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**Series: Romans: The Just Shall Live by Faith**  
**Message: Christian Nonconformity**

**Transcribed Message**  
**October 30, 2022**  
**Romans 12:2**

When Bonnie and I left Dallas, we moved to a very small town in Kansas north of Wichita. It was something of a culture shock to go from living almost in downtown Dallas to a little town that had three stoplights when we moved there. When the culture shock wore off, it wasn't long before we realized that there were people in our community who were different than the rest of us. They dressed differently. They looked differently. They drove different cars. In fact, almost exclusively they drove Fords or an occasional Chevy. They were always black. They were always dark blue. Never with white walls. If you don't know what white walls are, ask your parents. Not much chrome. They didn't have TVs or radios. They weren't allowed to take pictures lest it become some form of an idol. They didn't smoke, dance, play cards or go to movies. They didn't do any of those things. If you had asked them, why are you living this way. Why this lifestyle? I don't know how many of them would have necessarily referenced Romans 12:2, but behind whatever their answer would have been, there would've been some understanding that we're not to be conformed to this world.

Down through the centuries of time, there have been all kinds of groups – ascetics and monastics – that have tried to live out what they understood to be the truth of this verse that is before us this morning. To live either in isolation or separation so that the world didn't crowd in on them and they didn't buy into the things of the world. Even in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in our own country, fundamentalists came up with their own list of things that you shouldn't do. They had their sinful seven and their naughty nine and their terrible ten and all of the rest of those things. Their motto was I don't smoke and I don't chew and I don't go with girls who do. That kind of mentality has filtered in to the church at various levels.

We are back this morning in Romans 12. By the way, thinking of our friends in Kansas, the men were not allowed to wear ties. Almost thou persuadeth me to believe

is what I said. But in Romans chapter 12 verse 2, we are introduced to Paul's statement that we should not become like the world. What does that mean? What does that look like? What does Paul have in mind? One thing I know. It's not a new message. You don't have to wait 'til Romans 12 in reading your Bible to hear God say to you as a follower of Jesus not to be like the world. It's all through the Old Testament. It's all through the New Testament. I would suggest to you as we look at these verses this morning, in every age the greatest threat to God's people is conformity to the world. The greatest threat to Christians is conformity to the world. God's word is clear. Don't fall for it.

We're back in Romans 12. Let's do a quick review. I start off by saying what a way to start your day. What a way to start your day. I appeal to you, brothers and sisters. I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God to present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God which is your spiritual worship. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind that you may prove what is the good and acceptable and perfect will of God. Those verses are some of the most quoted and some of the most memorized verses in all of the Bible. People have been memorizing and quoting those verses for centuries. To me, they're like the compass of the Christian life. They're literally the foundation for everything else that we need to know and all that we've learned about how it is that we walk with God. That's why we're taking these opening verses a little bit slower than maybe some of you want us to. But these are so foundational, it seems to me for everything else calls in to say in these verses that come after and all the way to the 16<sup>th</sup> chapter.

We see four things in these verses. One of them we've already looked at and it is that we're to present our bodies. We're to present our bodies. It was the language of worship we talked about. It is a powerful imagery as these early Christians would have easily connected with what that imagery of the Temple looked like to bring an animal. And in this case God says no, you are the ones who are to present your bodies. We're to do it as a living sacrifice. In other words, we do it every day. That is what I mean when I talked about what a way to start your day. Every day before you even get out of bed, just lay there for a moment and say Father, today I am presenting myself to You as

a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to You. that is in fact the most reasonable thing that we could possibly do. It is this picture that we've talked about repeatedly of the first 11 chapters of Romans. Now when we finally do get to chapter 12, we have this image in our mind that is forever with us – that over our life is this banner, the mercies of God. You're laying in bed every morning and the first thought you have before everything crowds in on you is I present myself to You this morning, Father, as a living sacrifice because it is the most reasonable thing I could possibly do in light of the fact that I'm looking up and I'm seeing over me the mercies of God. That's what that looks like.

That is 24/7 worship. There are 168 hours in the week. Some of you are here for about 75 minutes of the 168 hours. Let's be honest. some of you are here for about 65 of those if you haven't got the early part down. Some of you are here for a few more hours after that. Some of you are here for many more hours after that as you're doing different things and serving and are a part of different groups. My point is simply this. There's a lot of living. There is a lot of presenting. There is a lot of sacrificing out there. We come here to be equipped to go out there to be a living sacrifice. How we live out there Monday to Saturday impacts what we do in here on Sunday. If we're not living out all these truths Monday to Saturday, it's very impactful of what happens here on Sunday morning. But if we are 24/7 presenting ourselves as a living sacrifice, it is impactful in here on Sunday I can assure you. that's what's behind this.

What we're going to see in these lessons this morning and in the next week, we're going to start off this morning and say we are called upon to reject the world. That's the negative. Reject the world. We're to be transformed in our mind. That's the positive. And then we do all of this to prove the perfect will of God. So that's why. it's the "why" of it all. To prove out, to show forward the will of God. So we go from "what" in verse 1 to "how" in verse 2.

There are seven words that we need to heed. Actually, as you're going to see in just a moment, there's 8. The first word of verse 2 is an important one. It's the word "and". Unfortunately, if you're like me and you're looking at an ESV translation or maybe you're looking at an NIV translation, you don't even see that word "and". They didn't translate that into those particular ones. If you have a New American, it's in there. If you have a King James, it is in there. If you have the new King James, it's in there. It's in the

Greek text and it's in there for a reason. It's because it is indicating to us a connection. When we read verse 2, the very first word of verse 2 tells us to pay attention to what you just read back in verse 1. It's a connective word. It's presented to us in such a way that we go yeah, I just read about presenting myself as a living sacrifice. I was just reminded by Paul that I'm to be holy and acceptable to God. That then determines how it is that I serve. That determines how it is I live out my life. That's what verse 1 is doing. It is giving us the "what" we're to be doing.

Verse 2 is going to tell us how it is that we're to do that. All of the choices that we make, the decisions throughout the day, are wrapped up in the "what" of verse 1. I have made the decision at the beginning of every day that I am presenting myself to God today as a living sacrifice. Okay, then how does that work itself out? What does that look like? That little word "and" tells us that that connection is there.

The second thing that word does is it reinforces the previous truth. Go back to Romans 8 and verse 5. This is what Paul said there: "For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. For to set mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace, for the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law. Indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God. But you are not in the flesh, but you're in the Spirit." That is the connection, the previous truth that Paul just talked about back in an earlier chapter.

This is Paul again visiting this matter of sanctification, the fact that we are set apart to God. We are sanctified. The sanctification that he has in view here is something that is progressive. The sanctification that he has in view is continuous. It is ongoing. You never stop this side of death, this side of glory in your quest of sanctification. you never stop growing in your Christian life. That's the point that he's using here. It's just that little connective word reminding us of what it is that we have been committed to. It goes on all of our life. We don't stop. We never arrive. I don't care where you are in your walk with God. I don't care how old you are. Whether you're the youngest person in this room or the oldest person in this room, there's never a point that you start looking for the sideline and saying I've done enough. I've reached all that I can. No, this is a

continuous, ongoing, purposeful pursuit of the things that God has called us to. So, the first word is important, but so are the next four.

Let's look at those. the next four. Do not be conformed. We said in every age the greatest threat to the Christian witness and work is conformity to the world. I truly believe that. As you read the Old Testament you see that is the concern on the heart of God. Moses says in Leviticus 18:3 – “You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt where you lived. You shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan to which I am bringing you. You shall not walk in their statutes. You shall follow my rules.” Later on in 2 Kings chapter 17 verse 15, “They despised His statutes and His covenant that He made with their fathers and the warnings that He gave them. They went after false idols and became false, and they followed the nations that were around them concerning whom the Lord had commanded them that they should not be like them.” We could take the rest of the morning and read verses out of the Old Testament where God warns His people that the greatest threat to them was to become like the people around them. You read in the prophets, the heartbreak of God that His people have in fact become like the nations around them. This is the point here when he says do not be conformed.

Let's take a look at that little statement. Let's look at the grammar and what is presented to us in those four words. The first thing that we see is this is a negative command. This is actually the first command of the 12<sup>th</sup> chapter. This is the first imperative of Romans 12. We've got doctrine for Romans 1 through 11. We get to duty in 12 through 16. The first thing that God says, the first thing that the Holy Spirit has Paul write to the believers in Rome is don't be conformed to the world. The first imperative, the first command. Paul is if anything realistic. He's realistic. He knows we live in a fallen world. He knows we live in a sin-sick world. But he also knows we have a fallen nature ourselves. He knows that there is pleasure in sin for a season as Moses said of his time in Pharaoh's court. The world is attractive. The world is appealing. That's why out of the 10 Commandments, 8 of them are negative. Don't do this. Don't do this. Don't do this. Because we live in a fallen world and we're people who struggle. We saw Paul's testimony in Romans 7 to that very thing. Remember the statement of John Owen. You better be killing sin because if you're not, sin is going to be killing you. t

That's the word that Paul would say to us here when he says in this first command don't be conformed to the world.

The second thing I want you to see it is in the present tense. It's in the present tense. So it's stop being conformed to the world. It's happening. Don't be any longer conformed. It was happening. The statement when in Rome do as the Romans do – Paul would say no. No, not in this instance. No, you're not to be like those in Rome. It is a present tense. It is an ongoing statement and command and realization that this is a continuing struggle.

Then thirdly, I want you to see it in the passive voice. Remember the passive voice speaks of action that the subject is receiving. We're the subject in this case. There's something that is acting outside of ourselves, something external that is acting on us. That's the picture, that's the idea of the passive voice. In other words, stop letting the world put you into its mold. Or as JB Phillips said in his paraphrase, stop letting the world squeeze you into its mold. There is something happening that is happening to us.

Now there's a couple of different ways that can happen. It can happen first of all in just almost a subconscious process. It can be so subtle, it can be so discrete that you don't even realize it's happening. That's part of this picture of this passive voice. There's something happening to us and oftentimes we may not even be aware of it happening. Just think about the fact that we all view about a million commercials in our lifetime. Do you think there are any other subtle, underlying, subliminal messages that we're getting every time we hear about how we should look, what we should wear, where we should go, what we should drive, how we should smell. All of that. All of that is coming at us and trying to conform us into a certain image and likeness that the world wants to put before us. In some sense, you can say these messages are coming at us all of the time. Some of them we are aware of and some probably we aren't even aware of.

But there's another way this comes at us. It also comes at us and indicates that there is a permissiveness that is involved. There's a permissiveness that is involved. Allowing it, in other words, to happen. Allowing it to happen. Going along with it. Welcoming it into our life. Now you look at those two. Which do you think it is? The right answer starts with a B. It's both. It's coming at us subconsciously all the time. We live in

the world. It is also a response on our part at times to welcome it, to invite it, to receive it. I think both of those are in view.

Now let's take a look at this word itself. The meaning of the word itself. when Paul says do not be conformed. The word is *suschematize*. It is used only one other time in the New Testament. Peter speaks of it in 1 Peter chapter 1 and verse 14. Listen to what Peter said: "As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance." Do not be conformed to the passions of your former way of life. The same word that is used there is used here. Look at that word there on the screen. Look at that word and find the English word that's tucked away in there. Scheme. The word scheme is tucked away right in that Greek word. That says to us there's a scheme. There's a plan. There's a mold that we're being poured into. Just as JB Phillips said, don't let the world squeeze you into its mold. There's a mold. There's a scheme. There's a plan.

It seems to me there's a couple things to note at this point. The first one is this. If there is anything the world wants, it's conformity. If there's anything that the world wants, it's conformity. In fact, the world doesn't just want conformity. The world demands conformity. Today we call it the cancel culture. if you don't conform to the world, you get cancelled. The world doesn't just want us to be conformed, it demands that we be conformed. It will find you. You don't have to step out in some great bold display. Not anymore you don't. The world will come looking for you. The world will find you and the things that you believe will be made bare and brought to light. I'm hearing from people all the time who work in corporate situations who work for companies where they're receiving different kinds of training. Diversity training, inclusivity training, all of these different things that are happening in our culture. They tell me increasingly the statement "even silence is violence" is one that they're hearing. so it's not enough for you to sit there and receive the instruction. If you're not saying anything and if you're not affirming what you're hearing, then that's violence. You may in fact have a differing view that it isn't helpful in our culture. The world demands conformity. The world wants conformity.

I imagine a lot of you read the story of that CEO or the president of the rugby team in Australia. One of their major rugby clubs. A guy was named president. He had

been in business in Australia for most of his adult life. He came out of corporate banking. He had been the president of a major bank in Australia. He gets named to be the president of this club. It would be like being named president of the Yankees. It lasted less than 24 hours. Do you know why? Because he was a member of an evangelical Bible church like this. Somebody for the first time in his life evidently uncovered the fact that he went to an evangelical Bible church where the gospel was taught. He was the chairman of the board actually. Somebody dove into the archives of the church teaching and found something a pastor said in 2013 that was offensive to the whole LGBTQ group, and he was fired in less than 24 hours. He didn't do a great job in my opinion from handling it from that point forward, but the point is this. The world will find you and it will demand that you look like they do.

The other part of that is simply this. The other part of that is that if there's anything most of us want, it is to fit in. If there's anything we want, it's to be popular. If there's anything we want, we want to be a part of the cool group. If there's anything we want, we want to be accepted. We want to fit in. We all know who the cool group is. We want to be a part of that group. We want to be seen as popular and accepted and welcomed into those circles. Two words to describe this. They go together all the time. You know those two words. Peer pressure. That is what he is talking about. That is what he is saying. Don't let the world squeeze you into its mold. Don't let the peer pressure of the world force you to step away from verse 1. I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God that you present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God. We know that peer pressure is incredibly powerful. We know all kinds of studies that have been done that show that consistently and it doesn't matter what your age is. We think of peer pressure as just being for children and teenagers and college young people. It impacts everybody. We all are affected by peer pressure. We all want to be accepted. We all want to be welcomed. Paul is telling us here you have to drive a stake in and you have to say I will not be persuaded to be like the world.

Last but not least are three words – to this world. Do not be conformed to this world. What in the world are we talking about when Paul said we aren't to be like this world? The most common word in the New Testament for world is *cosmos*. it's a word that has got a variety of meanings. It can refer to our physical earth. It can refer to the



world of people. For God so loved the world. It can refer to the present evil age. Satan is the God of this world. That is the evil of this age. Paul doesn't use that word here. He uses a different word that's translated world here. It is the word *aion*. It's translated world here, but it's also translated in other places with the word "age". Look at it this way. A possible translation would be this. Don't be conformed to this present age. Don't be conformed to this present age. This present age in contrast to the age to come.

We've got two ages in front of us. The age in which we live. This present age. The age that is to come. Paul is saying to us don't be conformed to this present age. Don't be conformed to this present moment. Jesus speaks of this in Matthew 12 in verse 32 when He said this: "And whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven either in this age or in the age to come." It is the contrast between those two. This is what Paul says in Galatians chapter 1 and verse 4 when he speaks of the believers in Galatia. He says this: "Who gave Himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age according to the will of God our Father." So here's this contrast. This contrast we are not to give ourselves over to. This present age. You see his point. This present age is temporal. This present age is fleeting. This present age doesn't last. It doesn't satisfy. That's what we're not to give ourselves to. It stands in contrast to all that eternity represents.

David Wells in his book *Losing Our Virtue* describes it this way: "The world and worldliness and not conforming to that system of values in any given age which has as its center our fallen human perspective which displaces God in His truth from the world and which makes sin look normal and righteousness seem strange." You do realize that the world has no quarrel with the compromising Christian. The world has no quarrel with a Christian who willingly lets themselves be poured into its mold. They don't have any problem with you when you live that way. The problem they have with you is when you don't and when you won't conform and you won't agree that what is righteous is by their definition sinful. "It gives us great plausibility to what is morally wrong and for that reason makes what is wrong seem normal." Conformity to this age is to be wrapped up in things that are passing away. To have our thoughts, our plans, our dreams oriented to what is seen, to what is material, to what is visible, to what we can touch and handle and hold is to be shortsighted. If everything in this life is about the here and the now,

without any consideration about the age to come, we're living in a way that literally betrays the gospel. Over our life is the banner of the mercies of God. Over our life is a statement that says you're just a sojourner. You're just passing through. This isn't your home. we're looking for a city whose builder and maker is God. When we focus everything – our dreams, our plans, our inventions – all on this side, this present age, we literally are betraying the gospel of God's grace in our life. Parents, when your dreams, when your ambitions, when your hopes, when your plans, when your desires for your children are all centered around this world and this life, you're preparing your children to live for this present age. We're called to be different. We're called to not conform. We're called to Christian non-conformity because this world is passing.

Our kids are watching all the time. They're catching from us as much as they're hearing from us. I commend you, parents, who say Sunday morning is a time for our family to be here. One of the articles at our welcome booth is "Parents, Take the Kids to Church." It's impactful. It's important. The world says it's not. God says it is. What do we do? What are we to do?

First of all, we have to recognize that worldliness is like gravity. It is there. It is there all the time. It's always working and it's always hostile to God. We do not live in a morally neutral world. We live in a world that is hostile to God. Don't misunderstand. This world has many beautiful things for us to enjoy. Every good and every perfect gift comes down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variable nor the shadow of turning. He wants us to enjoy many of the things of this world, so don't misunderstand. There are things that we get to enjoy and we are to enjoy. But the world as a system is not morally neutral. It is hostile to God. The world, the flesh, and the devil are always conniving together to try to find ways to conform us. They are always looking for ways to pour us into its mold. You cannot be passive and overcome the world. You have to be intentional. You have to be engaged. You have to want it. You have to pursue it. You have to be committed to it. You have to be disciplined. That's what sanctification is. It's not let go and let God. It's you get engaged and you pursue it and you go after it and you be intentional. All across the board, whatever that looks like, that's what God has called us to do and to be.

Secondly, recognize that worldliness is not trivial. It can't simply be reduced to a list of things. That's the failure on the part of the church down through the centuries, thinking that we can come up with a list of things that are worldly and as long as we avoid those things then we're not worldly. That is not true. That's false. In fact, it is not helpful at all. But the New Testament makes clear. Jesus speaks of that often, that it is a grave matter of competing loyalties. It's a matter ultimately of heart idolatry. Why do you think Paul begins in Romans 1 by raising the issue of idolatry? Because that's what's on the line every day of our life. We're battling some form of idolatry. Who am I going to serve? Am I going to serve myself? Am I going to serve God? Am I going to give myself to the world? Am I going to dedicate myself to Christ? The battle rages. James says you can't love the world and be a friend of God. You can't love the world and be a friend of God. That's how profound this choice is that Paul puts before us. Love God or love the world, but you can't have both. Gain the world and lose your soul.

Then recognize the battle is in the mind. That's where we pick up next Sunday. In every age I say to you again, the greatest threat to the Christian is this matter of being conformed to the world. What do we take away? As I look at this, my friends, there's only two choices. There's only two choices. There is no middle ground. There's no muddled middle. There is either the world's way or God's way. You pick the one that you think really counts. You pick the one that is most important. You pick the one that you're going to invest your life in because you think it's going to last. That's the choice that's before us. The question before us then is where and in what ways have these competing loyalties already found their way into my life, found their way into my heart? Has the world come into my life in terms of relationships and how I view other people? Has it come into my life in terms of my pursuit of materialism and the things that I can collect in this world? Has it come in terms of my ambitions, my goals, and dreams of life? Does it come even in my understanding of who God is, creating God in the way I want Him to be so He could fit into my little world? Is it how I even view myself? We live in a world of individual self-expression and everything is about self. Make sure you take care of yourself. Make sure you're happy. All of the other things that go with that. Remember this. That wonderful statement by Jim Elliott: "He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose." God says to us do not be

conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind that you may prove what is the good and acceptable and perfect will of God.

I say to you this morning that that comes to us in the form of the gospel. All of our dreams, all of our aspirations, all of our hopes are ultimately to be found only in the gospel because that's the only thing that will last forever. That is the only thing that will introduce us into eternal life in which we will live with God forever. I commend to you this morning if you do not know Jesus as your Savior, I compel you, I call you, I beg you understand that this world and all the things in this world except people and the Word of God are passing away. You want to be a part of that eternal community that is going to live forever.

The way that you come into that amazing discovery is simply to say to God I realize that I'm a sinner. I realize that I can't gain heaven on my own. I realize that what Jesus did on the cross was all that needed to be done. I believe that. I receive the gift of eternal life based on my faith in what Jesus has done for me.

Let's pray. Father God, we thank You for Your word that speaks truthfully to us, that speaks so compelling, that speaks with such clarity in a world of confusion. You have simply said don't let the world pour you into its mold because of all that is in the world – the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life – is ultimately going to pass away. God, we thank You for Your gospel. We thank You for the people that You are calling to Yourself. We pray, Father, even now in these closing moments that You will open the eyes of someone to believe this gospel and trust Jesus as their Savior. We pray in Christ's name, amen.