

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. ² Do not conform to the pattern 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.

³ For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you. ⁴ For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, ⁵ so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. ⁶ We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; ⁷ if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; ⁸ if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully. (NIV2011)

In the name of Jesus Christ who loves you and gave himself for you, dear friends,

People are funny. I mean all of us—human beings are funny...and interesting. Some people seem to always take a negative view, right? It could be 75 degrees and sunny—not a cloud in the sky and you say, *"Wow, what a beautiful day!"* And your friend, sounding a lot like Winnie the Pooh's friend Eeyore, would say, *"Well, it will probably rain later."* Contrarians just always have to take the opposite view.

Perhaps you're more of a conformist. You want things to go smoothly, you follow the rules and don't make any waves. You'll let things go just to keep the peace. And while that can be useful in many situations, it can also be a problem if issues are never taken care of.

If you're more of a contrarian, a rebel, a go-against-the-flow type of person, then God's got something just for you today. Because of the way human beings develop and mature over time, these words of God should also speak right to the older children, our teens and college students because you are right at the ages where questioning and challenging the typical, accepted way of doing things is what you do well.

If that's not you exactly, well, these words give you a chance to *be* a rebel in the very best sense of the word, because this has to do with the rebellion that IS Christian faith and following God. You'll see what God means when he tells you:

DON'T BE A CONFORMIST! We'll see:

- 1. WHAT A CONFORMIST LOOKS LIKE TO GOD, and**
- 2. WHAT A RENEWED & TRANSFORMED CHILD OF GOD LOOKS LIKE**

Before we get into how we behave and view ourselves, we must note some of the first words of our lesson: **in view of God's mercy.** We can't really talk about the rest unless we understand why we would care, why would listen to what God says and wants, why we would trust his direction. God's mercy is the springboard for it all. It is so simple really—so well known—talked about every week in church—the topic of our daily prayers, but for some reason, we can sometimes forget about the reason WHY we would look at things the way God does and try with all our might live for him.

Without God's intervening in your life, you would be a lost creature, wandering around out there in the world, trying to make sense of life, like so many people. And then you would eventually die and you would go to hell—like so many people. I don't intend for that to sound insensitive; it's simply a statement of fact. If a person does not believe in Jesus as their Savior from sin, they will not live with God eternally. And if God had not stepped in, sending Jesus to pay for sin and giving you me the gift of faith, we would be just like so many others out there—lost while in this world and lost eternally.

It is good to be reminded of God's mercy, that he has not punished us for our sins like he could have! Because of Jesus' sacrifice, the Father has shown mercy on us. Trusting in that, loving God for that, motivates us to respond by living the way he wants his children to live. If God's love for you in Christ, his cleansing you from sin and giving you heaven mean something to you, then we can continue with the Apostle Paul's encouragement to NOT BE A CONFORMIST, but instead, live for God. Our living for God is called "sanctification", or as Paul puts it here, our **true and proper worship**. Everything we do with our lives as we live for Jesus is really our way of worshiping God.

Now the way of the world is different, isn't it? People who don't know Christ are different; their lives are different. God would say that the person without Christ conforms to the pattern of the sinful world. The pattern of the world is doing whatever makes you happy. A worldly person has no interest in checking out what God's will is. The sinful mind thinks of self first—self-preservation, self-promotion, self-indulgence. Like a whiny little baby who throws a fit when she doesn't get her way or like an arrogant NFL holdout who demands more and more and more for himself, the sinful mind thinks first and foremost about itself instead of God and others. The worldly Conformist doesn't see the value in being part of a group of people who look to Jesus as the Savior, so they could never understand God-given church roles. The person who conforms to the pattern of the world does not reflect the love of God by actually SERVING other people in faith.

It makes sense though, right? God says in the Bible, **"The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them, because they are discerned only through the Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:14, NIV2011)."** So there are lots of people who don't "get it". Sinners without Christ are CONFORMISTS, God says. They have adopted the ways of the world and follow along in that pattern of selfishness, self-indulgence, and sin.

You can understand, then why God tells you and me, his children, DON'T BE A CONFORMIST! He says, **Do not conform to the pattern 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.** Though it's tough to do, you and I as Christians have to fight our personal, sinful desires and our sinful urge to be like "everyone else." We have to fight the world's significant pressure and influence to think and behave the way it does.

And if you don't think this is difficult for us all, well...you're just not thinking! School has started again and college students have flooded back into our area (and thankfully our congregation has the opportunity to serve many of them!). Is there pressure for Christian students to be like the worldly students around them? Absolutely! *"Sexual experimentation is part of the college experience,"* they say. *"No, God says, it's not!"* Is it the influence of Jesus that urges them to party in excess and in ways that are harmful to body and mind...or is it the world's influence? Those are obvious examples, I know, but they're so common, especially at the beginning of the year. Many Christians mess up badly because they choose not to listen to what God says here. They choose to conform to the pattern of the world instead of being a godly rebel! Hang around that influence long enough and the world will change your mind. But God says he wants our minds transformed and renewed and clicking along with *his* will.

It's not just students that endure this pressure to conform. You don't have to be old enough to go to college to have some friends who are doing the wrong things, who are bullying or mistreating others and who make you feel dumb if you don't join in. Are you listening to what God says or what someone else says? *"Everybody talks like that,"* isn't right either if it's language God doesn't approve of. Who are you listening to?

You don't have to be *as young as* a college student to feel worldly pressure. The world says don't "waste" money by giving it to church, to God, you need it for all sorts of things that make you happy. God says something about that which contradicts the world's advice. Everybody lives together before marriage, people think. Sadly that seems to be our culture's norm now, but does that mean it's right? Is that God saying it's okay, or is that the world?

You know how when children do something dumb or wrong and they say, “*Well, Jacob told me to do it!*”? What do we say? “*If Jacob told you to jump off a bridge, would you do it?!*” So you can say that to a kid, but you can’t realize it in your own life? Let’s be honest, it isn’t just children who are pressured and do give in to the temptation to live like the world around them. Every one of us, young or old, is tempted to BE A CONFORMIST and live by the pattern the sinful world has laid out for us.

That’s why God sent his Son to live and die for us—to forgive us for those times we are not thinking like God thinks and not living like God wants us to. And we *are* forgiven. Remember, God’s mercy is his not punishing us as our sins deserve. He punished Jesus instead so that our sins are paid for. In view of his mercy, we trust in Jesus’ forgiveness and we have this renewed desire to show love to God by living as his child.

So now, let’s see WHAT A RENEWED AND TRANSFORMED CHILD OF GOD LOOKS LIKE!

When we know Jesus as our Savior and the Holy Spirit lives in us, our hearts and our minds are transformed; they’re made new. In another place, God says, **Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! (2 Corinthians 5:17)**. If we value what God has done for us in Jesus, then we *want* to live for him. We *want* to show Jesus how thankful we are by living in a way that pleases him and we *want* to be his witnesses to the world. If you go on looking...sounding... acting like everyone else in the world, what kind of witness for your Savior will you be? How many will be led to know that Jesus died for them if you just CONFORM to worldly behavior?

So I guess you could say that we, as Christians, are rebels! We don’t look, sound, and act like everyone else. We don’t just do what everyone around us is doing because that wouldn’t be God-pleasing!

The child of God pushes sinful self-centeredness aside and doesn’t think more highly of himself or herself than they ought. Nor do we despair over our failures as if that sin defines us. So no bragging and boasting and no pity-party either! Some use the term “Christ-esteem”—knowing who we are in Christ. And that’s a good way to look at yourself! You know Jesus lived perfectly because you couldn’t. You know he died to pay for your sins. You know he rose from death and promises you a resurrection to eternal life. That ought to make you feel absolutely wonderful!

Then God says some-thing else intended to build us up as his children and to teach us about our life in Christ: **For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.**

You are an important person to God. He has saved you and given you gifts and abilities with which to show your thanks and love for him. A person who knows that looks for ways to use his or her gifts and the Apostle Paul gives us a sampling of those gifts. It’s not an exhaustive list, but it gives some good examples. A Christian wants to find out what his or her gifts are and put them to use in serving others and sharing the gospel. Now, don’t feel bad if you’re not sure what your gifts are. God gives pastors and other Christians to help you figure that out. You discover that by reading God’s Word too.

- Paul mentions “prophesying”—that means preaching or proclaiming God’s Word. That’s something a handful of us at Grace have the gift and training to do.

- Maybe yours is “serving”. That can be done in lots of ways, can’t it, but it has as its foundation the attitude of putting others first. That might be you.
- “Teaching” could be your gift—but this isn’t really talking about instruction in history or English or something like that. This is talking about knowing God’s Word and having the ability to explain it in a way that others understand it.
- Perhaps you are an “encourager”. You might not think that’s so special, but not everyone knows what to say at just the right time. Not everyone easily speaks words of comfort or encouragement. But if you’ve ever been thanked or built up or given hope by a Christian friend, then you know the value of that gift.
- You could be a “contributor”. “*Anyone can give,*” you say. Ahh, but not everyone has been blessed with the same amount of earthly wealth and resources. And not everyone gives with a proper attitude. And not everyone trusts God enough to give generously. And not everyone actively looks for ways to give. It is a gift that each of us can and ought to cultivate, but it comes harder to some than others.
- Maybe you’re a “leader”. Not everyone is gifted to lead, some of us are better followers—but we can’t all be! Remember when God gives someone leadership and authority, he makes it clear that those people are servants of others. Godly leaders know this.
- Can you “show mercy”? Can you cheerfully show love and forgiveness? It’s hard for some to let go of anger or resentment even after saying “I forgive you.” To some, this comes naturally.

These are wonderful gifts, but again, just a sampling. If you and I were going to CONFORM to the worlds’ standards, we would be too selfish to look into our gifts and think hard about how we could use them for God and for other people. But we have been TRANSFORMED AND RENEWED as children of God, so we *want* to live as God’s people! We rebel against the world’s pressure and the whispering of our sinful nature! The new creation that we are in Christ refuses to conform to the world’s ways—Jesus means too much to us! The Holy Spirit lives in us and drives us to live for God! The Father’s good, pleasing and perfect will is the goal of our life! May God give us strength to not CONFORM to the world’s pattern and give into its pressure, but instead live in a way that honors Christ and serves others. Amen.

**Now the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.
Amen.**