

THE LETTER THAT CHANGED THE WORLD - The Biblical Theology of Romans - Part thirty-seven

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UNCONFORMING YOURSELF TO THE PATTERN OF THIS WORLD, YET STAYING RELEVANT TO TODAY'S CULTURE

Romans 12:1-2 - "I appeal to you therefore, brothers, 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 concentrate a bit better next year," she said. "That's wonderful," the pastor replied. "What are you going to concentrate on?" "O, **lots** of things!" she answered.

There is something terribly wrong with that answer. If you concentrate on "**lots of things**" you aren't really **concentrated** in your thinking at all. Yet it's precisely the path many of us take. We try to concentrate on "**lots of things**." And this will never work in generating spiritual life because 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 Paul says flat out that this world is out to **obstruct** people from focusing on God. It applies pressure. He says it actually tries to **squeeze God out of your mind**. Hence the warning - "**....Do not be conformed to this world!**" Don't let the culture around you press your life into its shape. If you fit the world's mold, you're the wrong shape.

Think about those words for a minute. "**....Do 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 and 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 - "**UNconforming yourself to the image of this world....**"

We don't start from **neutral**. 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. And that mercy 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:

Psalms 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."

So, **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**.

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 comment. Both these references verify the pattern Paul lays down in our text. **UNconforming** 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, [then] but be transformed by the renewal of your mind...."

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 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 **erase - uncop**y - something else first. 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**." You can borrow the old phrase 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.

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 **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 pattern - 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.**"

Yet, the world demands that we **pose**. It is temporarily ruled by the Devil and **tailors itself - fashions itself** - to create the desire to follow it in our hearts. It **models** a life that makes devotion to Christ Jesus impossible apart from **feeling the disgust 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.

Philip. 2:8 (KJV) - "**And being found in fashion (*schema*) as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.**"

Here the same word is used in a positive sense. In the Incarnation Jesus was found in "**fashion**" as a man. This doesn't mean that he wasn't **actually** a man or wasn't **fully** man. It simply means there was a time when Jesus "**took on**" this way of being. Unlike you and me, there was a time when He existed **not** in the form of a man. He put on that "**fashion**" in the Incarnation.

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.

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 being fashioned by the world truly is.

2) **THE CALL TO UNCONFORMITY 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 truth about the mercies of God. This isn't **all** there is to being transformed. It takes more than mere head information. But this is the **first** step in transformation. 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 **style** has no room for divine truth. Paul says the world's fashion - its 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. 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 style of 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 **unconform** 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? John makes it crystal clear. You can't love **both** the world and Jesus Christ at the same time.

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

The divinely given tool for unconforming 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 a **pose** - a **pretending** - of something that isn't really true. It's a frantic attempt to hide from the way God has created things. Refuse the pressure to conform to vanity. Save your mind and your soul. Only pilgrims will set foot into the heavenly city.

The pressure to conform to this world is constant and self-destructive. 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.

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

The emergent church has latched on to the word "**journey**" to picture the movement of the Christian life in this present world. And once Brian McLaren, Leonard Sweet, Rob Bell, and Tony Jones saturate the book stores with a phrase, the church is quick to get on the cool bandwagon. But the more common image used in the Bible is

pilgrimage, rather than *journey*. And for good reason.

A *journey* simply implies a *trip*. Like a tour, visiting and tasting everything along the way. A *pilgrim*, on the other hand, is one who isn't *sight-seeing*, but *passing through*. The pilgrim is a *stranger on route to a destination*, not a *tour member*. A pilgrim longs for *home while passing through a foreign land*.

All of this relates to the title I chose for this teaching. I referred both to being *unconformed* to this world, and also *staying relevant* to it. Is this possible? I think it is, and for two very important reasons.

- a) ***Only those unconformed to the world can speak the truth to its deepest needs***. Let's take a very common example. Can a person be loving toward homosexuals 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*** unconformed Christians ***can*** be truly loving to homosexuals. 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 homosexual that his or her actions are sinful, whatever we bring to them isn't genuine love. And that's our calling. We're called not only to be ***tolerant*** of homosexuals (which everyone should be), or ***accepting*** of them. We're called upon to ***love*** them with the redemptive truth of God's Word.

- b) ***Only those unconformed 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. 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.