare that you and I are mindful enough to really ask the Lord to help us think through our lives from a bird's eye view to see what He's doing. We're just in the midst of it every day. We just can't see beyond our circumstances, but if we could, this is what we'd see. This is what God is up to in all the circumstances and the ins and outs of life. This is what He's doing. This is His will for our life and it's staggering that this has been what He has predestined us to do. If you're a Christian, this is what God decided to do with your life. He decided to conform us to the image of His Son. That Jesus would be the firstborn of many brothers. We'd look like Him, act like Him, talk like Him, think like Him, depend on God like Him. You see this over again working itself into Paul's ministry. In Colossians 1:28-29, Paul said this, "Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me." So Paul is saying, "This is why I'm willing to be shipwrecked or thrown in jail because of my hope for you as a church to be mature in Jesus Christ." In Galatians 4:19, I can almost tell that Paul is not married, at least when he wrote this, because I don't think he would have used this example if his wife had given birth, he says, "My little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you." Can you imagine that picture in the first century? There's no epidural in the 1st century. This picture is tough. It's explicit. He's using it on purpose. He's saying, "I'm in that kind of anguish about what? That Jesus Christ be formed in you." Spiritual formation is that you'd be conformed to the image of God's Son. This is what the Christian life is all about. This is the journey that every individual Christian and every local church is on. But most Christians don't understand this. I'm sure some of you have been taught this and people have disciple you and walked along side of you, but many of you have never heard anything like this. It's a brand new thing. It's confusing for many Christians.

I picked up a book in Chicago about a young man's church where a man came to faith and once he came to faith, he hit this point where he was really confused in his journey. This pastor said this, "James had now run into a puzzle. He'd attended the church where he had that wonderful life changing experience. He'd learned a lot about God, he'd learned, too, about himself. He'd been taught, quite correctly, that God loved him more than he could ever imagine, indeed so much that God sent Jesus to die for him." The preachers he had listened to had insisted that nothing we humans can make us acceptable to God now or in the ultimate future, but everything is a gift of God's sheer grace and generosity. James had drunk all this in like someone who'd walked ten miles on a hot day and was suddenly given a large glass of cold water. It was wonderful news and he was living by it, but he found himself now staring at a big question mark. What am I here for? God loves me, yes. He's transformed my life so that I find I want to pray, I want to worship, I want to read the Bible to abandon the old self destructive ways I used to behave. That's great. Clearly God wants me to tell other people about this good news so they can find it for themselves. It feels a bit strange and I'm not sure I'm very good at it, but I'm doing the very best I can. Obviously all this comes with a great promise that one day I'll be with God forever. I know I'll die one day, but Jesus guarantees that everybody who trusts Him will live with Him in heaven. Here's the puzzle, he's asking himself this question. "What am I here for now? What happens after you believe?"

This singer at a concert I went to was telling about a song she had written after she had watched Cinderella. At the end of the film a thought struck her that had never struck her before. Her thought was, what happens after you get your

“happily every after?” What happens next? The pastor in the book went on to say, “many Christians have so emphasized the need for conversion for the opening act of faith and commitment that they have a big gap in their vision of what being a Christian is all about. It’s as though they’re standing on one side of a deep, wide river looking across to the further bank. On this bank you declare your faith, on the opposite bank is the final result of salvation it self. But the question is what are people supposed to do in the meantime? Simply stand here and wait. Is there no bridge between the two?”

The bridge is spiritual formation. The bridge is being conformed in the image of Jesus Christ. That’s what’s next. That’s what happens after we believe. This is what all of the Christian life is all about. My mentor, Elliot Green, gave me this, which really helped me. “Romans 8:29 that we talked about, “For those whom he foreknew He also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.” The context of this happening is a family of faith, hope and love and in the middle you have the Son, Jesus Christ. We’re being conformed to the image of the Son. Around the circle you have all these gifts that God has given us as a means to get there. It’s a means of transforming us and conforming us to the image of His Son. So you’ll see at the top is the Holy Spirit that Jesus has left us. He leads us and comforts us and does marvelous things in the life of our church and in our lives as individuals. Scripture, submission, the sacraments, baptism, the Lord’s Supper, supplication, sound doctrine, shepherds, pastors, other believers, the sacred assembly, this gathering we have each week, stewardship, suffering, all these things are gifts that God has given us and means by which He does this work of conforming us to His Son.

This helped me because it gets so messy and muddled. This is really simple, to think about my life and the life of our church in that way. That this is what God’s up to was really helpful to me. C.S. Lewis has some great quotes. He said, “This, giving our whole selves to Christ and becoming like Him are the whole of Christianity. There’s nothing else.” It’s so easy to get muddled about this. It’s easy to think that the church has a lot of different objects: education, building, mission, holding services; just as it’s easy to think that the state has a lot of different objects: military, political, economic, etc. But in a way, Lewis says, “things are much simpler than that. The state exists simply to promote and protect the ordinary happiness of human beings in this life. In the same way, the church exists for nothing else but to draw men into Christ and to make them little Christs. If they’re not doing that, all the cathedrals, clergy, missions, sermons and even the teaching of the Bible itself are simply a waste of time. God became man for no other purpose.”

The tension, of course, if this is true, if this is God’s will for your life it means that God is after all of our lives. If what He is about is transforming our lives, then He actually intends to transform our whole lives. That is frightening because as the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer famously said, “If Christ bids a man, He bids him to come and die to himself.” When He says come, to mean come follow me, what He’s saying is “I want all of you and I intend to have all of you and transform all of you.” You and I are not prone to want to die to ourselves. This is the tension. If this is God’s will, that’s a great thing up until we actually have to surrender to Him. That is why spiritual formation is hard. We want to rebel and keep God at an arms length away. In fact, C.S. Lewis would go on to say that “we act like an honest man paying our taxes.” He said, “You pay the tax man but he does so in the hopes that he’ll have enough left over for him to still live on.” He’s saying we treat God like that. We want to surrender to Him, but we do that hoping that deep down He’ll let us keep that little part of our lives that we are unwilling to trust Him with. Lewis said that’s really the one thing that Jesus Christ said you can’t do. If you do live that way, one of two things will happen. Either you’re going to give up being a Christian altogether or the more you walk with God, the more your conscience will press on you and the more you’ll know you’re supposed to submit with all areas of your life.

Remember the story of the rich young ruler? It’s a great example of this. He comes to Jesus Christ and says, “I want to follow you, tell me what I have to do to follow You?” and Jesus says, “Tell me about your life?” Jesus discerned that money was really his god. He said, “I’ll tell you what you have to do to come follow me. Give all of your money to the

poor and then come follow me and give me the rest of your heart." The man went away and seemed sad. He realized he couldn't do that anymore. He left Jesus sad. Lewis would say, "In the end you'll either give up trying to be good altogether because it's too hard to be both, or else you won't and you'll continue to try and live this life where you're doing this for God and then this other thing for yourself. You'll be one of those people who live for other and live in a disgruntled way; always making a martyr with yourself." If you do that you'll become a far greater pest to anyone who has to live with you than you would if you had remained, frankly, selfish.

Christ says, "Give me all. I don't want so much of your time, money or work. I want you. I've not come to torment your natural self but to kill it. I want you." The movie *Man on Fire* is about this man, Denzel Washington, an ex-military person who's just bad. He had some bad experiences, he's an alcoholic and he's depressed. The only job he can find is working for this family in South America. This family hires him to come and be a bodyguard for this little girl played by Dakota Fanning. She tries to get this new body guard to like her and eventually turns his heart. This little girl gets kidnapped and murdered and when Denzel Washington finds out he is enraged. He begins to kill people in the hopes of finding out about what happened to this little girl. Finally, he finds the guys family and he's with the pregnant girlfriend and his brother and has them at gunpoint. He makes them call this guy. The guy tries to barter with Denzel over the phone and Denzel Washington screams into the phone and says, "I don't want your money. I want you."

In a very violent way, God has His Son slaughtered on the cross so he can have all of us; so he can ransom us to Himself. And what He's saying in regards to Spiritual Formation is, "I don't want these little petty sacrifices that you want to give me. I envy your religion. I want you. I want your heart. I want to take your life and conform it to the image of my Son." Unless you think He's doing this as a killjoy, Jesus would say, "come to me and lose your life. You'll actually find it."

Let me ask you this, right now in your journey of spiritual formation, which areas of your life are you most reluctant to surrender to God? If all this is true and all He wants is us, what areas of your life are you most reluctant to surrender to God and why? Is it fear or losing control or comfort? Is it because if you surrender you're somehow afraid that you'll lose the approval of this other person? What areas of your heart and life has the Holy Spirit revealed to you that He wants to make you more like Jesus and you have either ignored Him or outright rebelled and have refused to follow and be obedient? What specific ways do you sense that God wants to conform you to the image of His Son? Whatever your answers are to these questions, this is why we're going through the gospel of life. This is why we're doing this; so God can have more of us than he currently has.

Finally, pray that the Holy Spirit would empower you inwardly. That Christ may dwell in your heart and that you would know the love of Christ and be filled with all God's fullness. Pray also that you may be able to grasp more and more what it means to live out the gospel in your own life through your community and for the benefit of the world. Thank God for the place that you live. Pray for God's peace and prosperity for it and that you would have love for it and its inhabitants.