

Breaking Free

Romans 12:1,2

Message by Dr. R Bruce Montgomery ~ Grace Church ~ 1/8/17

The illustration on the front of your bulletins and on the screen gives us a clue about our topic this morning. We are going to be looking at how we can break out of this world's mold and become who God created us to be.

By now you should be getting familiar with two key verses in Romans. They were our text for two sermons (one before Christmas and last week).

We've talked about offering our **bodies** to God as instruments for his service, and last week we looked at what God's will looks like. Today we're going to talk about the renewal of our **minds**.

Romans 12:2a *Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.*

Living Bible: *Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world*

J.B. Phillip's paraphrase: *"don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mold."*

Both are good paraphrases.

Do not conform is a compound word with the root word **scheme**. We get, for instance our English word **schematic** from it. So the verse means, *"Don't let the world force you into its scheme of thinking and behaving."*

The idea is that the world has its ways of thinking and doing things, and is constantly exerting pressure on Christians to conform to them.

Easier to conform, to imitate, to fit in, than to stand out from the crowd. We're told, *"When in Rome, do as the Romans do."* That philosophy may be prudent or work in some cases, but conforming to the world system is spiritually fatal.

This is a strong warning against what is often referred to as **worldliness**. But what exactly does **worldliness** mean?

Growing up in fundamentalist circles "worldly" was a term used for things like smoking, drinking, dancing, playing

cards and going to the movies. A Christian girl would say:

*I don't smoke, and I don't chew
And I don't go with boys that do.*

It is certainly true that as citizens of heaven our lifestyle and conversation should reflect that our ways are not the ways of everyone around us. As the song says, *"This world is not my home, we're just a passing through."*

Our conduct here should reflect the fact that we expect to go to heaven.

But Paul is warning about something much more serious and subtle than certain outward behaviors.

We get a clue about what he is talking about when we read the alternative of being **conformed**, when he explains that we are **transformed** by the **renewing of our minds**.

So Paul is referring to a way of **thinking**, not just behaving. What we do **is** determined by what we think. That is why it is so important to go beyond outward conformity to a list of do's and don'ts and allow God to change our minds, our attitudes, our outlook, and our perspectives

The worldliness we are to repudiate and break free from is this world's **worldview**.

Probably the best single word in English to describe this world's mental framework and value structure - is **secularism**.

Our English word **secular** comes from the Latin **saeculum** which means **age**. The word translated **world** in our English Bibles in verse 2 is the exact Greek equivalent: **age (aion)**.

A literal translation would be **do not be conformed to this present age**.

In other words, "do not have a **secular worldview**."

So what is secularism? Secularism is a philosophy that operates as if this age and this world is all there is.

It is illustrated by Carl Sagan's statement in the TV series **cosmos**. Pictured standing before a spectacular view of the heavens with swirling galaxies, he would say **"the cosmos is all that ever was or ever will be."**

Rejecting anything supernatural, secularism is entirely bound up by the limits of the material universe - what can be

seen and touched and measured and weighed. It operates within the limits of life on earth.

We don't have time to go into detail, but some of the spin-offs or subsets of secularism are humanism, materialism and relativism. If there is no God, then there are no moral absolutes, and everything is up for grabs.

When it comes to the element of time, secularism thinks only of the "now," disregarding eternity.

This outlook has many harmful repercussions. For example, if now is the only thing that matters, why should we worry about the national debt? That's not our problem! Let our children worry about that. Why study hard when you're young to do meaningful work later in life, when you can have a good time right now? And most dangerous of all, why should I worry about God or righteousness or salvation or judgment or heaven or hell if now is all that really matters?

R.C. Sproul writes, "*For secularism, all life, every human value, every human activity must be understood in light of this present time. . . . What matters is now and only now. All access to the above and the beyond is blocked. There is no exit from the confines of this present world. The secular is all that we have. We must make our decisions, live our lives, make our plans, all within the closed arena of this time – the here and now.*"¹

This worldview has permeated every conceivable place and circumstance. We are surrounded by it every single day of our lives. But it is precisely this restrictive mold that we must refuse to be squeezed into!

Let's turn to another passage in which Paul talks about the nature of the world system from which believers have been rescued **Ephesians 4:17 ff.**

Characteristics of people caught up in the present world system: (1) Futile thinking

Ephesians 4:17 *So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking*

God created the human mind so we would be able to comprehend his revelation, but due to the fall our minds are not able to perceive the revelation for which they were designed. And so our thinking is diagnosed as being futile.

Godless people think they are going to find fulfillment, but the fact of the matter is their way of thinking is empty. And so, no matter how much they put their minds to it, they can find no happiness, experience no real fulfillment.

(2) Darkened understanding. Ephesians 4:18 *They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts.*

They don't have any knowledge of the eternal. They are limited to their experiences, which is driven by their instincts and bodily urges. And so they don't see or understand what they need to see and understand.

The unsaved person thinks he is enlightened because he has rejected the Bible and believes the current philosophies expounded by the supposed thinkers of our culture, but in reality he is in the dark.

The godless culture has an ally - Satan has a role in their clouded minds – **"The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ. . . ." II Co. 4:4.**

This darkened understanding results in:

(3) Spiritual separation – separated from the life of God. That sums up the tragic state of affairs for those caught up in living for themselves according to the world's standards. You can live like that if you choose, but it carries a huge price tag. You are alienated from God. You don't have God with you now, and you will not have God with you ever.

What is behind this ignorance that results in separation from the life of God? What causes it, how could any thinking person choose that path?

(4) Hardening of heart

The Greek word for "*hardening*" comes from the word *poros* – a stone harder than marble. It's the same word Mark uses to describe the hearts of those in the synagogue who

¹ R.C. Sproul, *Lifeviews: Understanding the Ideas that Shape Society Today* (Old Tappan, N.J.: Fleming H. Revell, 1986), p. 35.

decided to kill Jesus when they witnessed him healing the man with the withered hand on the Sabbath.

It was also a medical term. The verb meant to petrify or harden. It could be used to refer to joints stiffening, or the process by which broken bones were united through the growth of new bone or cartilage.

What Paul is saying is that the *ethnos*, people in the world, have willfully hardened themselves against God.

People caught up in the delusion of this world have recurring opportunities to respond to God, but they refuse to change.

Their repeated choices may seem like “*just a little thing*” at the time. It’s “*no big deal*,” they rationalize, but repeated, stubborn refusals of God’s grace build up such calluses that God’s revelation cannot penetrate their hearts or their minds.

Vs. 19 says they have “*lost all sensitivity*.” Because of the sclerosis of the heart, there’s no flow of life-sustaining “blood,” no spiritual juices to the brain, so the brain begins to darken and harden as well. They are beyond feeling, like calloused skin.

Having lost all sensitivity, they wallow in

(5) Sensuality with a continual lust for more.

Ephesians 4:19b *they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more.*

Spiritual pathology of sin is that every time you indulge yourself you will need more. Our lusts are greedy, their appetite is never satisfied. They continually demand more and more. We keep hoping that “one more drink,” “one more fix,” will make everything better. But it only makes things worse.

The issues are epidemic among us: the allurements of the Internet, the allure of money, the pull of power, the seduction of alcohol, or drugs, or illicit sex, the fascination with entertainment. That’s to name a few.

Any way you look at us, the world has a clutch on us! Godless society wants to squeeze us into its mold. It wants us to think like it thinks and act like it acts.

But the truth is, that is not the way to find peace, to find happiness, to find fulfillment. What is the way?

Instead be transformed by the renewing of your minds

The world wants to control your mind, but God wants to transform your mind. The word **transform** is the same as **transfigure** in Matthew 17:2.

It has come into our English language as *metamorphosis*. It means “*to be changed from one thing into another.*” It’s the word used to describe what happens to turn a lowly caterpillar into a beautiful butterfly.

As our minds become renewed they no longer evaluate things as they once did. The Christian minds the things of the Spirit, a thing he never did before, and ceases minding the things of the flesh, which he/she always did before.

When we change the way we think, it shows in the way we use our bodies. Three things about this metamorphosis:

(1) It is an ongoing process. Two processes are going on all the time – refusing to be squeezed into the world’s mold, and being transformed by the renewing of our mind.

Both verbs are in a continual tense. Transformation doesn’t happen to us automatically when we believe. God’s Spirit comes to live in us, and he provides a whole new orientation to our thinking, but our thinking isn’t instantly changed. Not always easy to get out of the old ruts of life. Some of our ways are deeply ingrained, and they don’t disappear overnight.

We still fight mental habits and ways of thinking on a daily basis. Renewing our minds is a process similar to deleting files from a **computer** and replacing them with new files.

(2) It is an internal process. The world wants to change your mind, so it exerts pressure from without. But the Holy Spirit transforms you from the inside out by renewing how you think.

We’re not just talking about rearranging behaviors, some sort of external change. Paul is talking about an inner transformation so profound it reaches to the very core of our being.

He’s talking about a transformation that will affect the way we act, the way we talk, the way we think. Not just how we look, but our very outlook will be drastically changed. So much

so, that people will have to look at us twice to recognize us, because there's been such a radical change.

To change analogies, We're not just talking about a minor remodel – hanging new wallpaper or changing the curtains – no, it's a total home makeover.

(3) It is a process we cannot accomplish on our own.

Unfortunately, we cannot change ourselves. The exhortation to be transformed is what Chuck Swindoll called “*a cooperative command.*” As we submit bodies and minds to the Lord, he does the transforming. The Holy Spirit renovates us from the inside out. Gradually and supernaturally our mind begins to think as God thinks, to see things as God sees them, to desire what God desires, to love as God loves.

God wants to reprogram our thinking, but we must respond to the Spirit's work and actively engage in the process if it is to happen.

Our job is to cooperate with God's Spirit by feeding into our minds information that will reprogram our thinking in line with kingdom values and perspectives.

Our minds are not renewed:

- by watching more TV
- by spending more time on social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.)
- not even by reading more self-help books or attending more positive thinking seminars.

You've heard the expression, “*you are what you eat.*” Let me also suggest that spiritually “*you are what you think.*”

As the writer of Proverbs said, “*as a man thinketh in his heart, so is he.*”

A key question is: What are we feeding into our minds? If we spend all our discretionary time watching network television, reading secular books, and listening to secular music, it is no wonder our minds and worldview are overwhelmingly secular.

Mind renewal comes only through reprogramming via inputting TRUTH – God's revelation through his Holy Word illuminated by the Holy Spirit. Importance of daily feeding on the Word of God. . .

Without the study of God's Word we will remain in the world's mold, unable to think and act as Christians. With that study, illuminated and empowered by the Holy Spirit of God, we will become more like Jesus Christ, and become radiant lights in the darkness.

Conclusion

The word *transformed* appears only four times in the Bible– here in our text, in two gospels referring to Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration, and the other place is **II Corinthians 3:18** *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.*

Butterfly Song

Longer (sung by the Boone Sisters)

*In the land of caterpillars with its dandelion pillars,
For the worms there was no world beyond their town.
They didn't know a bird could fly;
They'd never seen a sunlit sky.
Their eyes were always facing down;
Their lives were fastened to the ground.
In the land of caterpillars with its dandelion pillars.*

*But one young caterpillar saw
That they were blinded by their law.
He spent his lifetime showing them the sky.
He said he'd fly just like the birds
Some said 'take me,' some said 'absurd.'
'Yes, someday I will fly,' he said.
'But first I have to die.'
In the land of caterpillars with its dandelion pillars.*

*Then they led him to a fallen leaf, to see the caterpillar
chief,
Who questioned him and sentenced him to die.
So he made him spin himself a tomb
But nature changed it to a womb*

And he was born again to fly, and be the world's first butterfly.

In the land of caterpillars with its dandelion pillars.

*Butterfly, Butterfly,
Won't you please teach us to fly?
You told us that you would someday;
But we thought it was a lie.*

*Then the wind breathed out a sigh,
And filled the air with his reply.
He whispered as he fluttered by:
"You only have to die."*

A man lived very long ago, a man of sorrow, man of woe,

*He came to open up our earth bound lives.
What once was his cocoon is now, a dark and empty*

tomb.

The day he went to die for me, he showed me how to fly, you see,

He showed me how to fly.

*Butterfly, butterfly, won't you please teach us to fly
You told us that you would someday
But we thought it was a lie.
Then the wind breathed out a sigh
And filled the air with his reply.
He whispered as he fluttered by
"You only have to die."
"You only have to die."*

By God's grace and the enabling of the Holy Spirit my prayer for each of us is that we learn what it is to die to self – giving God our bodies, and our minds, and so becoming more like Him.