

## Breaking Free of Cocoons

Becoming a Non-Conformist – Part III

Romans 12:2a

### Introduction

Our text today is Romans, chapter 12, verse 2. I want to cover the first half of this verse in our session today.

Paul writes,

*And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, . . .*

The New International Version translates it,

*Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. . . .*

The King James Version similarly translates it,

*And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, . . .*

Eugene Petersen paraphrases this verse in *The Message*, to read,

*Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out. . . .*

Finally, I think the New Living Translation gets a good handle on Paul's choice of words and tenses as it amplifies the text to read,

*Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. . . .*

I recommend that you circle three key words in this text:

- first, the word *conformed*;
- next, the word *transformed*;
- then, the word *renewing*.

This verse, using these three words, contains:

- a negative command,
- a positive command,
- a plan of action.

### Negative Command – Do Not Be Conformed To This World

The negative command that Paul writes is,  
*. . . do not be conformed to this world . . .*

The verb “conformed” is passive. In other words, he is saying, “Don’t allow yourself to be conformed by the world.”

I like J B. Phillips translation of this phrase, which reads, “Don’t let the world around you squeeze you into its own mold.”

You should know that Paul actually uses the present imperative tense, which literally means, “Stop letting the world conform you.”

It is as if he was saying that the believers in Rome, or at least some of them, were being squeezed into the mold of the Roman world.

Remember, Paul is writing to Christians. That means it is possible for the believer to be molded by the world, instead of by the word.

Now, the word translated “world,” is the Greek word “aioni (αιωνι)”. It is not a reference to our planet, or the globe, or even a particular country or empire. It can be translated “age or contemporary generation”.

One author defined it as, “the worldview [of the unbeliever] that defines the age in which humans live at any time in history.”<sup>i</sup>

In other words, it is, “how the world thinks.”

You may remember the way Paul confronted his generation of educated philosophers in Athens, as recorded in Acts, chapter 17.

- The current belief was that mankind had been created out of the soil of Mother Earth; Paul declared to them that God made the world and all things (verse 24).
- They pointed proudly to the Acropolis (the home of their gods), but Paul said, “. . . God who made the world and all things in it . . . does not dwell in temples made with hands (verse 24).
- Paul’s generation felt superior to uncivilized and uneducated barbarians, but Paul told them they were all related since, “. . . [God] made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth . . .” (verse 26).
- Paul’s generation prided themselves in the power and the vastness of their empire, but Paul said that it was God who determined the times of nations and their borders (verse 26).<sup>ii</sup>

How does our generation think? What are the politically correct notions of our generation? What are the philosophies of our culture today?

We happen to live in a generation that supposedly tolerates everything, believes nothing, and cares about no one anywhere nearly as much as themselves, right? Today, in our culture the customer is always right and the consumer is king.

One pastor recently wrote the ten commandments for the American culture of today:

1. have a good day
2. shop
3. eliminate pain
4. be up-to-date

5. relax
6. express yourself
7. be entertaining
8. be entertained
9. buy entertainment
10. make sure you get in touch with your feelings<sup>iii</sup>

Another author summarized the secular mindset of today with these phrases: “be as healthy as you can; live as long as you can; get as rich as you can; be as comfortable as you can”.

Secularism, which is the way of thinking for a secular world, defines the world’s thinking whereby man is the measure of all things.

This is not new. It means that everything is seen and evaluated in relation to you as a person. You become a little god. If it is good to you, it is good. If it is true for you, it is true. If it is right for you, it is right. There can be no absolutes, no moral boundaries, and no dogma. Truth is reduced to your opinion. And you should never try to cram your opinion down someone else’s throat.

Does that sound familiar? That is the pattern of thinking in our generation.

Paul warned the believer, then and now, with strong words.

Listen to what he wrote the Colossian believers, *See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ. (Colossians 2:8)*

Paul warned the Galatian believers of their, *. . . evil age . . . (Galatians 1:4)*

This is the same Greek word that he used in Romans, chapter 12, verse 2.

The word appears again in II Corinthians, chapter 4, verses 3 and 4,

*. . . our gospel . . . is veiled to those who are perishing, in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the visible image of God.*

The god of the worldview is none other than Satan himself.

Ephesians, chapter 6, verses 11 and 12, uses the same word again to warn the believer to,

***Put on the full armor of God, so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil. . . . against the world forces of this darkness . . .***

This age is a very dangerous place. The mindset of the world is a dangerous thing.

Do you know if you are infected?

The truth is, the easiest thing to do is exactly what Paul tells us not to do; that is, “Do not be conformed to the world’s pattern of living and thinking.”

However, we are by nature, conformists. By kindergarten, we learned that the last thing we ever want to be is different. “Monkey see, monkey do,” right?!

I am not calling anyone a monkey, I don’t think. But it is true, isn’t it?!

I continue to be amazed at the scene in which Daniel and his three friends, as well as hundreds of other deported Jewish men and women, who were Israel’s finest, were taken from Judah to the world empire of Babylon. I have seen, in a museum in England, a portion of the very wall that Daniel saw as he entered the empire city of Babylon. Huge lions are drawn and painted in gold on a towering city wall that is painted in a beautiful blue color. It is a wall so thick that at its top, four chariots could ride side by side.

Daniel and his three friends refused to eat the meat (considered unclean by the Jewish dietary laws of their covenant with God) and to drink the wine (most likely because it was offered first as a libation to foreign gods). The amazing thing is that Daniel and his three friends were the only ones who refused and demanded to be given simple vegetables and water. The king’s assistant agreed to allow them to refuse their diet for only ten days, and then they would be given a physical to determine their health as compared to the other Jewish deportees.

Daniel, chapter 1, verse 15, records what happened,

***At the end of ten days their appearance seemed better and they were fatter than all the youths who had been eating the king’s choice food.***

The sad truth was, when the finest from the kingdom of Judah were deposited inside the kingdom

of Babylon, all of them within days, began living like Babylonians – all except four of them.

If Daniel were living in this century, the average Christian would consider him to be taking his religion a little too seriously. For seventy-five years, he takes time away from his high level management position to pray. In fact, he prays three times a day. And, every chance he gets, he talks about his God. He does this so much that he has a reputation of,

***. . . constantly serving [God] . . . (Daniel 6:20)***

The average Christian would pull Daniel aside and say, “Relax, you’re in Babylon now. You’re making us all look a little strange. What are you trying to do here, change Babylon?”

I think Daniel would have replied, “Yes, I am.”

He went on, by the way, to convert at least two of his emperors to follow after his God. That does not mean it was easy, but it was possible.

Do not ever underestimate the power of peer pressure; do not overlook the weakness of your flesh to stand alone; do not downplay the awkwardness of being different.

I cannot count the number of similar testimonies I have heard from brothers and sisters in Christ who have joined this church who grew up in a Christian home. Everything was fine with their Christian walk until when? Until they left for college.

Within weeks of entering the college life, it was as if they left Judah, so to speak, for Babylon. And within weeks, they were conformed to their Babylonian world.

Be prepared! If you were automatically inoculated against the wisdom of the world and the ways of the world, the apostle Paul would never have had to warn you. He would never have written this trans-cultural, trans-generational command, “No matter where you live; no matter what century you live in, you are going to face the philosophies and the methodologies and the strategies and the fashions and the norms and the lifestyles and the patterns of your world.”

Do you know what they are? Where are you currently resisting?

Paul warns, “Don’t be squeezed into the mold of your present age.”

That means you had better be prepared to say, “No.” Say:

- “No” to secular thinking and “Yes” to spiritual thinking;
- “No” to social guidelines and “Yes” to the Spirit’s guidance;
- “No” to the world and “Yes” to the word.

Can you say, “No”?

Let us practice. You have heard your two year old say it all week, now it is your turn. On the count of three, say, “No.”

One, two, three, “No.”

Again, louder, “No.”

Look at the person next to you and say, “No.”

Now turn around and look at the person behind you and say, “No.”

When you walk out of here, you cannot be half-hearted about it; you cannot hold back!

Be prepared! You are about to re-enter Babylon! Get ready to say, “No!”

However, it is not enough to say, “No!” There is something you must say “Yes” to, with equal intensity.

Paul writes,

*... do not be conformed to this world . . .*

That is the negative command. Now, let us look at the positive command.

## **Positive Command – Be Transformed**

Paul provides a positive command,

*... but [on the other hand] be transformed . . .*

.

This is the Greek word “metamorphe”. It means, “to change from one form to another”.

Once again, it is in the present imperative. You could write an exclamation point after each of these commands.

Paul is saying, “Don’t do that . . . but do this!” “Don’t think that way . . . think this way!”

He is literally saying, “Don’t go on being conformed to this world, but go on being transformed daily.”

In other words, this is a continual process.

It, once again, goes against our flesh.

Our world is filled with inventions which meet our needs quickly and easily. There is instant food, instant communication, instant information.

I went from dial-up internet to cable some time ago. The difference was unbelievable. But today, I still sit in front of my computer and say, “C’mon . . . c’mon!”

If the former generation was the “me” generation, we are the “now” generation.

Whatever we are going to do, let’s do it now! Whatever we are going to enjoy, let’s enjoy it now! Whatever we are going to buy or eat or wear or plan or see . . . we want to experience it now!

In his humorous book entitled, *America on Six Rubles a Day*, the comedian Yakov Smirnoff wrote,

*Coming from the former Soviet Union, I was not prepared for the incredible variety of products available in American grocery stores. While on my first shopping trip,*

*I saw powdered milk – you just add water and you get milk.*

*I saw powdered fruit juice – you just add water and you get juice.*

*I saw powdered eggs – you just add water and you get eggs.*

*Then I saw baby powder – and I thought, “What a country!”*

You do not add water to powder and get a baby. Similarly, the transformation of a believer takes a lifetime.

Paul writes, “*go on being continually transformed.*”

The word he uses is the same word that gives us the biological expression, “metamorphosis”.

I have this week, researched the transformation of the silkworm into an moth – the metamorphosis of the caterpillar into an adult moth.

The tiny silkworm is born out of a tiny black egg. It eats mulberry leaves almost constantly for the first six weeks of its very short life. It grows to around three inches long before finding a little limb from which it begins a three day process of spinning its white silk cocoon.

If you can imagine, once unwound, one cocoon yields between 500 and 1200 yards of silk – one single, continuous thread that is ten football fields long. At a given time, the white cocoons are harvested and dropped into boiling water, and the silk thread is unwound.

Harvesting silk began in northern China. Beautiful silk garments remained a Chinese secret for nearly four thousand years. According to Chinese legend, the first silk thread was made when a Chinese Empress was sitting under a mulberry tree and a cocoon fell into her hot tea. She watched as the strong, silky threads of the cocoon began to uncoil.

What we do know is that the process of raising silkworms and developing the use of silk in weaving began in China, two thousand years before the birth of Christ. The Chinese would trade this precious silk fabric to the rest of the world along the so named “Silk Road,” and kept their secret until the third century A.D. when it was brought to Japan.

By the way, I found it fascinating that the greatest danger to the silk business is for the moth inside to successfully break free. It would leave a trail of broken thread which would be unusable to the industry. In order to keep this from happening, the silk farmers keep the moth from fully maturing along this process of metamorphosis. They do it by steaming the cocoons. They have discovered that, for whatever reason, the comfort and warmth provided by the steam actually stunts the growth process and the silkworm never fully matures into an adult moth. It finishes the cocoon, but never breaks free.<sup>iv</sup>

I could not help but think of the metamorphosis of the believer. I wonder how many Christians have accomplished so much and have given so much effort in their journey, only to never break free of the cocoon as a mature adult in Christ.

How do you break free of the cocoon, according to Paul?

## **A Plan of Action – By the Renewing of Your Mind**

Would you notice, Paul tells us how to break free of the cocoon; how to be transformed. He gives us not only a negative command and a positive command, but a plan or a path of action.

*... do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed . . .*

How?

*... by the renewing of your mind . . .*

Paul writes that the believer is transformed by the development of a new way of thinking – the renewing of our minds.

The Greek word for mind is “nous”. It is the center of logical reasoning, ethical judgment, and moral awareness.

“To renew our minds,” in the words of one Bible teacher, “is like deleting old files from a computer, completely erasing their presence and in their place, loading new files that come from scripture, through which the Holy Spirit refashions our minds.”<sup>v</sup>

Paul challenged the Colossian believers with this process when he wrote,

***Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom . . . (Colossians 3:16)***

Literally, he is saying, “Allow the word of Christ to take up residency inside you, opening your mind to its wisdom.”

The active role we play is becoming students of the word. The active part God plays is using the word to transform our minds.

You cannot be transformed unless you are informed. And again, that goes against our verbal, audio-driven culture.

One of my staff members sent the following statistics to me a few weeks ago:

- 42% of university graduates never read an entire book after graduation;
- 80% of American families did not buy or read a book last year;
- 57% of new books purchased in the United States are not read to completion, and most readers do not go past page 18 in a book they do happen to buy.

It concluded with this summary: “The majority of people living in our generation today prefer to listen to someone they perceive to be trustworthy to give them information, than read for themselves.”

Apply that to the church and it translates into believers driving across town to get under the sound of the word, without ever walking across their living room floor to get into the study of the word.

I want you to see something that is very important about this path to transformation.

Paul’s command to be transformed is, again, in the passive voice, which is critical in understanding that Paul is not commanding the believer to transform himself, but to “be transformed”. In other words, we cannot make transformation happen all by ourselves. It is going to take something else to actually transform us.

Paul’s letters to these believers tell us that transformation takes place as our minds are active in the word of God. They are then renewed by the word and the Spirit of God.

Paul told Timothy, “Listen Timothy, I want you to be,”

*. . . constantly nourished on the words of the faith and the sound doctrine which you have been following. (I Timothy 4:6)*

In the next verse Paul wrote,

*. . . discipline [train] yourself for the purpose of godliness. (I Timothy 4:7)*

One author provoked my thinking when he pointed out that the reason so many Christians give up on transformation is because we spend ourselves *trying* to be transformed, when the Bible calls us to *train* to be transformed.<sup>vi</sup>

There is an enormous difference between trying to do something versus training to do it. In other words, we are to train for godliness, not try to be godly. There is a big difference.

The Greek word for “train” is “gumnazo,” which gives us our word “gymnasium”. You can decide to try to get into shape, but you do not get into shape by deciding. You get into shape by training. Paul says, “*If you want to be in shape spiritually, go into the gymnasium of the word of God and work out – and the result will be increasing godliness.*”

Our church has a group going on a short term missions trip to Mexico. Would you like to be an interpreter? Would you like to be able to speak Spanish and share the gospel with the people?

Well, no matter how hard you try, you will not be able to speak Spanish until you are trained in Spanish. You will need to learn a new alphabet and practice the letters over and over again. Your eyes will need to become accustomed to new words, sentence structures, and accents. You will have to memorize vocabulary and practice pronouncing the words, making your tongue twist in new ways and with new sounds. After training, you will be able to begin speaking Spanish.

However, without serious effort and training, you will never get beyond, “¿Cómo está usted? Muy bien, gracias.”

I had two years of Spanish in high school and that is all I remember. Do you know why? Because I do not use it; I am not studying it; I am not refreshing my vocabulary skills – I am not training myself in Spanish.

So as much as I would like to be an interpreter and speak in fluent Spanish, desire has nothing to do with it – discipline does.

So the church tells people to live godly lives; the value of godliness and living like Christ. They leave saying, “Okay, I’m going to try this week to live like Jesus Christ. I’ll even wear a wrist band to remind me, ‘What would Jesus do?’. I don’t know what He’d do, because I’m not reading in the word what He did do, but I’m going to try anyway.”

Ladies and gentlemen, transformation is not trying, it is training.

You cannot be transformed until you are informed. A renewed mind is like learning a new vocabulary – learning to say words and think thoughts that you have never learned or used before.

Spiritual transformation is a long term endeavor. It involves both God and a willing child.

One author likened the process of transformation to crossing an ocean. Some people try, day after day, to be good, to become spiritually mature. That is like taking a rowboat across the ocean. It is exhausting and usually unsuccessful.

Others have given up trying and throw themselves entirely on “relying on God’s grace.” They are like drifters on a raft. They do nothing but hang on and hope they get there. Neither trying nor drifting are very effective in bringing about spiritual transformation.

A better image is the sailboat. With its sails prepared for the wind – ready . . . equipped, trained, alert to adjust sails as the journey continues.<sup>vii</sup>

The three types of Christians who desire to be transformed are:

- rowers;
- drifters;
- sailors.

## Conclusion

From this phrase in Romans, let me summarize with several statements.

### **Be alert: conformity is as dedicated as Christianity to winning converts**

1. Be alert: conformity is as dedicated as Christianity to winning converts.

The god of Babylon is passionate in winning you over to his pattern of living.

Paul told Timothy that the words of scripture came from the very breath of God and were profitable for every aspect of life, totally equipping

the believer in their life for God (II Timothy 3:16-17).

**Be aware: transformation of mind and spirit will never occur apart from exposure to the truth of scripture**

2. Be aware: transformation of mind and spirit will never occur apart from exposure to the truth of scripture.

**Be active: connecting the scripture to every life situation is crucial, if you want to break the old patterns for the new**

3. Be active: connecting the scripture to every life situation is crucial, if you want to break the old patterns for the new.

I recently read of a high school student who understood that peer pressure can work both ways. He went on a Caribbean cruise.

One night his friends tried to entice him into the ship's bar, but Chad, whose mother was an alcoholic, had determined to never drink. He was a believer and

had reinforced his mind with scripture that he purposefully memorized from Proverbs about alcohol abuse. He explained to his friends that addiction ran in his family, and then, he rather courageously quoted a verse he had memorized. He said, "I have learned from the Bible that wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler, and whoever is intoxicated by it is not wise." (20:1)

They replied, "Aw, come on Chad, just one beer won't hurt anybody."

He replied again with scripture, "Do not look upon wine when it is red, when it sparkles in the cup, when it goes down smoothly; at the last it bites like a serpent and stings like a viper." (23:31-32)

His friends turned rather sour at this and began to accuse him of rejecting their company. He quietly said, as much to himself as to them, another Proverb, "... if sinners entice you, do not consent." (1:10)

This is the story of a young man who is breaking free from his cocoon – maturing; growing; already flexing his wings for freedom.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 3/13/2005 by Stephen Davey.

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<sup>i</sup> Kenneth Boa and William Kruidenier, Holman New Testament Commentary: Romans (Nashville, TN, Holman Reference, 2000), p. 364.

<sup>ii</sup> J. Oswald Sanders, Paul the Leader (Navpress, 1984), p. 103.

<sup>iii</sup> Martin Marty, Christianity Today vol. 41, no. 3 (Feb. 1, 1992).

<sup>iv</sup> <http://www.enchangedlearning.com/subjects/butterfly/activities/printouts/silkworm.shtml>

<sup>v</sup> Woodrow Kroll, Romans: Righteousness in Christ (AMG Publishers, 2002), p. 191.

<sup>vi</sup> John Ortberg, Leadership Magazine (Summer 2002), p. 104.

<sup>vii</sup> Ibid., p. 104.