

Romans 12:2

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[0 : 00] Our text is in Romans chapter 12 and verse 2. Romans chapter 12 and verse 2.

And be not conformed to this world. Now this chapter marks a very important transition in Paul's argument in this epistle.

He has hitherto covered all the main doctrines of the Christian faith. He has gone through the doctrine of sin, justification, sanctification.

And then gone on to expound to us his own concept of God's sovereignty in human history in chapters 9 to 11.

He comes at this point in chapter 12 to the detailed application and practice of his message.

[1 : 23] And he's going on to indicate the bearings of his gospel to upon a long series of very elementary questions of human behavior.

In the opening part of the chapter, he has laid down the foundation principles of conduct which bind believers in all ages.

He says we must present our bodies in living sacrifice to God. He says we must not be conformed to this world.

He says we must be transformed by having our minds renewed. Those are the three main principles of what I may call the Pauline ethic.

As laid down in the rest of this epistle. Now each of these principles has its own relevance and its own importance. But I want this morning to isolate one of those principles.

[2 : 39] The one I announced as my text. Be not conformed to this world. I want to reflect for a moment.

What is the Bible's teaching as to our relationship with the world? Because sometimes we are guilty of a simplistic definition of worldliness.

And sometimes we are equally guilty of elapsing into what is almost an antinomian worldliness.

There are always those two perils. The peril of a simplistic legalism. And the peril of a very lax worldliness.

And I want to develop, if I can, two particular emphases. Which I think sum up the Bible's teaching on this matter of worldliness.

[3 : 51] The first principle is that the Christian faith is a world-affirming faith.

And the second principle is that the Christian faith is a world-denying faith.

And the particular skill demanded of us is to hold those two principles in their proper biblical proportion and balance.

The first principle is that the Christian faith is a world-affirming.

That is, they have a positive attitude and even a creative attitude to the world. We are told that God made the world.

[4 : 54] And that God made the world in Christ. And because God made it in Christ. The world cannot be evil.

It cannot simply be something to be avoided. Because it's God's world in Christ. It is a good world. Furthermore, God preserves it and God governs it. But God hasn't abandoned the world to the devil. And in the same way, we cannot abandon the world to the devil.

Furthermore, God has made the world the object of his common grace. He sends the sun to shine on the righteous and on the unrighteous.

He has given us ordinances like government. Which serve us with strength upon the corruption in human society. Common grace is a symbol of God's care.

[6 : 03] It's a symbol of God's involvement. And of God's continuing interest in the world. And it means again that we cannot abandon the world.

Again, we are told that God has loved the world. This world in all its wickedness. This world that lies in the evil one.

This world that crucified the Lord of glory. This world that hates God. This world that is in organized rebellion against God.

Yet, God loves it. And it seems to me that if we take all these emphases, we have a very, very positive perspective in the Bible on the world.

A world that God made. A world that God preserves. A world that God peripherates with his common grace. A world that God has loved.

[7 : 12] And for which God has sent his son into the world. And that surely means in practice. That we have to adopt a positive attitude to our own physical environment.

That environment which God has made and made in Christ. We have to learn to treat it in a positive and in a creative way.

We have to learn to look at it as the psalmist did in Psalm 8. When I look up unto the heavens which thine own fingers fade.

The psalmist looked with wonder at his own world. He looked with amazement at its vastness, at its complexity, at its beauty.

And I think that we Christians, especially we in our Puritan tradition, are so often guilty of neglecting that great strand of biblical teaching.

[8 : 32] We are sometimes so completely and exclusively redemption oriented that we have lost all interest in creation.

And that to me is a profound betrayal of the posture of Holy Scripture. And I'm saying therefore, let us look up.

Let us look up at the glory of the heavens. Let's look up to the beauty of our own environment. Let us look up to the intricacy and the complexity of the world, both as microcosm and as microcosm, this world that God has given to us.

Let us look for our enthralling. Let us look for our pleasure. Let us look for inspiration of this marvelous universe in which the Lord God has placed us.

Let us look and listen to hear that voice, that word in which the heavens declare the glory of God and the skies preach the work of His hands.

[9 : 55] Do we really hear that great word about God's glory which is spoken in the vastness and beauty and intricacy of our own environment?

Are we indeed sensitive as we ought to be sensitive to that great message about God's eternal power and God's Godhead and God's glory and God's wisdom and God's love which is spoken of and spoken so eloquently in and by the world itself?

Let us not be so spiritual. Let us, if I may say so, let us not even be so Bible-oriented and so Bible-fixed that we don't hear this other word which is spoken in the glory and in the wonders of God's creation.

Let us look up, says the psalmist, and see the beauty and majesty of it all. Let us look and listen to that word about God's Godhead which is spoken so eloquently in our own environment.

And let us even more, let us relate to the universe, to our own immediate and our own remote environment. Let us relate to them with a great positive and abounding, abounding creativity.

[11 : 31] Let us subdue it. Let us understand it. Let us explore it. Let us master it. Let us colonize it.

Let us harness its resources. Let's ask it questions. Let us push forward constantly the frontiers of our own individual and our own racial understanding of the world in which God has placed us.

let us keep it so that we pass it on unspoiled to those who come after us.

But let us mold and keep it. Let us till it. Let us make it more fertile. Let us make it more productive.

Let us make it even more beautiful because that is the mandate God has given to us.

It was one of the great achievements of the Judaic Christian tradition that it de-demonized the world.

[12 : 43] and by de-demonizing it made the whole scientific quest possible. Primitive man was afraid of his environment because to primitive man every force in nature had its God and all those gods were demons.

There were sun gods and moon gods and storm gods and thunder gods and rain gods and fertility gods. There was a God that did evil for every force.

And man was afraid of those persons. The Christian faith has done away with that perspective.

It has shown us that there is one God. Not a multiplicity of gods. One God for all the forces. And that God is the great God of holy love whom the Bible portrays. And once we have seen that then God's universe should lose its terror.

[13 : 59] I am very conscious and in some ways increasingly conscious of the power of our science and technology to unleash upon a race forces of awe-inspiring destructive capability.

and I am very conscious of how tempting it is in the face of all those forces to draw back and to pretend not to know and to call to an end all of the exploration of our environment especially as it moves into those terribly dangerous areas.

and I believe that we are so made that we cannot choose not to know. We are so made that we cannot draw back and I believe further that before God we have no right to draw back.

I believe that it is God's mandate and God's directive that the quest and the search must continue and that we must collectively keep on pushing those frontiers of knowledge further and further back. And the answer to all the terror and to all the fear is not to revoke the creation mandate. The answer is to find by the grace of God the collective wisdom by which men and mankind can meaningfully and creatively harness those terrible forces which is all unable to isolate.

[15 : 48] So I'm saying it's God's environment. It has God's launching. It is God's beauty. It is God's grandeur.

It is eloquent of God. It is meddling of God. It speaks of God. God's let us not be afraid of it. And those of us who's calling it is in the scientific disciplines in the technological disciplines those who's calling it is to relate to that world at such close quarters let us see that as a glorious calling and let us see it as one to which as people of God we can give the whole of our strength and the whole of our dedication because this is God's world and the mandate to explore it and to harness it is God's mandate.

So because we have this positive perspective because the world is God's world we are to relate to our environment in the most creative way possible.

but that is equally true of our social environment of the world considered not as a physical entity but as the world of the world considered as the social organization of mankind even mankind organized in a non-Christian way mankind organized even in its godlessness that is where Paul uses the word here the world is human society considered as without God and I am saying that even at that level the Bible has a positive attitude to the world in its worldliness let me explain what I mean I mean for example that we are required to acknowledge the achievements of the world in its worldliness many of the outstanding achievements of a race are achievements of unconverted men they're achievements in art they're achievements in literature in science and technology and achievements in giving us political institutions many of those things have come from the world against world men and we have no right to be dismissive of them simply because they're the products of men without grace or of societies without grace the reason why I read

Daniel this morning was because we find that man of God required in the providence of God to immerse himself in the learning of a non-biblical civilization he had to immerse himself in all the culture and all the learning of the culture and as far as we know Daniel entered into that work conscientiously and industries I sometimes feel that we have so negative marriage to so much of our own culture maybe because it comes as we know from non-Christian sources and what

[20 : 05] I'm saying is that the mere fact that these things are not Christian does not mean that we cannot legitimately immerse ourselves in them and I'm saying for the Lord that when we are called to read them to read books that come from an anti-Christian perspective to immerse ourselves in the quest of a non-Christian culture and a non-Christian civilization that we are not there simply to protect ourselves from contamination if we enter into those studies interested only in our survival interested only in non-contamination that we're going to lose so much because of the operations of common grace there is in those products of the unregenerated mind there is often a great deal of insight a great deal of value and a great deal of truth there is no reason why the

Christian church should not spoil those Philistines if one may use such a constant we have every right to explore our cultural heritage our literary heritage our philosophical heritage our scientific heritage even although those things have come very largely for long Christians if you go to John Calvin you find that that man was steeped in classical learning if you come to John you find there again was a man steeped in classical learning you come to John how there again was a man steeped in classical learning you've I've heard many stories about freed church students some of those men prepared for the ministry and they're told to study for example

Anthony Cleopatra they find the whole thing so distasteful they find it in some curious way almost obscene and their concern is simply with survival and that seems to me an unutterable loss it seems to me for example that some of the analysis of love and jealousy and of hell that these are not only marvelously moving but are profoundly true in their exposure of some of the deepest and most potent of our human emotions that as we immerse ourselves in Macbeth and Hamlet and all the self doubt and all the self questioning of these men in the collision between conscience and interest that there again there is the same superb insight on the part of a natural man into some of the deepest workings of the human heart and I say

I recognize their God I recognize God's common grace heart I see there is something which is for me as a Christian that I can use that I can learn from that I can benefit from something I can thank God for and so I'm saying let's have a positive attitude to those great achievements of even the unregenerate human mind but I'm also saying this because we have this positive attitude we are required by God to permeate our own society prepared bound to acknowledge its achievements first of all but bound also to permeate it that is something which the

New Testament is absolutely unambiguous I pray not that thou shouldst take them out of the world we are required by the Lord himself to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world and there is no way that we can be the salt of the earth if we live in monasteries or live in ghettos it is quite possible for us as Christians to immerse ourselves marginally in the world's commerce world's world's industry world's education world's caring professions and yet not to relate in any meaningful way whatever either to the process of which we are a part or to the individuals whom we meet [25 : 58] I don't know places of work and recreation and I'm saying that that is a complete violation of the biblical directive the salt must get out of the salt shaker it must interact it must be involved it must speak we must form personal relationships not only in our Christian circles but we must form such relationships in the world itself with the world where we work where we live where we play if need be you will know yourselves the distinction that Martin Buber draws between two kinds of relationship one which is an I thou relationship and one which he calls an I you relationship

I thou means that we relate person to person we speak we ask questions we show interest we care I you as the way you relate to a bus conductor or to a policeman direct and traffic you pass your money without looking there is no verbal communication there is no eye contact there is no real encounter and I put it to you that many Christians go back and forth from work five days a week and never relate in any meaningful way to anything that is going on in their place of work we don't form relationships we don't permeate we are not solved let me be bold or still we don't get involved in the politics of our own situation we don't get involved in our trade unions we don't get involved in community associations we don't get involved deeply do we many of us in our particular professional bodies if we adopt such an attitude we have absolutely no right then to throw up our hands in horror and wonder at the way things are going it is very well for us to engage in constant union bashing but how many

Christians and how many free church people take the trouble to attend their own local branch meetings it is unknown fact that there are far more evangelical Christians in trade union membership than there are marxists they are marxists they maximize the opportunities given to them within those frameworks the Christians meekly and sinfully absent themselves épices and it can only be put down to what I regard as a totally heretical position that we are saying the world can go to the devil and that's why we have withdrawn.

Now what I am saying is that we are bound before God. Bound because of the Bible's positive perspective on the world.

We are bound to permeate our own society. The church is bound in its official pronouncements to decognizance of the world as it is.

[30 : 42] The church is bound to criticize government, give guidance to government, but equally we as individuals are bound to function as the salt of the earth and as the light of the world.

We are bound to be in there. Let me go beyond that still. We are bound to acknowledge the world's achievements. We are bound to permeate the world.

We are bound also to evangelize the world. Now I do not mean by that for the moment simply or primarily that the church is bound to conduct missions or to hold evangelistic campaigns.

I very much think that it is. But I also think, and I think it more and more, that the illness lies upon individual Christians to bring the light of the gospel to them evangelistically into their own situations into their own places of work and leisure.

We have been sent into that world to hold fast your confession. we have been sent into it to give to all those who ask of us a reason for the hope that is in us.

[32 : 18] We have been sent out into what Paul calls a crooked and perverse generation. We have been sent out there to hold forth the word of life.

Every one of us has access to particular places. Every one of us forms a complex web of personal relationships.

It has always seemed to me absurd that Christians can spend the whole day, five days a week at work and never say a word for Christ.

And then one night every week they come home and change in dress and go round doors witnessing anonymously to strangers with whom we have no real relationship.

and I'm saying that as I understand it we have been sent by God into the world not only to permeate it we have been sent there to infiltrate it with the light of the gospel to hold forth the word of life to invite people to church to make specific arrangements with them that we shall meet them and bring them to church to answer their questions their objections so far as we can to react Christianly to every situation every temptation every pressure to open our mouths for Christ there is a great deal spoken about silent witness and most of it is nonsense there is no such thing as silent witness there is certainly an imperative that our lives should reinforce the gospel but that is all the life can do it can only reinforce how shall they hear without a preacher there is no way that my silence can tell men that Christ died to save sin my silence can provoke questions it can arouse interest but a point must come when we have to verbalize the gospel we have to put it into words and we have to be constantly on the alert so as to be able to identify the opportunity and take advantage of it and speak our word for Christ now the love the tact the courtesy and patience and wisdom that that requires is considerable people are not conversion fodder people are human beings

[36 : 03] I've got to recognize that often it's up to them to choose what we shall discuss I've got to watch that I treat them as human beings but what I'm saying is that our lives in society our lives are lives of constant watchfulness as we look for the opening of the door of gospel opportunity well I must move on so much for this first principle that the bible is a world affirming word secondly and I'm afraid much more briefly the Christian faith is a world denying faith alongside this great positive there is a long series of equally urgent negatives because the by the world lies in the wicked one because the world is hostile to God because the world persecutes the church because the world is an apostasy therefore there is an inevitable negation there is a separation there is in practice a long series of binding negatives the first is this that we cannot adopt the world's social preferences preferences we can't adopt the world's social preferences by that I mean this where do we choose our friends by what principles do we choose or let me put it this way what is our preferred company in other words as Paul in St.

Corinthians 5 the world chooses its own friends in a certain way it judges according to the flesh it asks what race a man belongs to it asks what color is his skin it asks what's his job what's his income what kind of house what kind of area how many cars what kind of school did that man go to what degrees does he have that is the world the world chooses according to all those criteria the Christian cannot choose by such criteria his preferred company is the company of the Lord's people and that common commitment to Christ is a great unifying factor in his social life and I'm asking whether in fact in practice that's so it is do we new students new intellectuals new sexual souls are you happier among people of your own class to the own level of intelligence is that more important to us than whether a man or woman is a

Christian do we really prefer the company of God's people even although they belong to the wrong class to the wrong income bracket to the wrong race and to the wrong strata of intelligence the second thing is this we can't adopt the world's priorities the world has its priorities what we shall eat and drink and what we shall be clothed with the world is obsessed with things seen and with things temporal the world is obsessed with income and promotion comfort and affluence and security it's obsessed with possessions with consumer goods it's obsessed with the socially and economically advantageous and that is all that matters before we know where we are as Christians we are swallowed into that same vortex caught up in the same scale of eyes and we forget that a man's chief end is to glorify

God and to enjoy him forever we forget that great word of the Lord seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness we forget that magnificent word of the apostle Paul for me living is Christ that's the way it should be but there are many lies today which began brightly began full of promise

from him the glory has departed because they have lost that commitment that perspective the blessedness has gone and the there and the zeal the exhilaration and the enthusiasm I've seen it and I've known it and others shouldn't it myself and I'm asking today whether we may not be required to face this possibility that we ourselves have gone dreadfully wrong in our priorities one can see it suddenly even in many areas of Christian service one can see it even in places that men and women must have entered upon in a full consciousness that there was no luxury there and no comfort and no affluence and yet they complain that there's no comfort they complain there's no luxury they complain there's no affluence and I cannot understand because they knew that they were turning their backs on these things by the kind of service with which they volunteered and I'm asking again well what is our chief end what is our priority cannot be security cannot be popularity cannot be comfort cannot yet in so many many chases it is so we can't other world's social preferences we can't other world's priorities we can't have the world's ethics the world's moral standards there is a point more elementary than that and that is that as

[44 : 25] Christians we must be careful that we don't fall below the world's standards because sadly the church sometimes does it behaves with a venom a discourtesy and a worldliness divisiveness that will disgrace the world itself we must be meticulous that in honesty and integrity and efficiency we do not fall below the world's standards and yet to conform to them is not enough because the social consensus the moral consensus in any community will always fall short of the Christian standard and if we are content with the social consensus then we have fallen away from the commitment of our discipleship for example in modern commerce and especially in the sales side of commerce there is a tolerance of many techniques that will simply not stand up by Christian standards and we have to watch unless maybe unsuspectedly we are drawn into an acquiescence in those commercial and professional practices that are violations of God's norm and even more so in a permissive society in a society with an escalating divorce rate an appalling level of infidelity in a society where promiscuity appears to be socially acceptable we have to watch again lest we ourselves slip and slip and find ourselves in a mess and say yes but the statistics that many men and many women find themselves in exactly this situation

I'm not all that bad not all that different by the world's standards it's so easy to find palliatives for our consciences in statistics as in other areas and on a worldwide sin today the church is littered with the tragedies that have resulted from lapses in this particular area the divorce freedom among Christians is escalating in Atlantic Australia to an appalling degree and a situation emerging where people can go through these experiences and still in the remarried status having deliberately and deliberately violated

God's norms of fidelity think they can continue their public discipleship to I'm very very conscious of the profound difficulties of the personal trauma of the non-simplistic nature of many of those problems the one thing I know is that no one can go through them no matter how innocent without heartbreak and without sorrow there is more than people commonly realize involved in God's great affirmation they shall be one flesh and once that physical bond is formed it creates a very profound psychological bond and a complex relationship from which

I defy any human being to execute himself painlessly we cannot adopt the world's ethical standards but I'm going to close on this we cannot adopt the world's attitude to Jesus Christ that is the radical and final point of divergence the world is prepared in some eras and some places to tolerate the Lord the world is prepared to admire him for his compassion for his insight and for his genius but the world will not bow the knee and the world will not take up the cross it's a terrible scene my friends but Christ says all or nothing

[50 : 40] Christ calls for total surrender but the world says if only that man were content to be liked and content to be tolerated and content that people were interested in him but that man wants to be worshipped that man tells us to get about cross and follow him follow him wherever he goes and yes that is the challenge that we follow that his feet are dead I believe that if we do that we shall find that we cannot adopt the world's social preferences and that we cannot accept the world's priorities and can't apply us from the world's boundaries

I believe that commitment to Christ involves a great pronouncement but I also believe out of your experience that Christ gave me back the world the world that he holds in his arms told me it's mine told me look at it told me love it told me care for it made me rejoice as a Christian not only in the glories of redemption but in the glories of creation there is pronouncement but there is also this great fact godliness with contentment is great because in

Christ all things are ours amen let us pray oh lord we ask thy blessing upon thy word and grace to understand it and to apply it in our own lives or own opportunities and our own temptations may thy word be your instructor our light and guide for thy glory sake amen for thy compliments so it shall in is if it shall pray Cas wa■OG excitedetos experience cups and have what it