

Roman 11:33 - 12:2

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[0 : 00] Are you a conformist? Do you want to be conformed or transformed?

Paul presents us with these two possibilities in chapter 12 of Romans and in verse 2 in particular. I'm going to spend a little time this evening exploring these alternatives that Paul presents, but just a little bit of the background to our consideration of this verse, really just re-emphasizing something we've already said, but maybe just with a little bit more detail.

So last Sunday morning we were considering the fifth of the five solas of the Reformation, soli del gloria, to God alone be the glory. And in doing so we considered how as believers we are to respond to God's glory, to God's character, to God's person as revealed very especially in the person of Jesus.

And we indicated that the manner that we are to do so is by worshiping God, worship that involves acknowledging God for who He is, praising God, and living for God.

And in the matter of living for God we pointed to this passage in Romans as presenting the logic of a life lived to the glory of God as being central to who we are.

[1 : 29] And what we noted last Sunday morning, and we're going to just note again, is that at this point in the letter, Paul having presented in the first 11 chapters this stunning exposition of God's redeeming work in the person of Jesus, he comes to a conclusion, a conclusion of worship in the light of all that he's been considering and penning in the letter. And we find that conclusion there in his doxology at the end of chapter 11, for from Him and through Him and to Him are all things.

To Him be the glory forever. Amen. It could be no other way. In the light of all these things, in the light of all these truths, in the light of who God is and what God has done, to Him be the glory forever. Amen.

And then he moves on in chapter 12 to issue a call to live a life to the glory of God. And then in verse 2, which is our concern this evening, he describes one aspect of such a life, the renewing of our minds. If we are to live this life that we're being called to live to God's glory, then it is necessary that our minds be renewed. If we just reflect a little bit on what we were thinking about this morning, if you were able to be here this morning, we were thinking about, you know, how can we do whatever we do to the glory of God? And towards the end of the sermon, we were suggesting some questions that we could pose. And as we pose these questions, that would help us examine if we are doing what we're doing to the glory of God. But, you know, even posing these questions and being able to answer these questions is something we're incapable of doing in the absence of a renewed mind. It involves the exercise of our mind. And that mind, in order to ask the right questions and find the right answers needs to be a renewed mind. And so, this is essential for us if we are to live this life to the glory of God. Well, let's think about this verse, verse 2 of chapter 12, that speaks about this matter of our minds being renewed. And the verses is easily divided in terms of three clear statements that it makes. And we're going to look at them each in turn. So, the verse begins with this call, do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world. So, we'll spend a little bit of time thinking about what that means, what it is, or what is it that we're being asked not to do. Then there's a contrast, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. And we'll spend just a little time thinking about what that means and what that involves. And then thirdly, we have a conclusion, I guess you could call it. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is. And we'll just think a little bit about that.

So, that's the way in which we'll be thinking about this verse, just in the order that you can read it there. First of all, then, there is this call presented to us, do not be conformed any longer to the pattern of this world. Now, in order to understand what is being forbidden, we need to understand what is meant by this expression, the pattern of this world. Now, the Greek word that lies behind this phrase, and it is just one word. It literally means age. It's a word that Paul uses on different occasions with a particular meaning. If we just limit ourselves to one other occasion where Paul uses this word, translated here in Romans as the pattern of this world, to get a sense of what he has in mind when he uses this expression or this word. So, in Galatians chapter 1, verses 3 and 4, Galatians chapter 1, verses 3 and 4, he's simply introducing his letter, greeting the believers in Galatia, and he expresses himself in this way, grace and peace to you from God our Father and the

Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from this present evil age. That word age, the same word that we find there in Romans chapter 2. The only difference is that here Paul introduces an adjective, the adjective evil. Jesus, who gave himself to rescue us from the present evil age according to the will of God our Father, of our God and Father, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.

[6 : 18] The wisdom of this age is presented in distinction to the wisdom of God, and by implication, it is that wisdom, what we might call received or conventional wisdom, that is false.

And we're no longer to conform to that wisdom, to the wisdom, the manner of thinking of this age, of this evil age in which we live. And the Galatians passage, as I noted, explicitly describes the present age as evil. Indeed, it is an age or world that we need to be rescued from.

Jesus came to give his life to rescue us from this present evil age, where we're no longer to think in the manner that those who are a part of this present age think, no longer according to the pattern of this world in the manner in which it's translated there in our verse. This age or the pattern of this world refers to ways of thinking and consequently acting, because as we think, so in turn we act, ways of thinking that are in opposition to God and in opposition to his wisdom, be that a conscious or often an unconscious opposition. Let me just give you some examples of the thinking of this age that we need to not be conformed to. No doubt we could give many examples, but let me just give you two or three to give this a little bit of reality, I suppose.

God's wisdom dictates that we are to separate one day and seven as a day of rest. At the very heart of God's creation, a creation ordinance, in God's wisdom he has seen that it is good for us that one day and seven be separated from the other. We set aside the legitimate activities and duties of the rest of the week and focus our attention on the worship of God and the enjoyment of fellowship one with another, that we would be refreshed and renewed. That's God's wisdom about how men and women work best. What is best for us? Well, that's God's wisdom, but the pattern of this world ridicules this notion as antiquated and repressive. You only need to see how, if ever there's some reference in the press to keeping the Lord's day, it's always in a tone of mockery of what a strange and antiquated way of thinking. You see, in opposition, God's wisdom opposed by the pattern of thinking, the wisdom of this age. Another example, and probably many examples within this area, is in the whole area of sexual behavior. God makes it very clear that sexual intimacy is to be enjoyed solely within an exclusive and permanent union between a man and a woman. The pattern of this world, or the wisdom of this age, rejects that notion as antiquated and restrictive and intolerant, and we could multiply the adjectives.

So, there's a very clear opposition between this age, the pattern of thinking of this age, and God's wisdom. Maybe just give you one more example. God's wisdom informs us that, and I simply quote the words of Jesus that are recorded for us in Luke chapter 12, a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions. But the pattern of this world declares a very different message, if not explicitly, I think implicitly. And the wisdom of this world tells you that you are what you drive, you are what you earn, you are defined by the job that you have and the salary you command.

[10 : 24] Or to put it in rather vulgar terms, he who dies with the most toys wins, as I once saw it expressed. So, you have the wisdom of God in opposition to the wisdom of this world. And the examples could be multiplied. But the point to stress is that we, as believers, are not to be conformed to this pattern, to this age, to this way of thinking, and consequently behaving. The picture is of being molded by the society that we are part of. That's what we need to avoid. Adopting its rules, living by its values, swimming with the current. And Paul says to the Christians in Rome that they are to live revolutionary lives, going against the grain, swimming against the current, refusing to conform to the wisdom of the society that they are part of. And to you, this evening, God brings the same message.

He places before you the same prohibition. Do not be conformed any longer to the pattern of this world. Don't be one of the crowd. Don't merge into the mass. Don't go with the flow.

I think there's a temptation for all of us to go with the flow. Perhaps for some, the temptation is more intense. I would imagine. It's been a long time since I was a young person. But I would imagine for those who are students and young people, you know, the pressure to just go with the flow, to just adopt the values of everybody around about you because it's so much simpler, so much less conflict, so much less problems if you just go with the flow, if you just think as others think and behave as others behave. And what Paul is saying is don't do that. Don't conform. Don't be a conformist.

Dare to be different. Know what you believe and stand up for what you believe. Notice also, before we move on, notice also the revealing little phrase there, any longer. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world. And the implication there is the default mode for all of us is to conform. That is what we ordinarily do. Hence the need to say, don't do that any longer. You probably are doing it. Don't. Don't do it any longer. If you are, we'll stop. And it also implies that we need to consciously examine ourselves and identify in what way our thinking, our attitudes, our values, our behavior is according to the pattern of this world and consciously and deliberately decide to resist that temptation.

Of course, it's not enough to stop thinking in a given way. It's a thankless and possibly impossible stance to simply oppose wrong thinking and consequent wrong behavior. God knows, and through Paul, he presents us with a necessary, we might call it parallel activity to not conforming, which brings us on to the second statement there in verse two. So, the first thing that we're told is, or the first challenge laid before us is, do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but rather be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Now, we're calling that a parallel activity. It's really more than a parallel activity because without this, without this transformation that is secured by the renewing of our mind, we're not capable of not conforming. What then are we being told to do?

[14 : 28] Well, first of all, we have this call to be transformed. What is required is nothing less than a radical root and branch transformation. To be a Christian is not to get religion or to be some kind of weird Jesus follower. It is rather to be the object of a complete transformation. The Greek word here, translated transformation, is one that you'll be familiar with. It's the word metamorphosis.

What Paul is saying is we are to be metamorphosized. It's quite difficult to conjugate that verb. Metamorphosized. That's what needs to happen. God wants you to be a butterfly, not a caterpillar.

God wants you to be beautiful. This is maybe best understood as we note another occasion when this same verb is used in connection with the Christian. If you turn with me to 2 Corinthians chapter 3 and verses 17 and 18, we find this same word translated here to be transformed in this context.

In 2 Corinthians 3 verses 17 and 18, listen to what Paul says here. Now, the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into His likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit. So, as Paul is saying is, is describing what's happening to us as Christians. And he says we are being transformed. We are being metamorphosized into the likeness of Jesus. And so, this is the call. Be transformed. Be like Jesus.

Be a butterfly, free and beautiful. It's striking to me, or it's something that I find interesting to note how this same theme plays out in different contexts when we're talking about living life to the glory of God. We saw it this morning when Paul was speaking about a very practical situation and giving advice on how to respond, how to behave in a manner that is God-glorifying. And ultimately, what did he say at the end of the section that we read? Follow my example as I follow the example of Christ. Be like Jesus. That is what is necessary if you are to live a life to the glory of God. And this transformation involves us becoming more like Jesus, and very particularly in the matter of our mind, of our thinking, which takes us on to that aspect of the second part. How are we to be transformed? Well, we're given the answer, by the renewing of your mind. And when Paul here speaks about our minds, we're not to think that it relates only to our intellectual faculties, but also includes a moral dimension. What Paul is speaking about here is what we might describe as our center of consciousness or perhaps more practically the faculty by which we think and make decisions. And this mind needs to be renewed. The verb is in the present tense implying a constant process of renewal, something captured by the paraphrase or the arrangement of these verses that we sung just a moment ago, just as we were singing it. I noted how it spoke about being renewed day by day. And that is indeed the idea that Paul is presenting. Now, in the light of 2 Corinthians chapter 3 and verse 18, the passage that we just looked at a moment ago, we'll not be surprised to discover that this daily renewal will result in a mind that is ever more like the mind of Jesus. And this is what Paul asks of us on another occasion when he writes to the Philippians in chapter 2 and verse 5. Listen to what he has to say to them on this same subject. Your attitude, or there the word literally that he uses is your mind, should be the same as that of Christ Jesus. I think the manner of expression that's in my mind is from the authorized version. Let this mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus. Have the mind of Jesus.

[19 : 04] And in Romans, Paul is speaking about how that comes about. It comes about by God's transforming work in us renewing our mind that it might become ever more like the mind of Jesus. And so that we would think like Jesus, that our values would be the values of Jesus, our affections would be the affections of Jesus. And the decisions that we take would be the decisions that Jesus would take. It's perhaps ironic that as a Christian you will perhaps be accused of being unthinking, of switching off your intellect in order to believe, of abandoning so-called rational thinking and embracing superstition. These are the things that we are accused of as Christians. But nothing could be further from the truth. To be a Christian is to enjoy a renewed mind characterized by vitality and freshness and vigor and straight thinking.

A mind like Jesus. How does this happen? You know, we're being urged to be transformed by the renewing of your mind. And you might say, well, that's an outcome that I would welcome. But how does that actually happen? Are we entirely passive? Well, the call to be transformed would suggest that no, we're not entirely passive. We must have a part to play if we're being urged in the manner that we are being urged here by Paul in our verse. It's true that this transformation, this renewal of our mind is a work of the Holy Spirit, but is a work of the Holy Spirit in which we participate actively by the study of and submission to the wisdom of God as revealed in the Scriptures. As we search the Scriptures, as we meditate on the Scriptures, as we study God's Word, this is the means that God uses as the Holy Spirit accompanies that to effect this transformation and this renewal of our minds.

But then thirdly, in this verse, we're told of a consequence of not conforming and particularly of being transformed by the renewing of our minds. We see that just at the end of verse 2.

Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is, His good, pleasing, and perfect will. A renewed mind, Paul assures us, will enable the Christian to test and approve what God's will is.

The verb in question here translated test and approve is one verb in Greek and has the idea of testing and approving with a view to doing. Maybe another way of translating it or maybe somewhat paraphrasing it, it could be the idea of discover and do as another way of understanding test and approve. Where it captures the idea not only of coming to a conclusion in your mind, but actually acting upon it. Discover and do. And this way of understanding what Paul is saying also has the merit of highlighting that what is being said is not simply that a renewed mind will grant the Christian the ability to know or discover God's will, but that such a Christian will do God's will.

[22 : 34] You discover what it is, you identify what it is, but then you proceed to doing what you have discovered to be that which God would have you do. But maybe one question remains for us just to touch on very briefly.

And the question really is, is this being presented, this conclusion that Paul gives, then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is. Is this being presented as the way in which we discover the will of God for our lives? You know, the age-old question of guidance in specific life situations. I don't think that is what Paul has in mind. In actual fact, what a renewed mind allows us to discover and do is that which is good, pleasing, and perfect as revealed in the Word of God, where these words are not to be understood as adjective describing the will of God as they're presented in the verse that we're reading, but rather what is being said is that the will of God is the good, the pleasing, and the perfect. And that sounds a bit of a riddle there, but let me just give you the manner in which the ESV translates this verse. And that, I think, captures this slight difference of understanding what Paul is saying. And I simply read from the English Standard Version, the translation of this verse. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind. Well, so far almost identical. That by testing you may discern what the will of God, what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. That is what you will discover, what is good, what is acceptable, and what is perfect. And so, be able to live in that way. Now, this is no small matter to be able to discover this. In an age of moral confusion and ethical chaos, the Christian whose mind is the object of constant renewal is granted the capacity to know what is good, to know what is pleasing to God, to know what is perfect. That is some capacity to have. We live in an age when so few have that capacity. You have people who are very clever. Now, those of you who maybe are in higher education, you will have professors who are very clever. Some of them are probably a lot more clever than you are. No disrespect.

You will have fellow students who are intellectually brilliant. They get top marks and you look on in envy at how sometimes they don't even seem to study and they get top marks in their exams. Very clever, very able, very gifted in that sense, and yet clueless when it comes to knowing what is good, what is pleasing to God, what is perfect.

And of course, they can't know these things in the absence of a renewed mind. And we have a responsibility, you have a responsibility, not only for yourself, but for others to think straight, to get your mind into shape, to experience what it is to be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that in your life you would demonstrate what it is to think in that way, to think in a manner that is pleasing to God. And you will do that as you refuse to conform to the wisdom of this world, to this evil age, and as you are transformed by the renewing of your mind, that your mind might be a mind that thinks like Jesus, and consequently, your life, a life that is lived like Jesus lived. Well, what will you choose? To be a conformist, to be a coward, to be a caterpillar hemmed in and shaped by that dead shell that is our anti-God society, hiding your true colors. Or will you rise up on the wings of a butterfly and fly, living a life that is good, pleasing to God, and perfect, living life to the full. This is our calling, this is your calling.

May we rise up to that calling and respond to it. Well, let's pray. Heavenly Father,