

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, February 19, 2017**

CONFORMED OR TRANSFORMED? (2)

Romans 12:1-8

Here are some statistics that may or may not surprise you from a book entitled *100% American*, by Daniel Weiss. Did you know that:

- 1% of Americans read the Bible more than once a day?
- 15% of American married men say they do most of the cooking in their household?
- 30% of Americans smoke cigarettes?
- 42% of Americans cannot name a country near the Pacific Ocean?
- 67% of Americans believe files are being kept on them for unknown reasons?
- 70% of Americans own running shoes but don't run?
- 84% of Americans believe heaven exists?
- 94% of American men would change something about their looks if they could?
- 99% of American women would change something about their looks if they could?

Some of these statistics are totally believable. Others, not so much. Here are some other statistics, not taken from the book, that are absolutely reliable:

- 100% of Americans (and everyone else) are sinners who need a Savior, and are spiritually lost until they meet Jesus Christ and trust Him to be the Savior they need.
- 100% of Americans (and everyone else) need the gospel.
- 100% of Americans (and everyone else) need God's grace in their lives.
- 100% of American Christians (and everyone else) need the Holy Spirit to transform us by the renewing of our minds, so that we are no longer conformed to the ways and patterns of this world (Romans 12:2).

While we are talking statistics, here are some stats that may be a bit out of date, since they are from 2014. Even so, they paint a picture of our culture that gives us a perspective we must not ignore.

- 73% of adults use a social networking site of some kind.
- The average American on social media platforms receives about 54,000 words and 443 minutes of video every day.
- More than one billion tweets are sent every hour, or about 100,000 tweets per minute. (If you don't count President Trump's tweets, it cuts the total in half. 😊)
- Twitter calculates that one day's tweets are enough to write a ten million-page book, or 8,163 copies of Tolstoy's classic novel *War and Peace*, which runs about 1,300 pages. How many of you actually read *War and Peace* from cover to cover?
- Twenty million emails were sent in the time it takes for me to say this sentence.

- Sixteen minutes of every hour is spent on social networking sites. (For some people, it seems like 60 minutes of every hour is spent on social media.)

This is enough to give you some idea of the pervasiveness of social media and the degree to which the world and its ways have infiltrated the lives of people like us who profess to be followers of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Last Sunday we took an in-depth look at Romans 12:1, with its charge to present our bodies – our whole selves – to God as living, breathing sacrifices. We also began to consider ways in which we may be tempted to conform to or go along with the world and its ways, instead of giving ourselves totally to follow the will and ways of God.

SEXUALITY

I mentioned the temptation for Christians and churches, in the midst of what seems like a cultural tsunami, to allow our culture to squeeze us into its mold in the area of sexuality, marriage, and gender identity. I don't want you to think that I'm fixated on sex. I dwell on it because it is such a flash point in our culture, and it would be irresponsible of me to not speak clearly about what the Bible teaches on these matters and its implications for our lives in this world. Sexual identity, sexual relationships, sexual standards, sexual boundaries – these are all cutting edge issues in our culture and, therefore, unavoidable for us as followers of the Lord Jesus.

Some of you may have heard of Jen Hatmaker, a popular Christian blogger who also stars with her family in the HGTV show, “My Big Family Renovation.” She created a huge stir last fall when she announced her support for same-sex (sexual) relationships, having come to believe that such relationships can be “holy.” “Holy” means set apart for God and pleasing to Him. To call something holy that God calls unholy, to call something blessed that God calls sin, is not a trivial matter.

Rosaria Butterfield, a former lesbian and university professor whom I have mentioned to you before (she tells the story of her conversion in her book *The Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert*), responded to Hatmaker's announcement this way: “If this were 1999 – the year I was converted and walked away from the woman and lesbian community I loved – instead of 2016, Jen Hatmaker's words about the holiness of LGBT relationships would have flooded into my world like a balm of Gilead [I would have thought,] *Yes, I can have Jesus and my girlfriend. Yes, I can flourish both in my tenured academic discipline (queer theory and English literature and culture) and in my church.*

“Maybe I wouldn't need to lose everything to have Jesus. Maybe the gospel wouldn't ruin me while I waited, waited, waited for the Lord to build me back up after He convicted me of my sin, and I suffered the consequences.... Today I hear Jen's words ... and a thin trickle of sweat creeps down my back. If I were still in the thick of the battle over the indwelling sin of lesbian desire, Jen's words would have put a millstone around my neck.

“To be clear,” she writes, “I was not converted out of homosexuality. I was converted out of unbelief. I didn’t swap out a lifestyle, I died to a life I loved. Conversion to Christ made me face the question squarely: Did my lesbianism *reflect* who I am (which is what I believed in 1999), or did my lesbianism *distort* who I am through the fall of Adam? I learned through conversion that when something feels right and good and real and necessary – but stands against God’s Word – this reveals the particular way Adam’s sin marks my life. Our sin natures deceive us.”

(Sources: Jonathan Merritt, “The Politics of Jen Hatmaker, Religion News Service, 10-25-16; Rosaria Butterfield, “Loving Your Neighbor Enough to Speak the Truth,” Gospel Coalition Blog, 10-31-16.)

Our sin nature deceives us into believing that the things we desire – including our sexual desires – and whatever our society approves must be good and right, regardless of what God has to say in the Bible. But it is intuitively obvious to the most casual observer, isn’t it, that our sin nature is not a reliable guide?

I’m sure that Jen Hatmaker and her husband Brandon (who is a pastor), just like other high profile Christians who have come out in support of same-sex relationships, are motivated by love and compassion for people in the LGBT community. To be loving and compassionate toward the LGBT community is to be like Jesus, isn’t it? We are all called to be loving and compassionate toward people who identify with this community. The church is called to be loving and compassionate. But we are not to affirm or give our stamp of approval to what God says is sin. We can’t do that and be true to God. In the end, the most loving and compassionate thing is not to declare good and holy what God calls sin. The most loving and compassionate thing to do is to point sinners of all kinds, regardless of their sexual orientation, to the Savior who loves them and who died to save them from their sins. The most loving and compassionate thing for us to do is to love them (and one another) with the love of Jesus, who accepts us just as we are and then makes us new creatures and tells us to go and sin no more. Which is possible only as we surrender to the Holy Spirit and allow Him to transform us, as Paul says in verse 2, by the renewing of our minds.

I realize there are probably people here today who struggle with your sexual identity or same-sex desires. I want you to know that Jesus loves you, and He will never stop loving you. This church family loves you, too. And we will walk with you as fellow strugglers who have sins of our own that we need to renounce and repent, in order to follow Jesus faithfully.

Paul’s message applies to us all: “Don’t let the world squeeze you into its mold” (Romans 12:2, J. B. Phillips).

“Don’t become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God” (Romans 12:2, *MSG*).

Don’t think and act like the world. You are to be different from the world. For Christ’s sake. Through His power at work in you.

CONSUMERISM

I also spoke last week about how I think consumerism has infiltrated the church, encouraging Christians to go “church-shopping,” looking for a church that will “meet my needs.” I need to say more about this, because I don’t want you to think there is never a reason or a time to look for a new church. There are good reasons to look for a new church, and there are bad reasons. Now is not the time to talk about it in-depth. I will say this, though. It is okay – and probably wise – to leave a church:

- If the church denies or compromises any of the historic essentials of the Christian faith.
- If you have deeply-held convictions in “non-essentials” of the faith that don’t fit with the church you are attending.
- If the leadership of the church is overly controlling.
- If the relational atmosphere is toxic and threatens your spiritual well-being, or that of your family and/or children.
- If the church refuses to deal with sin in its midst or permits, affirms, and even celebrates something God calls sin.
- If the church has turned inward and has no interest in carrying out the Great Commission.
- If you live too far away to be involved in a meaningful way.

These are all good reasons to look for a new church. There may be others, too. But you have to be careful that you’re not just looking for greener grass, or for a church that has more to offer you without considering what *you* have to offer the church and how God wants to use you and your gifts to serve His kingdom purposes in the church.

MATERIALISM

We may be tempted in lots of other ways to go along with the world and buy into its values. Probably chief among them is the lure of materialism. Greed is not good. It is not a Christian value. But Christians are not immune to it. Advertisers bombard us through every available form of media in their efforts to appeal to our desires for more and more stuff, and to create in us a sense of need for whatever product or experience they are selling. It is everywhere.

Jim Knuppe – you probably never heard of him – was an apartment builder in the San Francisco Bay area in the 1960s. The apartments were small and most didn’t have garages, and Jim noticed that his renters were frustrated by the lack of space for all their stuff. As he looked into the problem, Jim discovered that it wasn’t just renters who had too much stuff. In fact, most Americans were acquiring more possessions than their homes could hold. So, in 1970, Jim bought a small piece of land in Alameda and built California’s first self-storage facility. People told him he was crazy. They said no one would ever pay money just to use a ten-by-ten shed to store stuff. Nobody has that much stuff, they said.

In just a few weeks he rented out all the units he owned, so he opened another in Berkeley, then San Pablo, Vallejo, San Leandro, Foster City, Colma, and Hayward. Soon he owned

thousands of storage units up and down the California coast. He made millions just giving people a place to store their stuff. (Palmer Chinchon, *The Barefoot Tribe*, 168).

There are now more than 50,000 self-storage facilities in the U.S., totaling 2.3 billion square feet of storage space, which is more than seven square feet for every man, woman, and child (Jon Mooallem, “The Self Storage Self,” *The New York Times*, 9-2-09.)

You get the picture. As a nation, we have accumulated more stuff than any other nation in history. We are addicted to stuff. Virtually all of us have stuff we don’t need and will probably never use. But we hold onto it, and collect more and more. Not everyone. But most of us.

What did Jesus say? “Be on your guard against all kinds of greed. Your life does not consist in the abundance of your possessions” (Luke 12:15). To say it another way: “Take care! Protect yourself against the least bit of greed. Life is not defined by what you have, even when you have a lot” (*MSG*).

Don’t misunderstand. I’m not saying it is a sin to have a storage unit or a basement or attic or garage filled with things. It could be, though. As long as you do not allow yourself to be possessed by your possessions, but determine to enjoy your possessions and use them in ways that honor God and bless people, it is not a problem. But watch out for the tentacles of greed. Make sure you don’t make your possessions the source of your security or hoard them selfishly. Make sure you don’t define your life or your worth as a person by the value of your possessions. Don’t allow the world to squeeze you into its mold.

POLITICS

Here is another way the world tries to entangle us in its web – especially, it seems, living as we do so close to our nation’s capital: It is no secret that the political discourse in our country leaves a lot to be desired. Sometimes it is downright deplorable. If (or when) we allow our political views to influence or define our faith, instead of letting our faith and our allegiance to the Lord Jesus Christ shape and determine our political views, we are being conformed to the pattern and ways of this world. If (or when) we equate our particular political views with the gospel, and speak ill of everyone who does not agree with us, we are being conformed to the pattern and ways of this world. And we are doing a disservice to the Lord Jesus Christ and to His church.

In this church, we are not all conservatives. We are not all liberals. We are not all moderates. We are not all Democrats or Republicans or Independents. But we are all sinners saved by grace. We are all members of the body of Christ. We are all followers of Jesus. We are all children of God and members of His family. So we must not allow the spirit of the age to fracture the unity we have in Christ.

INTOLERANCE

Still another way the world tries to seduce us into going along and conforming the way we think and live to the world's pattern is by framing Christian beliefs, convictions, and moral standards as unreasonable, intolerant, discriminatory, and even hateful. Who wants to be called hateful? Who wants to be called intolerant or prejudiced? In order to show the unbelieving world that we are none of the above, it can be tempting to compromise on biblical truths or moral standards. It can be tempting to go along, so the world will not think ill of us.

To do so, though, is a losing strategy. We should not be surprised by opposition or rejection in this world. Jesus said it would happen. Losing is not such a bad thing, provided we lose for the right reasons. Remember what Jesus said: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it if you gain the whole world, yet forfeit your soul? Or what can you give in exchange for your soul?" (Mark 8:34-37)

You can't please God by conforming to the world, but you can by presenting your life as a living sacrifice to Him. And by allowing Him to transform you – to change you from the inside out – by renewing your mind in His truth and grace. We'll talk next week about the means God uses to make it happen.

Until then, and always, with God's help, "take your everyday, ordinary life – your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking around life – and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for Him. Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what He wants from you, and quickly respond to it" (Romans 12:1-2, *MSG*).

Lord, let it be so in us, to the glory of Your name. Amen.