

Swimming Upstream

Romans 12:2

There are times when we need a new look at a familiar verse. The ESV translates the first part of Romans 12:2 this way: **“Do not be conformed to this world.”** Simple, clear, and concise. But what exactly does Paul mean? Other translations bring out various shades of meaning:

“Do not act like the sinful people of the world” (New Life).

“Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Do not be conformed to this world (this age), [fashioned after and adapted to its external, superficial customs]” (Amplified).

“Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world” (New Living Translation).

And then there is the famous rendering by J. B. Phillips:

“Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mold.”

In this message I want to do two things:

First, I want to examine that little phrase to see what it means.

Second, I want us to think together about how it applies to us today.

The general meaning is clear if we take all the different translations and paraphrases together. *We are not like the people around us, and we shouldn't act like them. We must not try so hard to fit in that we no longer think and act like Christians.* This verse reminds us the world is not morally neutral. It actively works against our Christian faith. Christians are constantly swimming upstream with the current of the world rushing against us. Don't be surprised, don't give in, and don't get swept away.

Two Wrong Inferences

Perhaps our greatest danger is to look at this command (which is entirely negative) and draw wrong inferences from it.

1) *We might end up thinking Paul means to warn us only against the external marks of the world.* In another generation, preachers applied this verse to the “big four” sins:

Drinking.

Smoking.

Dancing.

Card Playing.

Or it might have been applied to women wearing lipstick or men with long hair or listening to certain kinds of music or going to the movie theater. Sometimes the list of “Don'ts” became so long that a Christian was defined by what you didn't do. While Christianity cannot be reduced to a set of rules, in most cases the warnings had some basis in fact. Although we don't hear that sort of preaching nowadays, I am not sure that dropping the rules we used to follow has produced a new wave of holiness.

2) We might think Christians should withdraw from the world around us and have nothing to do with it at all. This might lead us into a monastery or to some isolated place in the wilderness or into a cave in the desert where we will not be tempted by the bright lights of the big city. But that cannot be what Paul meant because he ministered in all the big cities of his day. Whatever not being conformed to the world means, it can't be a call to run and hide.

Two Key Words

If this verse is not giving rules about outward behavior, and if it is not calling us to retreat from the world, what exactly is Paul warning us against? Two words unlock this text:

1) World

The word “world” does not refer to the ball of dirt we call earth, as if Paul means to say, “Don't enjoy the creation God has made.” He's not talking about physical things, such as the beauty of a sunset, the grandeur of Lake Tahoe, the intricate design of a single human cell, or the vastness of the universe. Still less is he speaking of enjoying a concert or a conversation with a friend or playing peek-a-boo with a two-year-old or riding a bicycle across America. Paul does not mean to say, “Don't enjoy life.” He's not an ascetic who bids us to reject all the beauty and goodness we see around us. Nor is he calling us to move away from the troubles of this world, hole up in a compound, build a fence, buy a shotgun, and dare anyone to bother us.

To the contrary, Paul plunged into the heart of the culture of his day. He focused on the major cities of the first century—Jerusalem, Antioch, Corinth, Athens, Rome—and fearlessly entered the synagogues, the marketplace, the lecture halls—with the express purpose of proclaiming Christ where he was not yet known. In his first letter to Timothy, he said, **“Everything created by God is good,”** (1 Timothy 4:4). Then he added that God **“richly provides us with everything to enjoy”** (1 Timothy 6:17). Paul evidently knew Greek, Hebrew, Latin, and Aramaic. He read the secular poets and quoted them in his sermons and his letters. He knew the culture of his day so well that he could debate the pagan philosophers on Mars Hill (Acts 17:16-34).

Sometimes we like to sing, “This world is not my home, I'm just a-passing through.” That's true, but it's not the totality what the Bible teaches. I think Paul would agree with these lines by Maltbie Babcock:

*This is my Father's world, the birds their carols raise,
The morning light, the lily white, declare their Maker's praise.*

*This is my Father's world: He shines in all that's fair;
In the rustling grass I hear Him pass;
He speaks to me everywhere.*

So what “world” is Paul warning us against? The New Testament uses two different words when it talks about the world. One is the word *kosmos*, from which we get the word “cosmetic.” That's the word John uses in 1 John 2:15-17 to warn us against loving the world. Dr. Ryrie defined the world as the “organized system headed by Satan that leaves God out.” Sometimes a radio announcer will say, “Here's the news from the world of sports.” He's not talking about a planet where all they do is play baseball, football and basketball. The “world of sports” refers to the organized system of athletic endeavor. Or people may say, “Here's the news from the world of business.” Again, that's not a planet where all they do is buy and sell and invest. The “world of business” is the organized financial system of buying and selling and investing. There is an organized system headed by Satan that deliberately leaves God out. Christians must not love that evil world system.

That's very helpful, but Paul didn't use the Greek word *kosmos* in Romans 12:2. He uses a different word—*aion*, usually translated as “age.” In the New Testament, there are two main “ages”—this present age of sinful darkness (Ephesians 2:2, Galatians 1:4), from which we have been rescued by the Lord Jesus Christ, and the age to come when Jesus will reign on the earth (Revelation 11:15). The text literally reads, **“Don't be conformed to this age.”** Why? Because this “age” is coming to an end soon, and when it does, everything about this age will crumble to dust.

Five weeks after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, I stood with a group of four men at Ground Zero in Manhattan, our eyes fixed on the twisted, smoking ruins of the World Trade Center. As I looked at the rubble, I felt the Lord speaking to me: “Ray, pay attention. This is what the world is coming to.” I realized how true it was. This is what happens to everything man builds. Only God is eternal. The twin towers seemed invincible, but they weren't because anything built by man can be destroyed by man. More than that, anything built by man can be destroyed by the hand of God. Read the book of Revelation. In the end, everything comes crumbling down.

Here is the paradox and challenge of Romans 12:2.

We live in this present age.
But this present age will not last forever.
We know there is a better age to come when Christ will reign on the earth.
We must live today by the values of tomorrow.
We must live in this present age, but this present age must not live in us.

2) Conform

The word “conform” translates a complex Greek word from which we get the English word “scheme,” which in its negative sense has the idea of a trap, like those email scams from someone in Nigeria promising you \$10,000 if you will just send them your bank account number. Since the devil is the god of this world (2 Corinthians 4:4), we should expect him to

attack from every angle. Most of the traps he sets are meant to seduce us into the world's way of thinking.

The word also means “to fashion.” A.T. Robertson offers this version, **“Do not take the world as your fashion plate.”** Why does Paul say we are not to follow the fashions of this world? Is he talking about how we dress? Well, that’s included, but he’s thinking much broader than that. We are not to think or act or otherwise fashion ourselves after the schemes of this age. Why did he say that? The answer is simple.

This world is dying.

The essence of worldliness, then, is to live as if this age will last forever. True worldliness buys into the notion that this world is the only world there is or ever will be. Years ago a certain beer advertised, “You only go around in life once. Grab all the gusto you can.” On one level, that happens to be good advice. Life isn't a dress rehearsal. You won't get a second chance or a “do-over” if you mess up your short time on planet earth. But underlying the commercial was the unstated premise: “This life is the only life there is so do whatever you want, indulge yourself, throw aside the restraints.”

My wife and I flew through Las Vegas on our way to Reno for a Bible conference. As the plane descended into Las Vegas, we could see the famous “strip” with all the casinos lined up next to each other: the Luxor, the MGM Grand, the Mirage (an apt name for a casino), the Wynn, Caesars Palace, and the Stratosphere with its tower rising 1000 feet above the desert floor. When we got off the plane and walked through the terminal, we saw slot machines everywhere. There were huge signs advertising the big stars who were coming to Las Vegas. Other signs invited us to go to this club or that club. Las Vegas is built on the premise that you can do whatever you want, any time you want, with whomever you want because “what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas.” You can eat more than you should, drink until you are drunk, gamble until you are broke, and you can indulge your flesh in every way your mind can imagine. Evidently business is good because the plane was filled with people coming to “sin city” to have some fun and maybe “get lucky” one way or the other.

I do not mention that to condemn anyone, not even the people who own those large casinos. *They couldn't stay in business if people didn't want what they offer.* Las Vegas simply provides an extreme example of what “this age” is all about. It's the ultimate, unvarnished appeal to live as if there were no tomorrow.

That's worldliness. Living today as if tomorrow will never come.

The Paths of Glory

If you think this world will last forever, then live by the world's rules. But if you think there is a better world coming, then live today in light of tomorrow. Your friends probably won't understand you, and it won't always be easy, and you'll often feel squeezed, but at least you won't wake up with a hangover that comes from getting drunk on the ways of the world.

Some people get drunk on alcohol.

Others get drunk on sexual pleasure.
Others get drunk on building an empire.
Others get drunk on fame.
Others get drunk on money.
Others get drunk on power.
Others get drunk on ambition.
Others get drunk on revenge.

That's okay if this age lasts forever. Living like that makes sense if tomorrow never comes. Why not grab all the gusto, indulge your passions, and trample on others if you really think this present age will never end?

In the end everything man builds collapses before his eyes. A friend sent me an email containing these lines from a poem called "Gray's Elegy" written in a country churchyard in England:

*The boast of heraldry, the pomp of power
And all that beauty, all that wealth e'er gave
Awaits alike the inevitable hour
The paths of glory lead but to the grave.*

According to 1 John 2:17, **"The world is passing away along with its desires."** Indeed, the best and brightest of us will someday die. All that we do will eventually be forgotten. Consider these next two sentences carefully:

Those who look to the world for approval will be disappointed because the best things of this world must one day disappear.

Those who look to the God who created the world will find safety and security that will last forever.

Alice Cooper

I will leave you with this final thought. *Christians don't fit in, and we never will.* We are fools if we make conformity the goal of our lives. I ran across a fascinating quote from legendary shock rocker Alice Cooper. Though you may not have heard the news, he became a Christian some years ago. Here's the quote I found:

Drinking beer is easy. Trashing your hotel room is easy.
But being a Christian, that's a tough call. That's rebellion.

He's right on all counts. *It's a lot easier to get drunk and fool around than it is to follow Jesus Christ.* You want to be a true rebel against the status quo? Become a disciple of Christ. Make him the Lord of your life. You'll be going against the flow every single day.

Let me say it another way. *The world has no quarrel with a compromising Christian.* The world loves believers who "go along to get along." It rewards Christians who look like everyone else, talk like everyone else, and live like everyone else. If you keep quiet about your faith, you can get

along just fine because the world loves a compromising Christian. But if you dare to stand up for what you believe, you'll end up like Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. You'll be standing while everyone else is kneeling. Nebuchadnezzar won't like you very much. Soon enough, you'll discover how hot the fiery furnace can be. But the good news is, Jesus is with you in the fiery furnace. That's where he makes himself known.

You'll never regret standing up for Jesus, but it won't be easy.

Who wants to be a renegade for the Lord?

Who wants to swim upstream?

Who wants to go against the flow?

The True "Alternative Lifestyle"

Do you know the name David Wise? At the Winter Olympics in 2014, he won the gold medal for freestyle skiing in the halfpipe competition. He earned a second gold medal in the same event in 2018. He's 29 years old, married, and has a daughter and a son. He's also a Christian.

After winning his first gold medal in 2014, NBC reporter Skyler Wilder wrote:

David Wise is at the top of his sport. He's always smiling among his friends and competitors. However, he's not like the rest of the field. He is mature.

The profile describes him this way:

At such a young age, Wise has the lifestyle of an adult. He wears a Baby Bjorn baby carrier around the house. He also attends church regularly and says he could see himself becoming a pastor a little later down the road.

NBC posted the article with this headline: "David Wise's Alternative Lifestyle Leads to Olympic Gold." Did you get that? "Alternative lifestyle." Today that usually refers to something else, but it perfectly fits Romans 12:2. Following Christ is the ultimate "alternative lifestyle."

We're not like the world.

We never were.

We never will be.

Some of us need to get our priorities straight because we're fitting in when we need to stand out. We're going with the flow when we ought to be swimming upstream.

How will we overcome our addiction to this dying world? In 1918 Helen Howarth Lemmel wrote these words:

*Turn your eyes upon Jesus,
Look full in His wonderful face,*

*And the things of earth will grow strangely dim,
In the light of his glory and grace.*

There's the answer. We need a new vision of Christ to set us free from the love of the world.

Our evangelical ancestors understood this truth very well. They boiled it down to two simple sentences. Here's my whole message in a simple couplet:

*Only one life, 'twill soon be past,
Only what's done for Christ will last.*

This world is passing away. Don't be swept away with it. Keep swimming upstream with Jesus.

Father, sometimes we get weary swimming against the tide. Sometimes we feel overwhelmed by the power of the world around us. We're seduced, we're squeezed, and sometimes we give in. Open our eyes, Lord. Do whatever it takes to break our addiction to this dying world and replace it with fervent love for you. In Jesus' name, Amen.