

RENEWED IN THE SPIRIT OF YOUR MIND - Knowing How the Life of God Gets Inside - Part fifteen - Teaching #2176

Sunday, March 27th, 2022, 6:30 p.m.

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UN-CONFORMING YOURSELF TO THE IMAGE OF THIS WORLD, YET STAYING RELEVANT TO TODAY'S CULTURE

Romans 12:1-2 - "I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. [2] Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect."

A pastor was talking with a woman after one of the prayer meetings held toward the end of the calendar year. She began sharing how the desire of her heart was to live a more **concentrated** life in the coming twelve months. "I believe my life will be stronger from the ground up if I simply learn to focus and concentrate more next year," she said. "That's wonderful," the pastor replied. "What are you going to concentrate on?" "O, lots of things!" she answered.

So she really showed she didn't know the meaning of **concentration**. She was caught in that silly position of using a very specific word but actually giving it her own **meaning**. You can **dabble** in a lot of things. You can have many **interests**. But to **concentrate** - by definition - is to **eliminate many things to give specific attention to one or two**.

To concentrate means to turn away from the **many** things so your energy can be poured into **one** thing. That's what concentration **means**. It means to zero in, to move from the general to the particular, the many to the one. It means **un-mixed - not blended** with a host of other things. And this woman betrayed the meaning of the word by saying she was going to focus in on "**lots of things.**" There is something terribly wrong with the logic in that answer, yet it's precisely the path many of us take. We try to concentrate on "**lots of things.**"

Remember that little story as we drill down into this text. Jesus was teaching about concentrating life on God when He said we were to "**seek first God's kingdom and righteousness.**" Everything we've been studying about renewing our minds with Biblical truth and presenting our bodies as living sacrifices and meditating on and savoring the sweet taste of the mercies of God must be worked at with diligence. The Christian life won't work for a **lazy** person and it won't work for a **distracted** person. The Christian life is a life that **concentrates** on God rather than **tinkering** with God.

And, more than anything else, this world is out to **divert** people's minds from concentrating on God. It will let you **tinker** but not **emphasize** commitment to Christ in this world. It jealously pushes you to pour your time and energy into **entertainment**, and **fashion**, and **wealth**, and **sports**, and **pleasure**. It works jealously to keep you a spiritual **light-weight**.

All of this is summed up in Paul's call that we "**....not be conformed to this world....**"(12:2). There's a right way and a wrong way to read these words. The wrong way is to think Paul is telling us simply to avoid doing anything that would influence us into carelessness and worldliness. This is **true**, of course, but it's very **incomplete**. This way of hearing those words assumes that we are presently **naturally neutral** in our motivations and desires and are being called not to **contaminate** our minds.

But if this is true it's hard to understand why Paul presses upon us the need for our minds to be **renewed** and our lives **transformed**. Those injunctions from Paul seem to reveal something not quite right on our insides - something that needs divine help and change.

No. I think the right way to read Paul's command to "**....not be conformed to this world....**" is to see that we are all **working against something** inside our own skins that **naturally shapes our lives the wrong way**. That's why I chose as the title for this message - "**UN-conforming yourself to the image of this world....**" Perhaps the English isn't great, but the point is we don't start from neutral with the renewal of our minds.

Picture a child playing with blocks, or perhaps a brick-layer on a construction site. Paul is telling us we can't just pick up the building blocks of godliness and set them into place in our lives. We desperately need the mercy of God in Christ Jesus - ***"....I appeal to you therefore by the mercies of God...."***

And here's the most important thing I can tell you about the power of divine mercy in our lives. That mercy always starts ***undoing*** before it starts ***doing***. If you have any doubt about that at all, I need to challenge you with this truth before we go any further. It is the consistent theme of both the Old and the New Testaments:

Psalm 1:1-2 - ***"Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers;^[2] but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night."***

Meditating on God's law - all the time - ***"day and night"*** - is what it takes to secure your mind against the lies of the ***"counsel of the ungodly."*** ***Before*** the heart is turned ***toward*** the law of God in delight it must be turned ***away*** from the counsel and path of the world in ***rejection***. Renewal doesn't start from ***neutral***.

Titus 2:11-12 - “For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, [12] training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age....”

The same pattern is so obvious here it doesn't even require much comment. This text is even clearer in linking **grace** with **“training us to renounce....”** Notice this is the **first** thing the reception of grace awakens in the mind of the recipient. There comes a deeply resolved mental turning **from** the counsel of the ungodly before there can be a lasting, powerful turning **to** God.

Both these references verify the pattern Paul lays down in our text. **UN-conforming** to this world comes first. Then comes the positive transformation through the renewing of the mind - **Romans 12:2 - “Do not be conformed to this world, but [rather, or then, or next in sequence - as a result] be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”**

“That by testing you may discern....” The testing is a very real one. You have to turn **from** the operating system - the values and dreams marketed by this world - before you can **prove** to yourself - **“by testing”** - that being a disciple of Christ fills up your life with a joy and purpose the world can't supply.

There is no way to miss the order of Paul's thoughts. Yes, grace is received. Everything we do will be the result of God's marvelous, amazing free mercy. But grace is received in a very specific way. It's not received the way a bottle of perfume or a box of chocolates is received. That misses Paul's point. Grace is received the way a small-pox vaccination is received. It's a wonderful thing to receive, but its immediate effect isn't in what's given, but what's **fought off** by what's given.

We mustn't just **listen** to this idea. This idea must be absorbed right into our beings - like dye into fabric - before we can move ahead in the renewal of our minds. You can't concentrate on **lots of things**. You can't **concentrate** on God and **concentrate** on other things. That betrays the very **meaning** of the word "**concentration**." What you **can** do and what you **must** do is concentrate on God **in** everything **else** you do.

But you must be **dominated** by concentrating on pleasing God, even while you **do** other things. This is what Jesus meant when we were to seek **first** His kingdom and righteousness. It is not the case that there aren't other things to do. But we **concentrate** on pleasing God, not ourselves, **in** all those other things first of all.

And remember, you don't start from **neutral**. The god of this age - the Devil - has had a head start on your mind since the Fall. Since the Fall, turning **toward** God always requires turning **away** from something else. It takes constant diligence to avoid having your mind - and then your whole being - squeezed into the wrong shape. **"Do not be conformed to this world!"** I hope we all understand the starting point in this process. It isn't just a matter of trying to **copy** life from Jesus. We must **un-copy** something else first. And that's what grace is **for** and that's what grace **does**. That's what today's teaching is all about.

1) **UNDERSTAND THE NATURE OF WORLDLINESS AND THE POSING OF OUR SOULS**

We need to look deeply into what Paul is saying in the command **"Do not be conformed to this world."** The word **conform** is **"suschematizo"** - **"to assume a certain form or figure."** To borrow a term from Madonna, it's all about how we **pose** our lives - how we're shaped and stanced by the things we set out to admire and mimic. We naturally find the God-ignoring style of this world attractive. We're prone to **model** it. That's what that word means.

With this background you can easily see why various forms of the same word are sometimes translated as **"fashion"** (**schema**) in the New Testament, especially in the language of the old King James Version:

Acts 7:44 (KJV) - “Our fathers had the tabernacle of witness in the wilderness, as he had appointed, speaking unto Moses, that he should make it according to the *fashion* that he had seen.”

Here Stephen refers back to the way Moses built the Tabernacle in the wilderness. He didn't just make the design up in his head. The Lord revealed the *pattern* to him. Moses made the Tabernacle according to the *fashion* - the *scheme* - the *model* - that he had seen.

1 Cor. 7:31 (KJV) - “And they that use this world, as not abusing it: for the *fashion* of this world passeth away.”

Here the term is used in a more negative sense. There is a whole *fashion* that is according to this world. There is a model offered - a style on this world's runway - a way of *posing our lives* - that is not innocent or neutral.

The world, says John, creates an *image* that is nothing more than a vapor and is destined to pass away - **1 John 2:16-17** - “For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions—is not from the Father but is from the world. [17] And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.”

John uses the same idea. The world wants its desires and goals and ambitions injected into your mind. It **models** a life that makes devotion to Christ Jesus impossible without arousing the **disgust and rejection of the world around us**. This is Satan's chief ploy. He preys on our weakness - our desire for acceptance - our longing to fit in with the **fashion** of this age.

I know I took a little time with this, but we will never understand the nature of Paul's command not to **conform** to this world until we see exactly what worldliness **is** and how it creeps into our lives. In Romans 12:2 Paul is using this same word in its purely negative sense.

We have this tendency to pose our lives after the models of this world. We can all so easily miss the beauty of the truth and will of Father God by taking on the outlook - the image - the fashion of this fallen world. The world all around you makes devotion to Christ - **real** devotion to Christ (not just religion) - unattractive, narrow-minded, and irrelevant.

And the sin of this kind of worldliness lies in its ***distortion*** of both ***the way we were made*** - in the image of God (however marred by the Fall) - and ***the purpose of our redemption*** - that we might prove the goodness and perfection of the will of Father God in our lives. The good and perfect will of God is to be an open demonstration of just how empty and phoney and fading the life marketed by the world truly is.

2) **THE CALL TO UN-CONFORMITY TO THE PATTERN OF THIS WORLD IS THE FIRST CALL IN PREPARING OUR MINDS FOR RENEWING BY THE SPIRIT OF GOD**

Perhaps now some things will start to fit together in our thinking. We saw earlier in this series that the renewed mind comes from ***somewhere***, not from ***nowhere***. That's why Paul starts this new section in Romans 12 with the word ***"Therefore."*** We are called to thinking and study that is saturated with the factual, knowable truth about the mercies of God. That is the fuel for transformation.

Why don't more people do this? Why don't we all devour all we can get our hands on that magnifies and explains and rehearses the mercies of God for us? We would like to think there are lots of answers to those questions, but there is really only one. ***We simply don't want to.***

We could. There's nothing stopping us - no laws as of yet in this country forbidding church attendance, Bible study, prayer and fasting, or any other such thing. Why isn't everyone - why isn't society in general - more hungry for the perfect will of Father God?

Because, society **has** totally conformed, and the church **is** increasingly conforming, to the fashion - the model - the image of this world. And the fashion of this world makes no room for the truth of God - **Romans 1:18** - **“For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.”**

The world's **system** has no room for divine truth. Paul says the world's style is to **suppress** God in its mind. But **how** does this take place? And why don't Christians reject a world that would do such a terrible thing?

That's a key question. And the answer is Christians don't reject the world in anger because of the **way** it suppresses God's truth, especially in North America. The style of our world is to suppress God's truth by **distraction**, not by **renunciation**. There is no apparent battle with God by the world. He is simply **drowned out**.

This is the relentless pressure - the pressure to **conform** - the world applies to your life. You don't have to **reject** God's good and perfect way and will. You simply dance to whatever music is loudest. And, in this age, the world's music always plays loudest.

So here's the question. What are you doing to **un-comform** yourself to this world's style? What steps are you taking to get off the world's runway? Before you turn **to** God, what are you consciously turning **from**? And how badly do you want out of the fashion - the **schema** - of this perishing age?

Remember, John makes it crystal clear. You can't love **both** the world and Jesus Christ at the same time. You can only **concentrate** on one thing.

- 3) **FUNDAMENTALLY, GOD WANTS US TO SEE OUR LIVES IN THIS WORLD DIFFERENTLY THAN WE ARE BEING TRAINED TO SEE THEM**

The divinely given tool for un-conforming to the style of this world is the constant reminder that it's all fading away. **1 John 2:15-17** - **“Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. [16] For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions—is not from the Father but is from the world. [17] And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.”**

Remember, the posing of this world is just that. It's pretending - acting out - something that isn't really true. And God will only allow this ***proud boasting in phoney things*** so much leash. It will all come crashing down. Only the one who has already proven the perfection of God's truth and God's will is going to last forever. And that relates to the final point:

4) **ONLY COUNTER-CULTURAL DISCIPLES CAN HAVE TRUE RELEVANCE TO THIS WORLD FOR DISPLAYING THE MERCIES OF GOD IN ALL THEIR REDEEMING BEAUTY**

One closing thought remains. In the title of this teaching I referred both to being ***un-conformed*** to this world, and also ***staying relevant*** to it. Is this possible?

It is - and for two very important reasons.

- a) ***Only those un-conformed to the world can speak the truth to its deepest needs.***

Let's take a very common example. Can a person be loving toward all kinds of outwardly sinful people and yet be faithful to the truth of God's Word? That is what Christians claim. In fact, we claim far more than that. What we claim is **only** un-conformed Christians **can** be truly loving to sinners as defined by God's revelation..

That's because the Bible says love **"....does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth."**(1 Corinthians 13:6). That means absolute truthfulness is a **precondition** of genuine love. So, if we don't tell the sinner that his or her actions are sinful, whatever we bring to them isn't genuine love. We will offer other solutions, void of God's redeeming grace in Christ Jesus. And that will leave them eternally lost.

- b) ***Only those un-conformed to the world can model the transforming power of God's mercies in Christ Jesus.***

This is why God created you and this is why He redeemed you. God wants living, working, walking, demonstrations that the counterfeit joys and dreams of this world are ***smoke and mirror*** delights. He wants living proof that the ***“counsel fo the ungodly”*** is all lies.

This world needs to see how much we treasure Christ. And that is ***only*** revealed to the extent that I ***renounce*** the phoney, self-serving fashion of this age to advance the treasure of Christ in my heart.

More on this next week.