

**Sermon preached by Mr. Michael Bittenbender
at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, August 30, 2015**

BEING DIFFERENT

Romans 12:1-2

This is a slightly older age group than what my typical audience is but please bear with me as I adjust from my normal five minute allotment on Sunday evenings.

As I accepted the call to preach apprehensively, a process began of listening to God's leading about what Scripture and topic I should be preaching on. Through prayerful consideration it was laid upon my heart to take some time to elaborate a bit on the Youth Kentucky Mission Trip. What I mean by this is, I'm not going to stand up here and regale you with story after story after story, but when the Kentucky Mission Trip is talked about, it's often framed in the context of helping the poor through construction and repairs. What isn't always highlighted is that every evening is chapel time where the Word is brought and worship takes place. What I would like to do this morning is to share with you a little bit about what made Kentucky special. These insights into Scripture have impacted not only my life but also the lives of many youth who participated.

Please open up your Bibles to Romans 12:1-2. "Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God. This is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the patterns 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."

So naturally the topic is "different." That's what every sermon that's preached on these verses is about. I was a little skeptical at first when that was the topic of the week for Kentucky. But by the end of the week it was different and that's what we're speaking to this morning. But first we must ask ourselves a couple of questions: "What does it mean to be different?" What we discovered is that we are called to a higher life than what the world throws at us. Which begs the question, "What does the world throw at us?" My list contains drugs, alcohol, money, sports, websites like Ashley Madison. All of these can become idols in our lives. They become the precepts on which we build our entire life. But if we're called to something higher it begs the question, "What does God throw at us?" or "What does God offer?" I left a couple of blanks because I knew that this list could go on and I appreciate those who added to it. On my list I have love, I have support, I have guidance, I have joy, I have forgiveness of sins, and everlasting life as a list just to start with of the things that God has to throw at us. And all of these should become the precepts on which we build our life.

The next question that's asked is, "Who is different?" That answer is *us*, God's chosen people. That's us in this building, that's us who believe God, who put Christ first, who meditate on His words, who trust Him to guide us, who love Him. Now let's look at something very important about our life that is different and that's something that I struggle with that was brought to bear the week in Kentucky, and that is *no looking back*. What I

mean by this is that we are called to be different and that different is not how we used to live. We lived one way and now we live another. The old way has black stains on it. The old way has old ways of thinking. It has old actions and it has old behaviors. When doubts come in our head, when things aren't working out the way we perceive them as being promised, when things are dirty, we look back. We look back at the way we used to live and there may be nostalgia. There may be a longing for that. I want to clarify one thing: I'm not saying that it's not healthy to remember the testimonies of God's grace in our lives. There are some black moments in my life that I wish to put behind me forever, but there are others that are such incredible testimonies of the *then* and of the *now* that can be healthy to remember and even to share with others. But when we take the time to look back with the desires of that old way we are taking our eyes off of Jesus. We're looking back saying what's ahead of me isn't good enough. I long for what's behind me.

So no looking back. We have an example in the Old Testament of somebody who looked back. We see Lot's wife in Genesis 19. They had a comfortable life. They were told to leave. God said, "I'm going to destroy this place." Lot said they would go to this area over here and God said "Go ahead, but make sure you're quick because I need to take care of this." And as Lot and his wife left everything that they were comfortable with, everything they knew, everything they loved, there was a longing there still not to leave. Lot's life looked back. It says in verse 26, "But Lot's wife looked and she became a pillar of salt." She was telling God, "No, where You're sending me isn't good enough. I want what's back there."

Another example of not necessarily looking back, but of taking our eyes off Jesus we find in Matthew 14, verses 22-23, where we have Peter taking his eyes off Jesus. The context is that Jesus is walking on water and Peter says, "If you call out to me I will come." And Jesus says, "Come." In verses 29 and 30 we read, "Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water, came toward Jesus, but when he saw the wind he was afraid, beginning to sink, crying out 'Lord, save me.'" Peter wasn't looking back, but he was looking down and around him. Things got rough, things got difficult and things got scary. And Peter took his eyes off of Jesus. We, and I mean a collective we, myself included, must keep our heads off of the swivel and focus on Jesus. We must stop looking around and look to Him. When we see Jesus, it's a straight and narrow path, but when we start looking around, when something happens with our job or with school, or with friends or family, we start looking away and we say, "Oh no, oh no," and we lose sight of the One who is supposed to be guiding us and we're supposed to be looking to.

We know what *different* is, we know *who* is different, we know about no looking back. Now there's a call to holiness. Being different isn't just standing out in a crowd for the sake of standing out. It's not holding up a sign saying, "I'm different." You don't tell God you're different, that you're telling people you're different. But being different is about to get a whole lot harder. Somebody may ask why. It's because of holiness. In 1 Peter 1:14-16 we have a call to holiness. It says, "As obedient children do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance, but just as He who called us is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written, 'Be holy, because I am holy.'" Followers of our God, us, and followers of pagan gods of different religions try to imitate their gods. We are called to imitate our God but something is different about our God verses the pagan gods. When we look at the Greek

gods and the Roman gods, any deity of that time period can be described as warlike, adulterous, spiteful, bloodthirsty or promiscuous. But the God of Israel, of the Christian Church is holy, setting the standard for morality. He is merciful and just and He expects us to imitate Him. We need to be merciful and just. We cannot become holy on our own, but God gives us the Holy Spirit to help us obey and to give us power to overcome sin.

If that doesn't seem difficult enough, let's add this to the equation: There's a cost to being different. Some costs of being different are more obvious than others, particularly the physical cost. Christians all over the world are being hunted and persecuted. Even here in the U. S. being different seems to take more and more courage. At work, in our schools, in our families, being different often means being an outcast. The not-so-obvious cost is ourselves in relationship to our faith. What I mean is we are our own worst enemy in our walk with Jesus. We must take ourselves out of the equation. Too often we put ourselves into the equation of our connection with Jesus and our faith. We must take ourselves out of the equation, we must die to ourselves, we must die to our sin, so that we can live a life that is holy and acceptable to God. When I approach God, I'm putting myself into that equation. I'm putting my own desires, I'm putting my own wants, and I'm putting my own thoughts about it in the way. But we have to get out of the way and let Jesus in the way.

There's a call not to be conformed but to be transformed. Everything the world has to throw at us, don't buy it. Don't get suckered into the lifestyle of the world. I use the word "suckered" because that's what happens. They pitch something. They say, "Look at how good this is. This is what you want." There are billions of dollars put into marketing to convince you that whatever shoe, food, item it is, you need it. But it's a sucker's bet because it only brings temporary pleasure. We can go for the temporary indulgence or the everlasting pleasure. Transformation is a lifelong process. No one becomes holy in a day. We have to take the appropriate steps in our path of not being conformed but being transformed. And yet again that involves us getting out of the way. Let God in the way and take time to grow.

Don't buy it. There's a cost to being different. Choosing *no* to what the world offers and choosing *yes* to what God offers. Being different is difficult, but the reward is so much greater than any other reward the world has to offer. We are set apart and different, not blending in with the crowd, yet not being different just for the sake of being different. What makes us different are God's qualities in our lives. We're called to imitate Him, His qualities, and it's His qualities in our lives that make us different.

Those are some of the things that were preached in Kentucky. Those are the things that touched the lives of our youth. Through the bringing of God's Word in Kentucky there were students coming to know the Lord for the very first time. There were students rededicating themselves to Christ. There is a call to be different and there is a wave of youth now that heard that call and are accepting that call to be different.

You've just heard me talk about what made Kentucky so special. Now I invite you to see what made Kentucky so special in this video. Being different is not just for the youth. It's for everybody in this room. We are all called to be different.