

Be Yourself!

Romans 12:2a

Sermon Transcript by Reverend Ernest O'Neill

In our study today, God gives us a command that I think will deliver many of us from pressures that we have in our own personal lives. The verse is Romans 12:2, just the first part of the verse. "Do not be conformed to this world." You might be inclined to say, "Look, that's impossible. Our whole economic and social system is based on conformity. You can't have one of us driving down the right-hand side of the road and another person driving in the same direction down the left-hand side of the road. The legal system demands that we all do the same thing, that we conform to certain laws and behavior.

Our economic system depends on the fact of mass production and the belief that all of us will be prepared to wear thousands and thousands of the same kinds of blue jeans or the same kind of shoes. It is the same with our educational system. Our educational system works because it believes it can conform our brains to certain median curves, certain norms and standards. Even the Minnesota multiphasic test presumes that our personalities can be conformed to certain norms.

So really it is foolish to say, 'Do not be conformed to this world! Conformity is the very basis of our present society. We get up in the morning and brush our teeth with sex appeal, we drown those germs with mouthwash and then we drink that drink that 'isn't just for breakfast anymore'. We snap, crackle and pop our way through our cereal and fall into a coma as we drink our multiple cups of coffee. Then we all get into our seventy-mile-per-gallon cars and drive to work. We are conformists.

It is not really fair to say, 'Do not conform to this world'.

Others of us might say, "No! Not back to those sixties where conformity was a dirty word. Not back to those terrible sixties, when we all ended up dropping out together and ended up going and living that real cool life in the California caves. We all ended up looking the same because we were all growing masses of hair, beards and everything. Not back to those sixties when conformity was supposedly a dirty word, and we all ended up more conformed to each other than ever before."

Yet isn't it true that there is a little bit of a feeling inside each one of our hearts, that in a way the outward conformity does seem to be destroying something real inside our own lives, and we have a kind of yearning for what we were trying to do in the sixties, because we did see that there was a little attempt to rediscover some freshness and some individuality?

Now, loved ones, it is both of those real honest truths that I believe God wants to bring before us as we study this verse. Maybe it would be good to start with the words in the verse--"Do not be conformed to this world." And it would be good to look at what God really means by "this world." The word that is used is the word "aeon" and it is the word that we translate into the English "eon". It has the meaning of something very special the way that God uses it. If you look at I John 2:15 you will find one use. This is going to involve us in one of those so-called contradictions in the Bible. "Do not love the world or the things in the world."

Now I will give you the contradiction. John 3:16: "For God so loved the world..." Here he is telling us not to love the world, and then the other verse says that he himself loves the world. Now

why doesn't he practice what he preaches? Of course the answer is that it isn't a contradiction. Both the Greek and the English language have only a certain number of words to express the multitude of ideas that we human beings have. When God says, "Do not love the world," he means the material world. In fact, he clarifies it when he says, "the things in the world," whereas when John 3:16 says, "For God so loved the world," he means the world of men and women. God "so loved the world" of humanity. Actually, you get another meaning if you think of the Great Commission where Jesus said, "Go into all the world." It is the same Greek word, but there it means the geographical world, all the countries of the world. So when God says, "Do not be conformed to this world," he is talking about something deeper than just the geographical world-or even the world of men and women.

Actually, you begin to see that there is a more sinister meaning of the term "world" if you look at Galatians 1:4: "Who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age." It is the same Greek word, "aeon". Now, do you see that is a more sinister meaning? It is not just a neutral world, but the idea that there is a duration of time which is inherently evil. It is not the Old Testament times or the times that will come when Jesus returns to earth, it is these times in which we live when the characteristic of the time is evil.

God tends to say, "This evil world." It gets even more dangerous if you look at just one more reference--II Corinthians 4:4. "In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the likeness of God." Here God is saying that there is an evil world that is actually dominated by a certain power or person who makes it his specific task to keep us from knowing that our Creator is really the Father of Jesus Christ.

Loved ones, that is the beginning of the original classical meaning of the Greek word cosmos, and here is the definition of it: a harmonious order or arrangement; an orderly arrangement or organization; a planned system that functions harmoniously in perfect order. In other words, there is the material world of nature that reminds many of us of God--beautiful sunsets, beautiful lakes, flowers and birds. Then there is the world of human beings, many of whom remind us of God, too, and bring us closer to God--the whole world of humanity.

But then behind those two worlds there is a world system that is dominated by a mighty power of evil. This is the world that God is speaking to us about this morning--"Do not be conformed to that world." Actually, the issue isn't that we all grew beards or we all grew our hair long; the issue isn't that we are all drinking orange juice, or we are all trying to drive cars that give good miles to the gallon. The issue isn't those outward things. That isn't the world that God is talking about.

He is talking about something more sinister--a whole world--system or an orderly arrangement that a power of evil has going behind all these things. In other words, he is talking about an invisible, intangible world--system that operates behind all the things that you and I see and touch and hear. There is a hideous declaration that John makes about our world in regard to that unseen system in I John 5:19: "We know that we are of God, and the whole world is in the power of the evil one." Now that is very close to the kind of language that Jesus uses about Satan.

Satan is that spirit--being that rebelled against God in heaven and then was permitted by God to test our free will here on earth. Jesus talks about Satan as the prince of this world. He talks about him as having all kinds of angel servants or lieutenants who are the rulers of this present darkness. Even though Jesus says this evil one has no power over me, yet through deceiving the free will of

men he has gained control of the spiritual and mental fabric of our world. That is the world, loved ones, that God is talking to us about--a whole invisible world—system that can touch you or me through deception.

Now if you say, "Well, what is Satan's purpose?" It is plain if you go back to the beginning of the earth's history. He states his purpose in Genesis 3 when he first revealed himself to our forefathers. Genesis 3:5: "For God knows that when you eat of it (that is the tree of the knowledge of good and evil) your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." That is Satan's purpose. "You want to be like God? Forget that business of being like him by trusting and loving him. Don't do that. I'll tell you how to be like him--by getting to know how to work good and evil so that you will become as independent as God."

Satan's purpose is to deceive you and me into thinking that the way to be like God is not by trusting him or depending on him or loving him, but by using right and wrong, good and evil, to make ourselves as independent as he himself is, so that we ourselves will be gods like him. If you say, "Well, how does he propose doing it?" the next verse shows you. Verse 6: "So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food..." If you love God he will provide you with all the food and all the material needs that you really have to have. Satan says, "I will tell you how to use right and wrong to manipulate out of the world all of the food and clothes that you will need." God says, "If you love me and take care of my business, I will take care of your business and you will have what food and clothes you need." Satan says, "Forget that! I will show you how to manipulate right and wrong so that you can get out of this world all the food and clothes that you need."

"...And it was a delight to the eyes." God says, "If you will love me, you will experience transcendental relationships that will enable you to be joyful, day in and day out." Satan says, "I will tell you how to use people and drugs and pills so that you can get all the happiness you want. I have the knowledge of good and evil and I will tell you how to work this thing to your own advantage whenever you choose without bothering about God at all."

"... And that tree was to be desired to make one wise." God says, "If you love me, you will begin to realize how important you are to me. You won't ever feel that you are a nobody again." Satan says, "Listen to me, and I'll tell you how to use your mind to dominate other people so that you can be the important person in your home and the important person in your office."

That's it, loved ones. Satan's purpose is to deflect us from being like God and make us into God-imitators--people who are trying to usurp God's place. His method is, instead of us loving and trusting our Father and relaxing in his arms and doing what he has put us here to do, to manipulate things or work things so that we get from the world and from people what God wants to give us through his love. The killer is that Satan never tells the dear eighteen-year-old guy who is fascinated by the 650 Honda that if he trusted and loved God he would remain liberated and free and able to do what he really wants to do. But if he submits himself to Satan's world-system, he, in fact, will lose his freedom and will lose control of being able to think what he wants to think or feel what he wants to feel. His life will become a dead weight on him.

It will become a straight-jacket that will control him and constrain him. Satan never says that to the eighteen-year-old guy who looks at the 650 Honda and thinks: "That would change my life! That would take away the hum-drum, boring experience that I have and give me an image and a reputation and a kind of experience that is absolutely essential for me." The eighteen-year-old doesn't know why he can't get to sleep at night for the excitement of thinking of the 650 or of thinking of how

to get the money to buy it. He thinks he is making a free choice when he begins to commit himself to a slavish kind of overtime experience to gather together the money to get it. He thinks he is actually choosing freely when, like a lamb, he commits himself to forty-eight months of payments that strap him every way.

He thinks he is free and he doesn't understand why he can no longer control the worried feelings or control his mind. Loved ones, it is because he has become enmeshed in the world-system. It is a power!

We dear souls trade up eternally. We trade up our jobs until we eventually-- what?--we get ourselves into the job we can't do and don't enjoy. We think we have done it because we want to. But who would want to do that? Who would want to leave the many good jobs that they enjoy through their lifetime just in order to get to the top of some ladder where they end up in a job that they don't enjoy and that they can't do? We trade up our homes and our cars and our stereo sets until--when? We trade up until we get to the point where we are stretched beyond any sense of reason financially in order to possess them.

Then and only then do we stop trading up. We have ourselves in a position of a torture rack--incredible stretch--and we think that we have chosen to do it. The truth is we haven't chosen to do it. The truth is we have lost our free wills and our peace of mind. We have done it because we have become enmeshed in this world-system that Satan operates behind everything that we see and touch. The truth is we don't need the latest of everything; we don't! The truth is we don't need the best jobs; we don't! The truth is we don't need to scramble to the top of the heap. The truth is the old things we possess do the job just as well, and the peace of mind that we have in owning them is far beyond price.

Of course, the subtlest part of it all is when we say, "Well, we know that! We don't really want those things! I'm buying this because I don't really want it, but I just have a little bit of extra there." Isn't it subtle? We actually are deceived by Satan by the thought that "we don't really want this, this is just a little preference thing." Yet, isn't it amazing how on the job level, on the personal relationship level, on the possessions level, on the reputation level, we are deceived into making all kinds of stretches that take us just beyond the point of ease and relaxation?

Loved ones, that is what God is talking to us about. He is saying, "Do not be conformed to that world." He is saying, "I have a way for you to go. I have a relationship for you to have with me that will give you more and more that you are trying to get by working the angles. Don't be conformed to that world-system that begins to touch your life with its own evil powers. Begin to look to me and love me and put me first." Some of us say, "Look, you said yourself it is subtle. It is like heroin. It is like drug-addiction. I don't want to conform, but the pressures are unbearable in my office, the pressures are unbearable where I live; they are unbearable from my parents, from my friends. I have tried again and again not to conform, but I can't not conform."

That is a lie! I will tell you why it is a lie. If you look at just one last verse, Galatians 6:14:

"But far be it from me to glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world." When Jesus died to conforming to this world-system inside himself, he bent your man-fear. That is what it means. All of us were crucified with him and the world was crucified to you. He bent your man-fear, he bent your circumstance-dependency, he bent your things-addiction, he bent your personality, so that the chains that appear to hold you to this world-system have been broken. You can be free if you choose to.

You can be free this morning if you choose to, because in Jesus the fetters that bind you to that world-system have been broken, however much you may at the moment be deceived into thinking that you are chained and fettered. Loved ones, there isn't one of us here in this room who cannot break loose this morning.

That is what that verse means. As far as you are concerned, God has crucified the world to you. He has actually cut those chains and you can decide, "Lord, I am stepping back from this whole world-system that I have been using to manipulate some security for myself, to try to manipulate some position for myself in this world, to try to manipulate some happiness for myself. Lord, that's the end. Thank you, Lord Jesus that you bent me inside yourself on Calvary and that you have broken those chains. Thank you. I choose to be free today."

Loved ones, you can be yourself this morning if you desire. I think all of us probably have certain things or situations where we realize this world-system has got hold of us. You can break them this morning by an act of will because of Calvary. You can say, "That's the end."

That is why recession is good. It makes us look again at the things that we thought were essential for our happiness and begin to realize, "Forget it! None of those things are essential for our happiness." You could actually do without them all, and you could still be as gloriously happy as you will be in heaven.

Loved ones, I would encourage you who are struggling with some things, not only materially in these days, but in regard to your reputation and your job and all that kind of thing. Why not relax back and say, "Lord, I'm getting off this rat-race. I'm not conforming anymore to this world. I'm going to start finding out who I am in you and doing what you want me to do, because I know that will be freedom compared with this present slavery." Loved ones, you will not believe the free world-system that exists in Jesus!

Let us pray.

Dear Lord, we thank you for speaking to our own heart. We thank you for those many things that we wondered why they are there. We have wondered at our bitter envy and jealousy at times. We have wondered at our sheer vehemence and covetousness but now we see that it comes from a power beyond us. It's a power of evil that we latch on to when we conform to this world system.

Lord, thank you for showing us this. Thank you, Lord Jesus, that when we died with you on Calvary the world was crucified to us and the chains that fettered us were broken. Because of that we can chose that freely this morning to be our own men and women. We can begin to take our lives back under our control and then submit them to your blessed direction.

Lord, we pray for each other here. We pray for any loved one that feels they are in too deep. We pray, Lord, that they will have a little voice from you saying you make the move and I'll open the way up for you however bad it seems or however much it seems to cost. You make the first move and the thing will not be half as bad because of the grace I'll give you.

Lord, we pray for each other. We pray that we will walk in freedom from this day forward and walk free from the crushing burdens Satan deceives us into bearing.

Now the grace of our Lord Jesus, the love of God and the fellowship of the dear Holy Spirit be with each of us throughout this week.

