

**“Caterpillars Into Butterflies”**  
**Romans 12:1-8; Exodus 19:1-9a**

Little Billy loves soccer. And, Mom and Dad get a kick out of watching him run up and down the field, his short little legs churning like two pint size pistons. Plus, the exercise is really good for him. He takes piano lessons, does well in school, so this is a nice outlet and another side to his development.

The problem is that they play soccer on Sunday. The casual question of why Sunday instead of another day was met with a torrent of reasons: the fields are crowded, this is the only day available, etc. And right now, it isn't too bad. Since their church has two services, Little Billy can play and then they make it to one of the worship services. But he does miss Sunday School. And as he moves up this scheduling will become more difficult. And what if he makes the travelling team, where the expectations encompass the entire weekend?

Mom and Dad were raised coming to church and Sunday School every Sunday. They know the importance of consistency and repetition in faith development. They know weekly attendance establishes priorities and declares belief. They also are aware that church attendance positively correlates with happiness, marital success and better health. But Little Billy really likes soccer.

Fred enjoys shoot 'em up movies. And he really likes James Bond movies. Of course, Sean Connery was his favorite 007, but he could even tolerate Roger Moore in order to escape to Bond's world of spies, secrecy and sex. Fred realizes the wanton violence and marriage less intimacy directly contradicts his Christian values. And he realizes that paying money to see the Bond films finances more movies with inappropriate values. But Fred doesn't act like James Bond. And he really likes the movies.

Jane is one good looking woman. That doesn't mean she is always the most beautiful female in the room. Rather, she possesses a certain style, a way of dressing and presenting herself that make an impression on other people. Individuals, men and women, repeatedly confirm this gift with their compliments. And one of her chief attributes in this ability is Jane's fashion sense. She knows how to dress, how to apply makeup, where to get her hair cut.

Of course, none of this comes cheaply. One friend in surveying her closets remarked there were enough shoes and outfits to clothe a small Latin American country. And Jane has to admit that keeping up with the fashion trends, getting one's hair cut and colored, just maintaining all the cleansers, cleaners, and make up is both time consuming and expensive.

And then she reads in the paper where thousands of children die everyday from starvation. In church, she is urged to give money to missions. And she does give. But she knows she could give so much more, not only money, but her time. Yet, that would cut into her clothing and make up allowance. And she really likes looking fine.

“I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice...Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds...”

It sounds so simple. “Present your body as a living sacrifice. Do not be conformed to this world.” Everyone of us here agrees with this. We know what this means. We are to live like Jesus. But Jesus, nor the Apostle Paul, had to worry about soccer, James Bond movies, or clothes and makeup. How do we decide if we are conforming or transforming?

The Apostle Paul’s admonition to “present your bodies as a living sacrifice” would have resonated with his readers. Two thousand years ago most all religions based their liturgical worship on animal sacrifices. But for Jews and pagans, the sacrifice of an animal was symbolic of dedicating oneself to the deity. Paul takes that concept a step further by eliminating the animal, and saying, “You must make your life a sacrifice to God.” God doesn’t care about the blood of animals. God wants your heart and soul, your actions, your life to reflect your love and belief.

Now, remember that in the Christian faith, there is a tension between behavior and belief. We do not act in a certain manner to earn God’s love and forgiveness. Not a single one of us is good enough to do that. Every one of us is a fallible, sinful human being. We think evil thoughts. We say and do bad things. God’s love and forgiveness is a free gift offered through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Through Jesus, God offers us his love and forgiveness.

*But*, if we love God, if we accept God’s love and forgiveness, our gratitude for this free gift of grace will express itself in how we live. Our love for God motivates us to act as God desires. We live in response to the love and mercy God has shown us in Jesus Christ.

For Christians, that means our bodies and our spirits are inseparable. You cannot love Jesus with your mind and do whatever you want with your body. Otherwise, Sunday and Monday must match. Love and forgiveness define not only our relationship to God, but our relationships with other people. In Christianity, there is no disconnect between belief and behavior.

Now, this is hard. Incredibly hard. Because I want God to forgive me, think God should forgive me, am grateful when God does forgive me. But, I am not so certain about forgiving the guy who cheated me in business, who kept me from a promotion, who laid me off, who ran away with my wife, whose parents’ contacts got him into the school I wanted to attend even though I had better grades and scores. God’s love and forgiveness are free, but truly accepting them calls us to present our “bodies as a living sacrifice” — day in and day out.

A woman was walking down a residential street and saw a frail, wizened old man rocking contentedly in a chair on his porch. She called out to him as she passed by. “Hello there! I couldn’t help but notice how happy you look. Tell me,” she said, “what’s your secret for a long happy life?”

“I smoke three packs of cigarettes a day,” he replied. “I drink a case of whiskey a week, eat nothing but fast food, and never, ever do any exercise.”

“Wow!” said the woman, “that is amazing. That must make you really happy! And just how old are you?”

He replied, “Twenty-six.”

Mind and body, spiritual and physical, faith and practice cannot be separated.

So, how do we present our bodies as living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God? Paul says the first step is to not conform to the world.

When I was growing up my grandmother believed that except for Old Maid playing cards was bad, conforming to the world. So we hid the canasta cards whenever she and Grandpa drove up. And where I went to college didn't allow dancing or wearing long hair, both considered conforming to the world. So, during the summer break I grew my hair long and danced with girls.

Trying to categorize conformity to the world is always difficult. Yet, we must be very careful to simply describe it as being in the eye of the beholder.

Those people who constructed financial derivatives that brought down the banking system would undoubtedly argue that what they did was legal.

Somali pirates would say they are feeding their families the only way available to them.

Soccer, video games, the beach are more fun than church, or Sunday School, or school, or homework, or household chores.

In basketball, scoring points gains more recognition than passing.

Those who possess material resources receive more attention in life than those who do not.

Avoiding conformity to the world has nothing to do with what is legal, or acceptable, or profitable. In fact, those who refuse to conform to the world often are viewed as unacceptable. Conforming to the world is accepting the world's standards of morals, values, and judgments. It is acting in accordance with what others think is right. Conforming to the world is doing what is best for me regardless of how it impacts other people.

If you or I had been in the derivative area of banking, could you have said no to the huge profits and bonuses accruing to those who promoted these inadequate financial instruments? As an employer, are you and I willing to seek equitable pay and benefits for those at the bottom as well as the top? We choose to either conform to the world, or conform to Jesus.

And typically, we categorize conformity with minor issues so as to comfort ourselves that we are living like a Christian. I don't think God gives a hoot whether or not you dance, but God does care whether you treat the opposite sex with dignity and respect. God doesn't care whether you drink a beer after you cut the grass, but God does care whether you pay your employees fairly. God doesn't care if the shadows on the cross are right or the stained glass windows are beautiful, but God deeply cares whether we are telling men and women that justice, treating other human beings with respect, dignity, and generosity defines us as Christians. God deeply cares whether we are leading men and women to

look to Jesus for how to live. And God demands that we continuously say, “Life is about God, and not me.”

Writing in the January 23, 2009 edition of Budget Travel, James Dorsey recounts being on a recent trip through Africa when the sun was boiling hot and the temperature 120 in the shade.

They were following the Niger River east from the port city of Mopti, heading toward Timbuktu. Even though the river was quite muddy, it looked inviting enough for a quick cooling swim in the brutal heat. But when they asked their guide if it was safe to go in, he shook his head no. “Globefish,” was his reply.

Not wanting to admit that he had no idea what a globefish was, Dorsey just nodded in agreement and looked it up that night at the hotel. He learned that a globefish was the local name for what he knew to be a puffer fish. When the fish is threatened, it inflates itself with water and doubles in size — sticking out its barbed scales that are somewhat toxic and very bad news to whoever encounters one. He had no desire to step on one, but as his trip progressed, the oppressive temperature made him long for a dip in the river. Each day their guide would wade in the river a little bit. Then, he would come out and shake his head with the same refrain, “Globefish.”

On their final day in the country they were in a very shady spot having lunch when their guide waded into the river, shuffled his feet a bit, and called out to them, “No globefish!” He and his friend, not wishing to waste this rare opportunity, doffed their shoes and waded out into the river, long pants and all, up to their waist.

Their guide was up on shore at this point, sitting under a tree, and Dorsey called up to him asking, “How come there are no globefish here?” He called back, “Crocodiles.”

When it comes to attempting to not be conformed to the world, it is easy to give all our attention to the globefish instead of the crocodiles.

“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds...”

How we act grows out of our minds, what we believe about Jesus. When our minds are renewed, restricted, transformed, our actions change accordingly. How we live cannot be separated from what we believe. What we believe drives, dictates, determines how we act. Our lives are shaped according to what we believe, our faith.

The original Greek word that is translated as transformed is the word from which we get the term “metamorphosis.” Paul desires the Christian faith to transform us from worldly caterpillars to Christian butterflies. Our emotions are helpful on a short term basis. But our minds formulate and control our hopes, dreams, and desires.

This is why three of our pastors here at Westminster work in the area of Christian education. It is why Sunday School is important. What we believe determines how we act. What we believe formulates and regulates our conscience, our sense of right and wrong.

In the Christian life, there is no disconnect between belief and behavior. Our minds comprehend, ingest, recall the words and life of Jesus. Those words, that knowledge, come to the forefront when we must make decisions about what is fair, just and right.

We can choose wrongly. But if we have not been taught the faith, we possess no criteria by which to make decisions. Then greed becomes simply getting our share. Selfishness becomes doing what is best for me. Other people become pawns in making my desires come true. Our minds control our bodies and our actions.

The National Opinion Research Center conducted a survey which found that those who attend religious services and pray perform more acts of kindness than those who do not participate in services. The study discovered that those who never attend worship helped others ninety-six times a year; whereas, weekly worshippers performed 128 selfless acts per year. The study also found liberals were no more altruistic in their deeds than conservatives. Nor were small-townners more altruistic than city folk.

People who prayed at least once a week performed nearly twice as many altruistic acts as those who never prayed. Those who prayed many times a day did three times as many good deeds as non-kneelers. Acts of kindness include helping a homeless person, returning money to a cashier after getting too much change, allowing a stranger to go ahead in line, donating blood, offering one's seat on a bus or in a public place to a person who is standing, giving directions to a stranger, or spending time talking with someone who is a bit down or depressed.

Even statistically we know that what we believe determines how we act.

“Caterpillars into Butterflies.”

The Christian faith changes us from worldly caterpillars to Christian butterflies. But we are only able to keep from conforming to the world's values when we have allowed the teachings of the Christian faith to renew our minds.

This morning, are you conforming to the world? Are you allowing your mind, your children's minds, to be renewed through the life and teachings of Jesus? Or by default, are you and I allowing the world to dictate who we are and what we believe. All of us are caterpillars. The question is whether you want and are giving Jesus a chance to turn you into a butterfly.

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