

Metamorphosis

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[0 : 0 0] Well, behind me will be a picture, in a second, there we go, of a caterpillar. It's actually a particular type of caterpillar. It's called the Parthenos sylvia caterpillar, for those of you who care.

And he's a pretty ugly fellow, don't you think? I mean, as caterpillars go, he's not the most attractive. And he's certainly not something you want to find in your garden, because he's not really good for much except chewing up plants.

Except for one thing. Which is the fact that when our creator designed this particular caterpillar, he never intended for it to stay that way.

He intended that one day, the humble Parthenos sylvia caterpillar would stop being a caterpillar, and would become this. This is called the clipper butterfly, and it's one of the most strikingly beautiful insects that you can find.

And this change from this ugly little stumpy caterpillar to this beautiful butterfly happens through what's called metamorphosis. That's an amazing process that God has built into creation, that literally changes one thing into something completely different.

[1 : 1 4] Well, we learned last week that the process of metamorphosis doesn't only happen to caterpillars, does it? Because we learned the process of metamorphosis is something that God desires of people, too.

That God has built a process of metamorphosis into creation for you and me. He calls us in Romans 12, too, to be transformed by the renewing of our minds.

You'll remember that? Alan mentioned it earlier. In fact, that's how we started our service this morning. But that word, interestingly, the word used for transformed, that we're called to be transformed, do you know what that word is in the Greek?

Metamorphosis. Metamorphosis. Literally. Metamorphosis. God has called us to engage in a process of metamorphosis in this world, in this life.

You see, and just as God never intended for that caterpillar to stay that way, He doesn't intend for you and me to stay the way we are. And that's a big thing we've got to get in our minds this morning.

[2 : 1 7] And that is the reason that God sent Jesus into this world, to begin this process of metamorphosis by changing us from the inside out. You see, when Jesus came to earth to die and to take the punishment for human sin, the most amazing act in history, to take the punishment for your sin if you trust in Him in order to bring you into a relationship with your Creator, He didn't do that so that you can just stay the same.

Did He? He did that so that you can change into something amazing. He did that so that you can change into the likeness of Jesus Christ Himself.

God's plan for you is no less than that. Jesus Himself, you see, is God's intention for what humans should be. And being a Christian, following and trusting Jesus, what it is, is subjecting ourselves to the process of metamorphosis, to become something else, to become what God wants us to be.

And so when we put up our hands and we say, I'm a Christian, I want to be baptized, and we become a Christian, we're putting up our hands and saying, I want to change. It's the same thing. And so one constant in the Christian life is change.

And you've got to get used to that. And the reason, this is vitally important, the reason we come here this morning, the reason we come to church, to sit under God's Word, is so that we can change.

[3 : 49] Church is the cocoon, you see, where we slowly change from one thing into another. And so your goal every Sunday should be that.

You should want to leave this place changed a little bit each Sunday. I wonder if you do. Now the difference, of course, is that where the metamorphosis of a caterpillar into a butterfly takes perhaps a few weeks, the transformation of a person from a sinful, self-absorbed, dying creature into a new eternal child of God fit for heaven.

That change takes a lifetime. And it's also not a process where we just sit in stasis and wait for the change to happen on us. No, we have a role to play in that metamorphosis.

The Bible is quite clear in that. If you want to change, you need to do something about it. God changes you, but you've got a very important role to play in that. And that's why Paul writes what he writes here in Romans in this morning's passage.

Because here he's describing a number of areas in our lives that God wants to change us. See, so this is, God's giving us a leg up. He's giving us a head start because he's telling us exactly what he wants to change in us so that we can work with him to do that.

[5 : 09] And in this morning's passage, he talks about the all-important area of relationships. And here in this passage is God giving us a window in what he wants to do to you and me and how he wants to change our relationships with the people around us.

Because relationships, I mean, you've got to agree with me, relationships are important in life, aren't they? They make life what it is. We can't live without relationships. We're relational creatures.

They're fundamental to life, relationships. You have relationships, whether you like it or not. And they're the relationships that God has put into your life. But what we learn in this passage is that these earthly relationships themselves undergo a dramatic metamorphosis when we become Christians in some very important ways.

And that's what I want us to see this morning. Just essentially two major ways that God is planning to change us in our relationships. And the first of these is sincere love.

God plans to infuse our relationships with sincere love. And so we see that right at the beginning. But that's not to say that before we're Christians, we're incapable of sincere love.

[6 : 24] There's lots of non-Christians who sincerely love. But when we're not Christians, we're also capable of a whole lot of insincere love, aren't we? What Paul's saying here, though, is that one of the marks of gospel transformation in a Christian's life is a move away from insincere forms of love in our lives to the real thing.

And especially for people that we didn't genuinely love before. And that is a mark of God working in our lives. Because let's be honest, it's very easy to love insincerely, isn't it?

And we do it all the time, even without noticing it. To display a kind of a false care for people because it's expected. Or it's polite. Or it's just what you do. I mean, it's betrayed in the way we greet each other, isn't it?

Hey, how are you doing? Nine times out of ten, we don't actually want to know how the person's doing, do we? I mean, let's be honest. That's how we greet each other. How are you doing? But we don't want, if they're doing badly, we don't really want them to tell us and empty all their concerns out on us.

Now, most of the time we ask that, we don't care. I mean, why do you think Facebook gives you the option to unsubscribe from your friend's news feed? Have you ever noticed that? It's so that you can be their friend without really wanting to know anything about them or their lives.

[7 : 42] It's insincere. And the world is full of it. It's everywhere we go. It taints every relationship that we have, this insincere kind of love. But you see, Christian love, says Paul, Christian love isn't like that.

Christians are people being transformed to love others with a sincere love, which the world doesn't really know about, which is very rare.

The world isn't used to that kind of love. Well, this here, this is the cocoon to change us to love that way and then go out into the world and to show them that.

And this is where that transformation process starts. And so we're called to be transformed in how we love, but the transformation process starts right here with the people next to you.

In the Christian community. This here is the training ground where we learn to cultivate this new type of love that we're to take out into the world. It's almost like the practice arena before we go out into the world.

[8 : 47] You have 80 odd people that God has given you to be test cases of love right here. To train you to sincerely love people that you wouldn't ordinarily have loved.

Why do you think church is filled with people who have very little in common in an earthly sense? People from all walks of life. People from all kind of socioeconomic backgrounds. Well, because God deliberately wants to put into your life people that you wouldn't ordinarily have come across.

And that you wouldn't ordinarily have loved. That's why church is so unique and so special. It's not like any other kind of human institution you can come into.

Because any other kind of human institution, whether it be a sports club or a political party, whatever it is, is people of like mind gathering together. People who are already attracted to each other in some way.

Well, church isn't. Church is unique in that it's a whole bunch of people who have very little in common, who are lumped together. Because this is the training ground for genuine, sincere love.

[9 : 47] And you can't really train yourself to love sincerely if you're just surrounded by people that you already naturally get on with. See what I'm saying? And it's amazing. God has given you this amazing gift in the church.

The question is, though, what will it look like? If this is what we're called to, if we look around and we see, okay, these are the people that God has given us to love and train us to love. What will that look like practically in our relationships with one another?

Well, that's exactly what Paul goes on to tell us. Firstly, he says it will be expressed in devotion. Now, I don't have time to go through all of these. That's what Bible study is for. So I hope you're going to join Bible study this week to go into more depth.

But I want to just raise a few main applications of what sincere love looks like. So verse 10, it will be expressed in devotion.

Now, the original word here implies a kind of a family affection, a closeness that is seen in a family. The type of care that you have for members of your biological family, whether or not you actually like them, but you care for them just because they're family.

[10 : 55] You know what I mean? I think of my brother, for example. I wouldn't, I don't think, I hope he doesn't listen to this recording, but I don't think I would have naturally got on with him if he wasn't my brother.

But I love him deeply, not because we naturally get on, but because he's my brother. And I do. I respect and love him deeply because of that. Well, you see, Christians are called to love each other like that.

But even if we wouldn't have naturally got on, we're called to love each other with a family affection because we are family. Okay, we are family that is bigger and more long lasting than any biological family.

We are God's eternal family. And so it'll be seen in devotion. Secondly, this kind of love will be seen in honor. Honor. Verse 10 says, honor one another above yourselves.

You see, honor is, what does it mean to honor someone? It means to recognize and highlight people's good points for others to see. And to honor others, to recognize and highlight the good points of another person is certainly not natural for us.

[12:01] It goes against our nature. By nature, we want to honor ourselves, don't we? We want to talk about ourselves. We want to highlight our own good points to the people around us. And when we do talk about other people, it's mostly highlighting their bad points.

We tend to moan about people behind their backs rather than praise them, don't we? I mean, last time you spoke about someone behind their back, were you honoring them?

Was that the reason you wanted to talk about them? Or were you criticizing them to make yourself feel better? See, it's not natural to honor one another above ourselves. But that is what gospel transformation does.

That's the kind of love it starts to develop in us. This kind of love will also be seen in generosity. Verse 13 says, share with the Lord's people who are in need.

In other words, when we hear of another person who is in some kind of need, we don't just say, well, I hope you get sorted out. But, and maybe if we're particularly Christianized, we'll say, well, I'll pray for you, which is great, and we encourage you to pray for people.

[13:09] But we don't just do that. We actually do something about it. We take it a step further. We give of our own resources to each other, whether that be money or time or energy and effort.

Like the early church in Acts 4, we're told they shared their possessions and God's grace was so powerfully at work with them that there were no needy persons among them.

See, the early church, the first group of people that God was transforming through the gospel, there was no one needy among them because their love for each other, their sincere love was expressed in generosity.

True generosity. Notice also that transformed Christian love is expressed in hospitality. See verse 13? It says, practice hospitality. Now, this is an interesting one.

The original says pursue it, not just practice it. Practice is a bit of a weak translation because it just means, you know, when you have time, do it. But pursue it means you actually go after it.

[14:13] You make a special effort over and above the norm. So, what are we to pursue? Hospitality. Now, this is a very intriguing word, hospitality.

In the Greek, the word hospitality is an interesting one. And I don't normally quote the Greek from the pulpit. But in this case, I think it's justified. The word is philoxenia.

Philoxenia is the Greek word for hospitality used here. But why am I telling you that? Because philo means love and xenia means stranger. It's the same word that xenophobia comes from.

Xenia, stranger. So, xenophobia means to fear the stranger. Christian hospitality is the opposite. It means to pursue the stranger. It's the complete opposite of xenophobia.

In other words, Christian hospitality isn't worldly hospitality in that it's not just to invite people into your home who you're already friendly with.

[15 : 18] Or you already naturally get on with. No, Christian hospitality goes a step further. And it deliberately builds into your schedule hospitality for people that you wouldn't normally have hung around with.

See, that is transformed love, isn't it? Pursuing the stranger. That's over and above the norm. That's the kind of hospitality Christians are called to.

Sincere love is sympathetic as well. Verse 15 says, Rejoice with those who rejoice and mourn with those who mourn. It's a love that feels what the other person is feeling.

A love that ties your feelings to the well-being of another. In other words, it's a vulnerable love. It's vulnerable. You actually, you risk your own emotions by building this kind of love.

Because when the other person is not feeling well, neither are you. It doesn't allow you to feel okay when the other is suffering. Now, these are just some of the ways that God intends for our relationships with each other here in this training ground of sincere love.

[16 : 30] This is how God intends for our relationships to look, our relationships to be different to relationships in the world around us.

But the obvious question that we might be asking as we consider them, I certainly ask, this is how on earth can we do this? You know, this seems just far beyond what we're capable of.

I know myself. I know my heart all too well. How can I love like this? It's impossible, it seems. You know, if we're honest, we all fall far short of the standard, don't we?

So how do we do it? Well, the secret is actually sandwiched right here in this passage in the middle of all these verses. And it's easy to skip over.

But it's in verse 11. This is the secret to having this kind of love. It says, never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor serving the Lord.

[17 : 33] Now, it's interesting. Paul says this in the middle of listening, talking about this love we're to have for each other. He puts this verse here. Never be lacking in spiritual fervor. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor.

What's that got to do with loving each other? Well, you can't be transformed to love the way that we're called to love here without God's Spirit actively changing you from the inside.

And for that to happen, we need to keep our spiritual fervor. Literally, this means we're to be set on fire by God's Spirit. We're to be set on fire.

And that is the key to our inner transformation, our metamorphosis. We're to be set on fire. We're to let the Holy Spirit work actively in our lives.

God's Holy Spirit that He gives to believers is powerful to change you, but you've got to let Him. And that's the key. If it wasn't up to us to let God's Holy Spirit in and change us, Paul would never have had to tell us, you've got to be set on fire by the Holy Spirit.

[18 : 45] You've got to keep your spiritual fervor. We've got to actually open the door to let the Holy Spirit do that in our lives. Paul says elsewhere that it is possible for us to quench the Spirit.

And so he says, do not quench the Spirit, which means even as Christians, those who God has infused with His Holy Spirit in our lives, we can quench the Spirit, and we often do. And that means to be a Christian, but to have no energy for God.

To have no fervor. You know what I'm talking about? Maybe that's you this morning. Maybe you want to live for God.

And you believe Him. You believe in Christ. You've put your trust in Christ. You've devoted yourself to follow Christ, but you just don't feel it. You're just tired.

You just have no fervor, no energy. And it's become a duty and not a joy. Is that you this morning, maybe? You just felt like you wanted to sleep in this morning.

[19 : 51] And you had to drag yourself to church. Well, the truth is you've lost your spiritual fervor. And you need to get it back. So how?

How do you get your spiritual fervor back? Well, one of the ways that I've found is, and this is probably, because I feel that often, okay? I'm a pastor, but I often feel that I lose my spiritual fervor.

I just feel dull. I just feel kind of spiritually dead, lethargic. And one of the ways that I find is the most helpful to get that spiritual fervor back, to open the door again for the Holy Spirit to work in my life, is to hang around other people who have spiritual fervor.

And then when they don't, they hang around me when hopefully I have it. But it's contagious. That's one of the things I've found about this being set on fire by the Holy Spirit.

When we hang around people who are on fire with the Holy Spirit, we ourselves will catch that. That's what fire does. It spreads. And so will spiritual fervor.

[20 : 56] But also, Paul tells us some other important ways to keep our spiritual fervor, some very practical ways in verse 12. Have a look. Three of them, in fact. He says, Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, and faithful in prayer.

So how do we let the Spirit set us on fire every day? One, we look forward to our hope. We fix our eyes on what is unseen. We fix our eyes on eternity, not on this world.

We fix our eyes on the world to come. Two, we endure our suffering with patience. Whatever suffering God has appointed you this week, this month, this year, let that suffering draw you closer to God in dependence rather than pushing you away from Him.

Because it's going to do one of those two things. And then three, we pray. See, prayer is the means by which we connect our everyday mundane world with the eternal God and His purposes for our lives.

Prayer is the connector between earth and heaven. And these are just some of the habits that when we put them into our lives will maintain our spiritual fervor.

[22 : 11] They'll allow the Holy Spirit to transform us, to work actively in us, and to transform our relationships. Now, it would be appropriate to stop there because there's enough to think about.

But Paul doesn't stop there. And so neither in good faith can I. Why? Because he goes on to do something unexpected. He goes on from describing our relationships inside the church to describing our relationships outside the church.

But not just outside the church. Note our relationships even with our enemies. And he says that even these relationships, even the relationships with the people who are currently your enemies, people who are hostile to you, people who wish harm upon you, even those relationships are transformed when you're a Christian.

How? Well, in one very important way. You will no longer respond to evil with evil. But you will respond to it with good.

You will overcome evil with good in your relationships with your enemies. In verse 14, have a look. Paul calls on Christians to bless those who persecute you. Bless and do not curse.

[23 : 33] Bless means to wish God's blessings upon. Curse means to wish God's wrath upon. Verse 17, do not repay anyone evil for evil.

And verse 19, do not take revenge, my dear friends. Now, I don't know about you, but to do what Paul's suggesting here goes against every single fiber of my being.

Doesn't it? I mean, I don't know, but maybe you're more holy than I am. But when someone hurts me, I want to hurt them back. Okay? When someone says something nasty about me, I want to say something nasty back.

Don't you? When someone does something bad, I want them to pay. I don't want God to bless them. I want God to punish them. And yet, if I stopped and took a step back, I realize that that is a characteristic of my earthly sinful nature.

It's not a characteristic of the type of person God wants me to be. How do I know that? Because it's not a characteristic of Jesus Christ. And Jesus is the type of person God wants me to be.

[24 : 39] You see, Jesus didn't seek revenge, did he? Even when he was dying on the cross unjustly and being spat on and being insulted.

What did he do? When he could have called down an army of angels to smite his enemies, what did he do instead? From the cross, he said, Father, forgive them because they don't know what they're doing.

He blessed his enemies. And in that, you see, Jesus is the ultimate human being. He is the model of what God wants you to be.

And if you are a Christian, what God promises that he is transforming you into. A person who doesn't respond to evil with evil and so just increase the amount of evil in our world.

But he counters evil with good. And so how can we do that? How can we possibly counter evil with good like Jesus? How can I possibly suppress this desire that I have for revenge and do the very opposite?

[25 : 45] Well, the first key, Paul says, is by knowing the sovereignty of God. By trusting him to do what is right so that you don't need to worry about it. Look at verse 19.

He says, do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath. For it is written, it is mine to avenge. I will repay, says the Lord. And so it's only when you truly believe that God is just and God is powerful and he will therefore deal with all wrongdoing in his way and in his time.

It's only when you believe that, that you can be free of the desire to do it yourself. That you can be free to respond to evil with good and with blessing.

The second way we can do this is remembering that that's exactly what Jesus did for you. See, when Jesus said, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, he didn't just say it.

He did it because we were his enemies. And the gospel is the story of how Jesus overcame our evil with his good.

[26 : 55] How he overcame your sin and my sin with the ultimate act of love. Not by punishing us for our sin, which he had every right to do, but by being punished for our sin.

Which is the complete opposite. Being punished for our sin so that we don't have to, so that we can come into relationship with God and have the eternal life that we don't deserve.

Which would never have happened if Jesus wasn't willing to respond to evil with good. And that is the way of the cross. That is the solution that God has always planned for.

To overcome the evil and the pain in this world. Not with more evil than pain, but with good and with love and with grace. And he calls you and me to be part of that solution.

Do you want to be part of that solution? Or do you want to be part of the world's solution for evil? Which is just to respond to it with more evil. See, God calls us to overcome evil people in our lives with good.

[27 : 59] That will completely surprise them. That's unexpected. That will, as Paul says later, pour burning coals on their head and make them feel ashamed for what they do. When they see that you're not repaying it in that way.

God calls us to respond to hate with love. To bless people who curse us. So that they too can experience firsthand the type of love that God showed us in Jesus. In fact, that's one of the best ways to express and to communicate the gospel.

And to show that you truly believe it. Is to do it. In repaying evil with good like Jesus did. And so you see, in closing, God calls us to be transformed people.

To undergo a process of metamorphosis. Not only to prepare us for eternity, but to be a witness in this world. To be God's ambassadors. To love as he loves.

So that people around us can encounter him through us. Through the church. Through his body. That is what he intends. That's why we need to expediently undergo this process of metamorphosis.

[29 : 05] So that we can be useful as God's ambassadors on earth. And that we can get ready for heaven. Now the question is, has that transformation process started in you yet? Are you a person in whom others can encounter the love of God yet?

Well, you see, that can't happen unless you first submit yourself to God's transformation process through Jesus. Jesus came and died to save you from your sin and to make you into the person God intends you to be.

But you need to believe that. And then you need to let him work on you and change you daily. As you learn to love sincerely. As you learn to love sincerely.

As you learn to repay evil with love and grace and blessing. Well, shall we pray for God's help to do that?

Heavenly Father, we are really excited when we consider the transformation process that you have called us to.

[30 : 16] That you plan to change us from the inside out. And so we pray, Lord, help us to play our role in that metamorphosis.

Help us, Lord, to put off the old and to be renewed and to put on the new. To put on the Lord Jesus Christ. To believe in him and then to live out the way that he's called us to live.

Lord, we know that we can't do this by ourselves. And so we pray for your Holy Spirit who you have given us to change us. We pray that your Holy Spirit would work in us daily. To transform us into the likeness of Christ.

Lord, help us in this. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.