

Conformity? Don't Follow the Crowd

Romans 12:1-2.

From the very first words of this chapter, Paul is urging his reader to take special note of what follows, so he must consider what he is about to say as being very important. But before I get to the rest of verse 1 later, I would first like to look more closely at verse 2.

Verse 2 – **'Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world'**. Out of curiosity I checked out the paraphrased version of the Message Bible, and found that it says it quite plain and simple:

'Don't become so well adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking.' (Repeat)
Great advice, since it does take effort, thinking and discipline to go against the flow and refuse to live our lives in the way of the world. After all, we are living in the midst of our culture, and it's so easy to simply drift along and to go with the flow, to follow the crowd.

And the NIV version of course also gets it right when it declares 'Do not conform' – for it is a command that we have to do. It should be a decision of ours not to conform, not to live as the world does. (The unbelieving world). As we well know, most of the world of unbelievers can be a place that appears to be completely ignorant about God, and often even hostile to His message of salvation, and hostile to those who choose to follow his ways.

The next words are – **'But be transformed'** – The implication there is that this is what will happen once we take the first steps to live our lives as God intended. To not follow the crowd. The fact that we have taken the stance of not conforming to the world's ways, will allow the transformation to happen naturally, and probably without any major effort on our part. The moment we surrender to being transformed, God will begin to accomplish his will in our lives.

What else happens when we allow this transformation to take place? The answer is found in the next part of the verse: 'By the renewing of your mind'. This perhaps begs the question, 'Why does my mind need renewing?' As Christians we desperately need this renewal since our minds have been constantly bombarded with the worldly ways, even from our very birth. When we come to faith and truly believe and are saved, the renewing of our mind begins through revelation of Scripture, by the works of Jesus, or the direct work of the Holy Spirit, once we welcome him into our lives.

So, if we are urged to not conform to the ways of the world, what is it about those ways that could be so wrong for us as believers? Actually it is in every way that is against Scripture, and God's best plan for us. Consumerism, physical abuse, murder, casual sex outside of marriage, (or even affairs within marriage), blasphemy, lying, cheating, greed, violence, Just to name a few.

Yet, even though this list may be incomplete, there is one other human way that I feel the Lord is leading us to examine more closely this morning;

According to Scripture one of the most abhorrent sins we could commit is to fail to love God with all our heart soul and strength, so it must surely follow that equally as bad is the adoration or worship of idols. And our modern world is full of idols to be worshipped.

Money, fame, status, power, cell phones, social media, sports heroes, (Just to name a few, but I'm sure you get the idea)

But to me, perhaps the most insidious of all can be the worship we give to our bodies. Not so surprising really, when we are constantly faced with advertising, glossy magazines and other media, all exhorting us to make our bodies look better.

Cosmetics to make us more beautiful. Hair products to enhance our looks, Botox and anti-wrinkle cream to make us look younger, cosmetic surgery, exercise gyms, (not necessary bad, but can become an object of obsession and worship), jewellery, designer clothes, perfume, vitamin supplements, slim underwear models to show us how we should look, Tattoos and piercing parts of the body. Everything about the body to enhance, feed, dress, pamper and show it off, in the way the world accepts as normal.

If then this is true, how can we have got it so wrong? Well I believe we have got it all back to front, when we focus on our body. You see, The Bible clearly explains our human make up as Spirit, soul, and then body, we humans seem to have it back to front. Our minds say body, then soul and spirit. Spirit, soul and then body. That is how we are made.

Yet it is our bodies that cry out to us for attention, more especially as we age and our body needs a little more care and medical intervention. (In my own experience, after 5 surgical events in the last 3 years, I have learned the value of medical aid, and also the experience of trusting in God.) Of course we do need to look after our bodies, give them the attention they deserve, but that attention should be coloured by even more attention to our spirit and soul. The more we focus on our body, the greater the danger we will end up totally focussed on it at the expense of the rest of our being – our spirit and soul.

Yes, of course our body is important to us while here on this earth, but it is the one part of us that will not be around when we reach heaven. Yes we need to look after it, but it should not be an object of worship, and only rank second after the eternal parts of our being.

As Christian believers, we know the promise of what is to come in the next life, yet in our humanness we tend to cling to the earthly life we have now, unwilling to let it go. We are often not ready to die.

Reminds me of a story - the three Pastors

Perhaps not a great illustration, but it does remind us how we feel about leaving this life and our bodies behind. It almost seems that our body has become in charge of our mind, and demands our full attention. Which means that our Scripture reading this morning becomes very relevant – we need to have our minds renewed, changed into the correct focus. Not the demands of our bodies, not the temptation to worship and pamper our bodies, but for our body to be given its proper place in our lives – next in line after our spirit and soul.

But hang on, we can't stop there. There's still more to this verse. As we read on we come to a word 'Then' Don't conform to the world, be transformed, renewal of your mind. Once this has happened we come to the 'then'.

Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will. Or once again as the Message version puts it. 'You will be changed from the inside out. Readily recognise what God wants from you, and quickly respond to it.'

Wow. Wouldn't that be great – to know clearly what God's good, pleasing and perfect will is for us – for me? So the rewards for being transformed are very rich and great.

The ability to discern and know God's will.

The ability to know God's will is good, pleasing and perfect.

Now, let me briefly go back now to the first verse of our Scripture reading.

I urge you fellow believers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – which is your spiritual worship. Not a dead one that means we have to die, but a living sacrifice, which means that it is continual, day after day. Non-stop. We need to give over our bodies to serve our Lord.

In view of God's mercy means perhaps we don't need to exactly follow Paul's example in 1 Corinthians where he claimed to beat his body to make it a slave. I would suggest that we should simply make an effort to put the cravings of our body in its proper place – as next in line after our spirit and soul, and available for God to use.

This verse is clearly saying that when we do this, it is our spiritual worship of the Lord. To put it another way, when we do this, when we transfer our focus from our body and onto our spiritual side, we begin to get our lives into balance with the will of God.

When we do this we turn around our lives and our mind no longer is solely focussed on our body, but we now live as God intended - spirit, soul and then body.

All this may be so, but it all sounds like hard work – Not conforming to the world, being transformed, and having our mind renewed. As if that is hard enough, now we also need treat our bodies as a living sacrifice? As I said at the beginning, this may be something we need to do, but we are not expected to do it all by ourselves. Then it would indeed be hard work.

This is one of the tasks of the Holy Spirit, once he is released in us.

So then, if we want the true fullness of God in our lives and truly desire to be transformed, perhaps we need to ask ourselves 'Do I have all the power and comfort of the Holy Spirit dwelling in me?'

If you need to ask this question, and have any doubts, then chances are the Holy Spirit is not yet fully released in you, because once he is released in you, there is absolutely no doubt that he is there.

You see, once you have come to salvation, and have been baptized, then yes, you have the Holy Spirit inside you, He is given to all believers at such times. But, the reality is we need to be immersed in the Holy Spirit before he can make his presence felt. Only then can we realise the life-changing power that he gives.

Randal spoke of this in a message he gave some weeks ago. He said 'There is a difference between the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and the actual filling of the Spirit. Not all believers are filled or controlled by the Holy Spirit's power. The Holy Spirit comes and lives within us at our salvation, but we are filled with Him when we submit to him.'

I completely agree with Randal. As believers we may have the Holy Spirit living in us, but we can never know his full presence or power until we release him to accomplish his work. The Holy Spirit will never intrude in our lives unless we invite him to, and surrender to his will. I see this as being immersed in the Holy Spirit, or to use a perhaps controversial term – being baptized with the Holy Spirit.

This is not to say that he takes over our lives, we can easily grieve and squash his influence on us. But our surrender to him simple gives him permission to gently guide and steer us along the right pathway.

It is the Holy Spirit who transforms us, from the inside out.

It is the Holy Spirit who helps us recognise the presence of God in our lives.

It is the Holy Spirit who enables us to put our bodies into their proper perspective and place.

But only once we have asked for him to be immersed into our lives, and we are in tune with him.

In my experience. Once we have the true fullness of the Holy Spirit within us, we will never ever want to be without his presence again.

Without the fullness of the Holy Spirit, our faith will not grow, we cannot be changed into Christ's likeness, and we cannot get to know our heavenly Father intimately. Without the Holy Spirit we can never become effective believers.

If you are thinking that I'm enthusiastic about being immersed in the Holy Spirit, you are right, I am. Because I know and have experienced the tremendous difference He has made to my own faith and life. Don't conform to the world, be transformed; renew your mind. All made possible by the work of the Holy Spirit in your life.

Have you experienced any of this yet?

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