

Nonconformity Romans 12:1-8

INTRODUCTION

Very early in his life a Baptist preacher encouraged young John D. Rockefeller, Sr., to “earn as much money as he could so that he could give away as much money as he could.” Rockefeller later said that in that moment, he knew his life’s plan was clear.

Earning money became the most important thing he did, and by the age 33, he had already earned his first million dollars. As a point of reference, he turned 33 the same year that the Civil War broke out. At age 43, he controlled the biggest company in the world. At age 53, he was the richest man on earth and the world’s only billionaire. His weekly income was now one million dollars. And all of that power and wealth earned him the title of the most hated man in Pennsylvania.

That “success” began to take a physical toll on him. He developed a now-treatable condition called “alopecia,” a condition that resulted in the loss of all the hair on his head, including his eyelashes and eyebrows. His body shrunk until he resembled a mummy. He could only eat crackers and milk. He could not sleep, no longer smiled, and enjoyed absolutely nothing about his life. The doctors predicted he would not live past another year. The newspapers had gleefully written his obituary in advance—for convenience when the need would arise.

Rockefeller was raised by very devout mother, and out of respect for her he had maintained the habit of daily Bible reading, But the pursuit of money was his one true passion. Then one night, not knowing what else to do in his decrepit condition, he attended a revival meeting – a part of what would become known as the “Second Great Awakening” in the United States. It was then he realized with a new light that he “could not take one dime into the next world.” Money was not everything. God was displeased with his sinful life. Then and there he surrendered His life to Christ, repenting of his sins and pleading for God to change his heart.

He was genuinely a new man. He began to help churches with his amassed wealth. He developed ways to care for the poor and needy. He established the Rockefeller Foundation whose funding of medical researchers led to the discovery of penicillin and other wonder drugs. And amazingly he began to sleep and eat well and to enjoy life once again.

Rockefeller was 53 years old when the doctors had predicted he would not live to age 54. He died in 1937, just five weeks shy of his 99th birthday.

It’s interesting how Rockefeller’s life was divided into two distinct periods – almost two halves of equal length. For most of his first 53 years he pursued an agenda that was very consistent with what the world system values. A life exemplified by a bumper sticker slogan:

He who dies with the most toys wins.

And Rockefeller accumulated the most toys. One article I read said that if you adjusted Rockefeller's wealth to today's standards, the richest men alive today would still be a distant second to him.

But the second half of his life was different. Something different was motivating him now. Something other than the world system that characterized and dominated the first half.

For purposes of this sermon, Rockefeller's life is a perfect example of the distinction offered in this week's memory verse:

Do not conform to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will. (Romans 12:2)

And our foundational truth is this:

Knowing God's will for your life requires a transformation in your thinking.

It's a picture of all our lives. Let me break that down like this:

#1: THE FIRST HALF: CONFORMING

The first half of the verse corresponds to the first half of our lives:

Do not conform to the pattern of this world ... (Romans 12:2)

Conforming comes naturally to us. It is part of the fallen nature instilled in us as we were formed in our mother's womb.

Conforming is all about experiencing the best this world has to offer at the expense of missing God's best.

The conformed Christian never gets to experience God's best in this life because they settle for less. Their focus is on the things they see which are all temporary. In the eyes of the world, they may appear successful because they have defined their success according to the standards of the world.

I have always liked how the JB Phillips translation states this first half:

Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mold... (Romans 12:2, JB Phillips)

I spent this past week working on plans for the Advent and Christmas season. I do that in August so our various ministries – like music – have time to plan accordingly. And I do it

so that I can pace my preparation for all those additional services. But right now my mind is sort of in Christmas mode ... which is why this illustration came to my mind.

Each Christmas there are standard sweet treats that have to be made.

- I'm in charge of the peanut brittle and fudge.
- Karen does everything else ... like Hershey kiss cookies, a caramel brownie, and of course her great-grandmother's sorghum cookies. Her entire family looks forward to eating those.
 - These cookies require cookie-cutters to make. Stars, trees, Santa, wreaths. All different sizes and shapes. Each one cut by a mold to look a certain way.

In our memory verse Paul advises us to not let the world define your shape. Don't be squeezed into their mold. If you allow the world to determine your shape, you will end up looking a lot like the world looks.

- It is a pressure for us individually and for us as a congregation.
- The world has definite opinions about how we should look.
- But in the long run, that approach gets us nowhere.

Here's how the Apostle John frames it:

For everything in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away ... (1 John 2:16)

But there is still a second half to play.

#2: THE SECOND HALF: TRANSFORMING

The second half of the verse and of our life is characterized by transforming. Here is how our memory verse puts it:

Do not conform to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. (Romans 12:2)

The word "transformed" is the word from which we get our English word is ...

Metamorphosis

An outward change that reflects a new inner reality.

It's a metamorphosis of the mind. A re-booting – a redeeming – of our thinking and our point of view.

- I could have easily chosen verse 1 as our memory verse this week, for it follows well last week's verse.
- You remember last week's verse, right?

For God has bound everyone over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all. (Romans 11:32)

Verse 1 says this:

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. (Romans 12:1)

When you do God will change your way of thinking. He will transform your mind. He helps you to ...

1. Guard What You Let Into Your Mind

- This means He draws you away from some people and toward others. In so doing He helps you to be influenced by those who share your new kingdom values.
- In 1 Corinthians 15:33 Paul reminds us:

Do not be misled: Bad company corrupts good character. (1 Corinthians 15:33)

2. Guard What You Put Into Your Mind

- This means He helps you must be intentional in what you watch, listen to and read. All these things feed your mind and are either helping your transformation or they are hurting it.
- Again, Paul gives us some good advice

Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable — if anything is excellent or praiseworthy — think about such things. (Philippians 4:8)

When this second half is achieved ...

#3: THE RESULT: KNOWING GOD'S WILL FOR YOUR LIFE

Our memory verse says:

Do not conform to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will. (Romans 12:2)

There is nothing in this life that can substitute completing and finishing the course that God has laid out for your life. There is no greater joy. The challenges may be harder. The sacrifices may be greater. But in them are the joy and satisfaction that makes it all worth it.

Imagine the joy on that day when you stand before the Lord and he says well done, good and faithful servant. You only get to that place through the necessary sacrifice and transformation that is required now. It won't be the easiest road but it is the road worth traveling.

Amen