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## The Pattern Of This World

Texts: **1 Samuel 16: 4-7; Romans 12: 1-21; Excerpt from *Black Boy*, by Richard Wright** (*the autobiography of an African-American author whose work many critics believe changed race relations in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century*)

It is probable that Paul wrote his letter to the Romans around the year 50 A.D., although he wouldn't have known it. Time was measured in the Roman Empire from the founding of the city of Rome, supposedly April 21, 753 BC in our time-telling, so Paul would have been writing in the year 801. That's two fewer years than you might think because dates in our calendar go from 1BC to 1AD, omitting 0, which didn't exist when the Christian version of time was created. So the year from 1 BC to 0, and the year from 0 to 1 AD never existed. Every calculation of length of time between AD and BC is off by two years. (Betcha didn't know that!) However, even the Romans weren't sure about the year of Rome's founding, so they generally cheated and used the sequence of consuls ruling in Rome as their dating in the Republic, and then the regnal year of the emperor in the Roman Empire.

Paul himself would think that it was completely right that a new dating system had been invented which put the birth of Jesus the Christ as the hinge upon which time swung like a door from an old age to a new age. He thought that everything had changed with the coming of Christ. The old age was notable for a division between two races of people, Jews and Gentiles, who related to God in completely different ways. Now in the new age, God had brought Jews and Gentiles back together, to make them one new race of people in Jesus Christ.

The old way of thinking had divided people up into these those two races, these two peoples, the people of God and the others, the outsiders, the Gentiles. Now in Christ, God had brought them together, to live in harmony with each other. In Christ, they had become one people. In this new people that is the community of Jewish and Gentile believers at Rome, there are no longer differences of race, Jew and Gentile, but only differences of spiritual gifts. Paul uses the metaphor of the body whose various parts are different, but all work together for a healthy whole. The old way of thinking, the way of dividing people up into two groups, in and out, Jew and Gentile, or even male or female, slave or free, as Paul adds in Galatians, is out. The new way of seeing each other with familial love, of honoring others above yourselves, of sharing with people in need, sacrificing for others, whoever they are, is in.

Now, scholars of the book of Romans recognize that the book is divided into two parts, a doctrinal part and an ethical part. In other words, one part helps us think through what we are to believe, and the other part helps us to think through how we are to act in response to what we believe. Chapter 12 is where Paul makes that transition: now that we know that we are one people, that we all stand before God on exactly the same footing, that we all need God's grace to the same extent, and that God's love has been poured out on all people equally in Christ, how will we respond? His answer is that it's going to require a new way of thinking. We can no longer do the old thing of dividing people up into races, but now we have to do a new thing, of seeing people as holders of gifts from God that enrich the community.

Not everybody has to be the same. In fact, it's clear that people aren't the same at all! But their differences are to be measured in their different gifts, not whether they are Jews or Gentiles. As God taught in our story about Samuel, which Paul knew well, God judges by what's on the inside, not what's on the outside. "Don't be conformed any longer to the pattern of the world," Paul says, "but be transformed by the renewing of your mind."

One of the patterns of Paul's world that needed transforming was a separation between Jews and Gentiles. One of the patterns of our world that needs to be transformed is the division between Black and white. The pattern of our world clearly puts whites on top and Blacks on the bottom. Even when people aren't intentionally trying to act in ways that distinguish the races, there are outcomes that do nonetheless. Let me give some examples. Take technology, for instance. Everyone knows those hand blowers that dry your hands in public restrooms. You put your hand under and the air starts. That is, if you're white. If you're Black, the air may not start as the sensors have been calibrated to white hands. Or take testing technology, the facial scanning that computers do to ensure that the right person is taking a test and that they are looking at the screen, not at some cheat notes somewhere. Just this week I read about Black people being unable to take exams because the technology couldn't read Black faces properly. These are little things, but they are a constant frustration through the day that whites don't have. The pattern of thinking in our world takes white as normal. Take employment. Researchers have done studies where identical resumes were submitted to companies advertising for workers. The only difference was that the name on one resume was Joe Johnson, and on the other it was Jamal Johnson. Joe got more callbacks than Jamal. Or take housing. For generations wealth has been built up by home ownership. Many were helped by the GI Bill to buy their first home. But the banking practice of redlining made it much more difficult for Black veterans to get any kind of loan to buy a home, effectively excluding them from the GI Bill's assistance. Black neighborhoods had a literal red line around them and banks wouldn't lend to anyone trying to buy a home in that neighborhood. Why didn't Black vets just move to a different neighborhood to buy their home? Because many subdivisions had racial covenants in property deeds that restricted home ownership to white residents. These covenants and practices have been outlawed, but the wealth disparity persists over the generations. And some of these practices continue today, as research has shown that Black homebuyers are shown fewer homes than white homebuyers, and then only in certain neighborhoods.

Sometimes the racial thinking is even in laws themselves. Farm workers and domestic servants are not covered under Social Security. It will not surprise you to learn that the majority of farm workers and domestic servants are Black. Assumptions about Black people persist. A study of medical students found that about a quarter of them believe that Black skin is thicker than white skin, and that Blacks age more slowly. Some even believed a tale that was told in slave-holding times, that Blacks are less sensitive to pain. These differences have led to Black people being given less medication for pain, and to Black people's trauma not being taken as seriously as whites'. Disparities in health care lead Blacks to live almost four years less on average compared to white people.

Black accomplishment is also always in doubt. My friend, Dr. Ebony Jade Hilton, is an anesthesiologist and teaches anesthesiology at the University of Virginia Medical School. Yet when she enters a room to talk to a patient pre-surgery, she is often confused for a nurse and some patients have even requested a white anesthesiologist in her place.

In voting, Black people often have to wait 8-10 hours to vote while white people seldom do. Many laws are meant to suppress Black voter turnout as politicians seek to choose their voters, instead of letting

the voters choose the politician. After this summer, I am sure I don't need to mention the disparate ways that Black and white people are treated by the police.

All of these ways of thinking and acting are patterns of this world that we live in, patterns that we must break out of. As we become more and more aware of the many ways that the world is structured to the advantage of white people and the disadvantage of Black people, we have to take care that the pattern of our thinking is not conformed to the racist pattern of this world. Instead, through Christ, our goal is to see ourselves and our world transformed by the renewal of our minds. It's possible to break out of old ways of thinking. We see Paul breaking down the barrier between the race of Jews and the race of Gentiles. Paul's way of thinking about race, as being a religious category rather than a genetic category, helps us to see that the way we divide up the world is somewhat arbitrary. Even something as fundamental as how we measure the passage of the years isn't set in stone. The patterns of this world may seem difficult to break, but it can be done. We need to insist on better from our lawmakers, our technology leaders, our banking services sector, and even from ourselves. How much is our society missing out on the talents that God has distributed among us by refusing to let Black people shine? Paul would certainly wonder if he were writing his letter to us.

This is the last Sunday of February, the last Sunday of Black History Month. During this month, I've tried to show how the Bible story is entangled with the history of race relations in American History. I've tried to point out where African-Americans have gained strength through the Christian faith, and where white Christians have gone astray in using the Bible to support slavery and a separation of the races. It may be that you are tired of hearing these messages, that talking about race has become tedious and you can't wait for February to be over so that we don't have to talk about race anymore. That is a luxury that most of us, as white people, have: we can think about race for one month of the year and then be done with it. But the lived experience of our Black friends, neighbors, and fellow citizens is that the issue of race never ends. They can't put it aside and decide not to think about it because they have to live the consequences of having darker skin every moment of their lives. I hope that the series of sermons this month will challenge us all to a new way of thinking, that our attitudes to Black people will no longer be simply conformed to the thinking of this world, but will be transformed by the renewing of our minds, that we will think about these issues differently.

In the first sermon of this series I said that I was going to be mostly preaching to myself, about what I need to learn and hear, and that I was just going to let you listen in. The only people that pastors know will be changed by the sermon are the pastors themselves. I know my thinking and my life have been changed by what I've learned. It's my hope that yours have, too, and that we can go forward to create a new society with new ways of thinking about each other, transformed by the renewing of our minds.

Amen