

Be Not Conformed to the World

by William Fitch

The sermon emphasizes the importance of not conforming to the world's values and ways of living, but rather living according to God's will and being transformed by the Spirit.

Duration: 37:42

Scripture: Matthew 5:13-14, John 17:14, Romans 12:2, James 4:4, 2 Peter 1:4, 1 John 2:15

Topics: "Worldliness", "Sanctification"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher discusses the conflict between the Church and the world. He emphasizes that the Church is called to be different from the world and not conform to its ways. The preacher references Jesus' teachings, stating that there will always be hostility between good and evil, and that the Church will face increasing opposition. He also mentions the story of the pilgrims in John Bunyan's 'The Pilgrim's Progress' as an example of how the Church should stand out from the world. The preacher concludes by quoting St. Paul's exhortation to not be conformed to the world, but to be transformed by renewing the mind.

Transcript

If we are to choose a text this morning, it will be in the second verse of the twelfth chapter of the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans. Be not conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. We are thinking this morning about being not conformed to the world.

During these Sunday mornings of this month, we are studying the all-important question of the relationship of the Church to the world. Last Sunday morning, we noted some of the most distinctive emphases of our Lord's teaching. We saw then that our Lord taught there is an irreconcilable hostility between the Church and the world.

He taught also that there is no prospect or possibility of this hostility being removed by the conversion of the world to the Christian faith. The tares and the wheat will grow together until the harvest, and evil men will wax worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived. The story of history, according to our Lord's teaching, will be one of ever-increasing conflict between good and evil.

His own life on earth would be prophetic of the history of the Church, and the greatest manifestation of hostility to the Church, as to the Church's Lord, would be at the end. Then will the Church go down into her Gethsemane. Then will be the hour and the power of darkness.

We noted further in our Lord's teaching that one supreme peril the Church would face would be the peril of herself becoming embraced with the spirit of the world around her. And we saw also that the only hope of escape from such calamity would lie in ceaseless watchfulness and prayer. Watch ye therefore, and pray always, he said, that ye may be accounted worthy to escape all these things, and to stand before the Son of Man.

Now it must be recognized that the early Church took this teaching to its heart. The atmosphere of the entire New Testament is one of expectation. In it we are continually reminded that this world is a transient thing.

The world part of the way, and the lusts thereof. The Christian is to await the appearance of a new world, a different world, one with interests and values and institutions and orders after God's own heart. The New Testament Christian felt himself to be an alien in this world.

He was like those citizens of the Greek city-states, metics as they were called, who settled in Athens, but being citizens of their own city, they never became citizens of Athens, however long they resided there. So was the Christian. He had found his salvation in Christ, and having found his salvation in Christ, he became and he remained a citizen of heaven.

So far as this world was concerned, he was stateless. A profound and revolutionary transference of loyalty and affection took place when Christ entered his heart, and the world henceforth became for him only a temporary, halting place. He was but a stranger here.

He was but a pilgrim on his way to the holy city. He was one who looked for a city which had foundations whose builder and maker is God. He desired a better country that is unheavenly, and therefore God was not ashamed to call such men his brethren.

And in doing so, the New Testament Christian was revealing the truest quality of Christian discipleship, because this world had become divested of any quality of absoluteness or self-sufficiency, and therefore he loved not the world, neither the things that were in the world, for he well knew that the world passeth away, and the lusts thereof, and only he that doeth the will of God abideth forever. And it's this same truth, this very truth that St. Paul is stressing, as he comes to the twelfth chapter of his letter to the Romans and writes, be not conformed to this world. Be not conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds.

Don't let your life become patterned after the pattern of the world, he says. Don't let the scheme of things all around you become your scheme of things. Don't become schematized, his very word, to the ways of the world.

When Paul writes to the Ephesians, he reminds them that prior to their salvation, and I quote here from the J.B. Phillips translation, they drifted along in the stream of this world's ideas of living, and here he is urging the church in Rome never to relapse back into that kind of drift upon that kind of stream. Be not conformed to this world, he says. Don't let yourselves drift along in the stream of this world's ideas of living.

Don't let the philosophies and the ideologies of this contemporary civilization so possess your mind and heart that you'll become one with them. Be not conformed, for you are called to higher things. You belong to another world, another world order.

You serve another Lord, even Jesus Christ. See to it, therefore, that you be not conformed to this world, but be renewed and transformed in the spirit of your mind. And so will you prove that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.

This then is our subject for this morning, being not conformed to this world. And essentially it is the same emphasis that John makes and which we shared last week. Let me remind you again of John's words, love not the world, neither the things that are in the world.

If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. And the world passeth away, and the lusts thereof, but he that doeth the will of God abideth forever.

Forever. It's the same emphasis that Paul is making here when he says, be not conformed to this world. But in making this emphasis, he's also indicating the way in which love for the world is usually shown.

It is shown in being conformed. It is shown in a special type of conformity to the spirit of the age in which we live. But the servants of the Lord must not be conformed to this world, for they belong to another company, and their walk and their conversation and their character must be distinctive of their heavenly birth.

Be not conformed to this world. Let's then consider this word of St. Paul's this morning, and let's do it in three particulars. First of all, let's ask, what is signified by this term, the world? Let's get our definitions right.

And then let's ask, in what ways may we be conformed to the world? Then lastly, we will ask, where may victory be found in our battle against such conformity? First of all, let's define the world. Now, the world in the New Testament has, of course, various significances. God so loved the world, we are told.

Christ died for the whole world, John tells us. And again, the Father sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. At other times, the world is used to denote the whole of created nature, comprehending the heavens and the earth and the sea and the elements and angels and men and animals.

In short, all created being is in this sense that we are told that the world was made by him, by our Lord, for without him was not anything made, but was made. The worlds were made, says the writer to the Hebrews, the worlds were made by the word of God, and by faith we know this. At the same time, however, there is another sense in which the world is used.

It's used to indicate so often the men of this world who are said to lie in wickedness. Paul speaks of this present evil world. And this is the sense that is characteristic of all these passages in which the disciples of the Lord are called to be not conformed to the world.

It's in this sense, the world is not only used of the world of men, but of the world of sinful men. In this sense, the world is not so much a sphere as an atmosphere. The world includes everything which is sinful or is likely to be so.

It's in this sense that we interpret such a passage as John 1, 10. He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not. When our Lord came to his own, we are told that his own received him not.

The world that his hands had fashioned, he came to that world of men unto his own, and his own received him not. There was one final answer given to our Lord by the world, and it was the answer of Calvary. We will not have this man to rule over us.

The world has been defined as everything with God left of it. And I can think of no more specific definition than that. The world is the totality of everything, but was the Lord of everything cast out, excluded, crucified.

The world is therefore a sinful world, a world that wants to survive without any divine intervention, a world of human self-sufficiency, a world of pride, a world of self-glory, a world which John epitomizes in three most pregnant phrases, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life. It's a world of self-enclosure, a world of self-interest, and yet a world of self-expansion and self-aggrandizement. In short, it's a world where man is, where God should be.

And Christian friends, it's in a world like this that you and I live. This is the pattern of the age, this is the complexion of our contemporary society, and it's against the spirit of such a world that we are called to wage war, called to be not conformed to this world. Very well then, having established that, let's go on to consider our next fundamental question.

What does St. Paul mean when he speaks of our not being conformed to this world? I want to say some things which I personally consider to be extremely important. First of all, Paul would emphatically affirm, I'm sure, that being not conformed to the world means being not conformed to the wisdom of the world. Of this he writes spaciouly and searchingly to the Corinthian church, and the whole of the first chapter of his epistle to the Corinthians is full of this.

Hath not God made foolish the wisdom of man, he says? And he goes on. For after that in the wisdom of God, the world by its wisdom knew not God. It pleased God by the foolishness of preaching, to save them that believe.

And he goes on. The Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified unto the Jews a stumbling block, and unto the Greeks foolishness. And he still goes on.

Ye see your calling, brethren. Not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty are called, but God hath chosen the foolish things of this world to confound the wise. And in all this he is pointing out that the wisdom of the world must not be followed by the child of God.

Because the child of God is the possessor of another kind of wisdom, the true wisdom which is from above, and which is found only in Jesus Christ. This is our calling. Be not conformed to the wisdom of this world, because therein lies only emptiness and loss.

But what does the wisdom of this world imply? What are its characteristics? What are its emphases? Well, for one thing, it implies the sovereignty and the centrality of man. Swinburne in the late nineteenth century epitomized this in his poetry, and came to the crux of it all when he cried, Glory to man in the highest, for man is the measure of things. The sovereignty and the centrality of man.

Everything revolves around man. That's the wisdom of the world. Man is central and focal.

Just because of that, the wisdom of this world of necessity denies the radical character of human sin. Imperfection, of course, he admits, and must. But this kind of imperfection is essentially something that's a

kind of survival from primitive times, something that will eventually pass.

If we're only patient, let's work out the beast and let the ape and tiger die. And soon, perhaps later, sometimes it may seem, but soon, eventually, we will come to our utopia, and this view, sin is merely the backwash of our lowly origins, and not a basic deadly disease from which divine deliverance is necessary and divine power can alone save. But there's a third emphasis in the wisdom of this world.

The wisdom of this world asserts that man is forging ahead. He is evolving into a higher kingdom. And on this kind of view, the eternal kingdom is transposed into a purely historic, terrestrial process.

The kingdom of God is going to come in time, and we are part of it. We ourselves are sharing in its creation. And therefore--and this is another fundamental element in this whole field of thought--therefore, God is unnecessary.

The thoughts of God are just created within the limbo of man's own imagination. Man's own need creates the sense of a superpower to which he would try and strive to come, but actually that is just childhood's imaginings, and these pass. Salvation is of man.

The kingdom will be man's creation. And that is, of course, as modern as tomorrow, because this is the way that the wisdom of this world speaks, as surely today, the 8th of January, 1961, as in the year 61. We need no haunting Christ.

We need no saving, no suffering God. We need no cross. We need no shedding of divine blood.

We need no pardon for our sins. And this is the wisdom of this world, placing man where God ought to be. Paul, as he writes to the church in Rome, says, be not conformed to this world.

Somehow or another you must get your whole thought processes into alignment with God's thoughts. Begin to think God's thoughts after Him, and let the glory of the divine revelation break upon you. Let that day spring from on high, visit you again and again and again, and in God's light you'll see light.

But be not conformed to the wisdom of this world. In that wisdom there is nothing of meekness. In that wisdom there is nothing of poverty of spirit.

In that wisdom there is nothing of the Beatitudes. But you are of another mind. You have the mind of Jesus Christ.

Let His mind, therefore, be in you. And be not conformed to the wisdom of this world. Elsewhere, Paul writes, you will recall, the natural man conceiveth not the things of the Spirit of God, because they are foolishness unto him.

That's the natural man. That's the natural world in which we live. He thinks of the things of God in this immortal form.

They are foolishness unto him. But they that are out of the Spirit do mind the things of the Spirit. For to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace.

Be not conformed to this world. Turn from the carnality of the world's way of thinking. Turn to the Spirit in inspired and in breathed and constantly renewed life.

Think God's thoughts. That's the first thing he means, I'm sure, when he says, be not conformed to this world. You've got another wisdom.

In that light, see light. Then I'm certain that there is another element. When Paul says, be not conformed to this world, I'm sure that he means, be not conformed to the cares of this world.

Do you remember the parable of the sower in Matthew 13? Where the good seed is sown and it falls in different places. One of the places in which it fell was amongst the thorns. The thorns sprung up and choked it.

And then, of the Lord's mercy, we have his own wonderful exposition of this parable. What are the thorns that spring up and choke it? Our Lord says, either they or the seed falls in the thorns. The cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches entering in choke the word and it becometh unfruitful.

Be not conformed to the cares of this world. What are these cares? They are the gold that men set before them. They are the goals that will gratify personal desire and crown personal ambition.

But Paul says, be not conformed. For the will of God is your goal. And such cares and such desires and such goals must not be yours.

Be not conformed to the cares of this world. And our Lord becomes still more specific. Because when the seed fell amongst the thorns and the thorns sprung up and choked it, our Lord says that the cares of this world, and then he defines these cares, even the deceitfulness of riches.

Now nowhere in the New Testament is money in itself counted to be wrong. Nowhere. But everywhere in the New Testament is the love of money counted wrong.

And when money reaches the place where God ought to be and where money has become a man's God, then is the hour of absolute desolation. And somehow or another the Christian must become absolutely delivered from this. The love of money is the root of all evil.

Money must not become our God. We mustn't let ourselves become concerned about that. If in the way of business the Lord prospers us, then for his glory, so be it.

It's all his. It's going to be his only for him. If of his mercy he withholds it from us, then it's of his mercy.

Because he knows that somehow or another it would entwine itself about our hearts and take us from him. If we are walking in the light as he is in the light, the Lord will keep us. But we must not become conformed to the course of this world, to its spirit and to its cares.

Now you and I live in a generation that requires continually to be reminded of this. Part of the philosophy of the great American civilization, we are told, is this. Anything for a fast buck.

Anything. And that's the course of this world, and that's the care of this world, and that's the spirit of this world. And somehow or another, our Lord says, if that gets in, it's going to choke the world.

You're going to become unfruitful. You're becoming conformed to the spirit of this age. Be not conformed.

One thing else I'm sure the apostle means. Be not conformed to the wisdom of this world. Be not conformed to the cares of this world.

And then, as I've been hinting, be not conformed to the course, the stream, of this world. Ephesians chapter 2 and verse 2, he reminds them, and here we quote from the Authorized Version. In time past you walked according to the course of this world, but now, no more.

What is the course of this world? The course of this world, the practices of men and women around you, their ways of life, their ways of entertainment, their ways of dress, their ways of bringing up their children, their ways of keeping or of not keeping the Sabbath day, their ways, the course of this world. Oh, says the apostle as he writes to the Rome, Roman church, that church in Rome, surrounded by the word in every manifestation, finding themselves pressurized continually to go according to the course of the age. He cries to them, be not conformed.

You must recognize that you're essentially different. You must recognize that you're meant not to belong. You must recognize that if you find yourself too much at home in this world, you're out of touch with God, for the love of this world is enmity of God.

You share the life of God, writes the apostle. And therefore your talk will be different, and your spirit will be different. And you will not conform.

Do you remember when the pilgrims came to Vanity Fair? And Vanity Fair lay right athwart the road that they were going. And everyone making for the holy city had to go right through that city. Yea, the king himself, on his journey, passed through that fair, and there on a fair day too.

When the pilgrims came, when the pilgrims came, the men of the city looked at them and they found that their raiment was different, and they found that their speech was different, and they found that they held very lightly by the wares of their fair. And in that John Bunyan seems to be the perfect interpreter of the New Testament, and of St. Paul, and St. John, and St. Peter, and the apostles, and our Lord. But all that Paul implies, and asserts, and advises, and urges, and demands of the Christian, be not conformed.

And of course this is the hardest thing on earth to do, because you and I, as I say, live in the world, surrounded on every side, and it's not easy to be different. You see, part of the dismay that faces true Christian fellowship today is to look out upon the world and see so little difference between the church and the world. Be not conformed.

What are we to do? Where is the place of victory? Not by separation from the world, in the sense of isolation. There was a man in my last parish in Glasgow who proudly boasted that from the day that he had received Christ as his Savior, twenty years ago, no non-Christian had stepped across his threshold. And he called that separation.

For myself, I would consider that insulation, isolation. The Christian is called to be in the world, and yet not of it. How are we to be delivered from such conformity? Well, Paul gives to us so clearly the answer.

Be not conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. In other words, there will be given to those who seek it a new mind, a new understanding, a completely new mind, God's mind. They that are after the flesh do mind the things of the flesh, but they that are after the Spirit do mind the things of the Spirit.

And so Paul here is saying that the answer to conformity to the world is to have the mind of Christ, is to have the mind of Christ singing his thoughts in us, is to have the mind of Christ expressing his desires through us, is to have the mind of Christ and Christ only ever more directing our steps. And you see, that's

what happens to a man who is prepared to follow Jesus Christ. You will be renewed in the spirit of your mind.

Somehow or another there will be given to you a completely different mind. It will be the mind of God, it will be the mind of the Holy Spirit, it will be the Lord's mind in you. And as that mind is in you, you will be renewed.

You will not become schematized according to the scheme of things of the world around, but you will be transformed. You will be, and this is the original word, you will be metamorphosed, absolutely transfigured. Now that's a divine work.

That's a divine operation. That's a divine act. It's a divine gift.

But it's what happens. And we're just to put the Lord to the test and ask him to do it, to renew us in the spirit of our mind, that we may become transformed. And this, of course, is the work of the Holy Spirit.

And this is only known when Jesus Christ is Lord. And so Paul has just said this. And here is the end of the matter.

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies, a sacrifice of life unto God, and be not conformed to this world. When we ourselves, our bodies, our minds, our spirits, are altogether Christ's, then in us he is able to think his thoughts, and we truly live as a colony of heaven. We are surrounded by the world on every side, but our lines of communication are unbroken and intact.

Twitc the throne, and we are sustained by heavenly life, and we are upheld by heavenly ministries, and we are graced and we are transformed by heavenly Jews. God himself living in us, and Jesus Christ being glorified in us, and thus we live in non-conformity with the world, and yet at the same time a blessing to the world, saving it, sanctifying it, the salt of the earth, the light of the world. We escape the corruption which is in the world through lust, but we become truly the very light, the life of God himself to our generation.

And of his mercy, we will serve our generation in the fear of God, and in God's good time and appointment, we'll fall asleep in him. Dear Christian friends, let us hear the word of the apostle this morning. Be not conformed to this world.

O Lord, to thee we cry. Our hope is in thee. Save us, Lord, and bless us.

Thank thee for thy wonderful provision. A new mind will be given unto us, a new heart, new thoughts. Think then thy thoughts in us, we pray.

Today, O Lord, to thee I cry. Thou art my rock and truss. O be not silent, lest I die and slumber in the dust.

O hear my earnest cry, thy favor I entreat. Hear while I lift imploring hands before thy mercy seat. For thy love's sake.

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