

Sermon for Sunday, September 25, 1977, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Senior Pastor
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"THE HIGH PRICE OF CHEAP RELIGION"

Romans 12:1-21

Text: "Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your
mind..." Romans 12:2

St. Paul tells the Romans to present their bodies to God as a living sacrifice. If you want to be a success at anything, you must give yourself totally to it. In a real sense of the word, you have to sacrifice yourself. You can't be a success at anything without some real sacrifice. So, the question each person must ask himself is this: At what do I wish to be a real success? Let me put that question to you this morning--above all else, at what do you wish to succeed? When you have lived out your life and your obituary is written, what most of all would you like for it to say?

Well, that is a sobering question, is it not? Back in the third century a man named Cyprian lived in the ancient city of Carthage. He wrote the following letter to a friend of his: "It is a bad world, Donatus, an incredibly bad world. But I have discovered, in the mist of it, a quiet and holy people who have learned a great secret. They have found a joy which is a thousand times better than any of the pleasures of our sinful life. They are despised and persecuted, but they care not. They are masters of their souls. They have overcome the world..." Would you like to have that kind of an obituary? When the history of our time is written, will there be a letter somewhere in the musty museums of the future that will give such a picture of Christians of today? Is there any reason to think that any one will write of us that though we lived in an incredibly bad world, we were a quiet and holy people who had learned a great secret? Will there be some ancient manuscript that will proclaim of us that though we were despised and persecuted, we cared not, that we were masters of our souls and we had overcome the world?

The fact is, to have such a letter written about us would demand sacrifice--it would demand that we present our bodies a living sacrifice to God. That's the high cost of being a Christian.

But then in the next verse--which is also our scripture text for today--St. Paul tells us what's involved in such a sacrifice. He writes, "Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed..." Well, there it is--the choice is to conform to the world or to be transformed by God.

Have you ever thought of the difference between conformity and transformation? The dictionary says that conformity means, "similarity in form or manner...the act or habit of conforming one's self slavishly." On the other hand, to transform something means to change the nature or character of a thing. Now, if you conform to the world you will have to sacrifice something--you will have to sacrifice your relationship to God. On the other hand, if we allow our lives to be transformed by God, we also must make a sacrifice, for we must give up the world. And that's where the rub comes in! If we choose the world, we give up God; if we choose God, we give up the world.

The fact is, most of us don't want to do either one. Most of us want to keep one foot in the world and one foot in heaven. That was the problem the Jews had when Joshua led them into the promised land. One day he called them together on the plains of Shechem and said to them, "Choose this day whom you will serve..." (Joshua 24:15) That is, make up your minds--will you be God's people or will you be like the people around you. That was the choice with which Elijah confronted the people of God on Mount Carmel. He said to them, "How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him." (I Kings 18:21)

Are you limping between two opinions this morning? Most of us are. We want the things of God, but we are reluctant to give up the things of the world. Too many of us have settled for cheap religion. Do you remember the story of King David in the Old Testament. He had sinned against God and God punished David. David repented. He wanted to offer a sacrifice to God for his sins. He needed some wood for his fire. There was a farmer near by who had a threshing floor and David wanted that wood to build his sacrificial fire. The farmer, because it was his king, wanted to give the threshing floor to David. David said, "No, I will pay you for it. Neither will I offer unto the Lord, my God that which costs me nothing." Most of us want to make offerings and the cost is nothing. We want to settle for a compromise where we can enjoy the best of two worlds. The only problem is the high cost of cheap religion.

Do you remember how the book of Revelation puts it? It says, "So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of my mouth." (Revelations 3:16) God doesn't want non-choosers, or limpers, or lukewarm people. There are several ways in which we have to decide about conforming to the world or being transformed by God. The first choice we have to make has to do with Jesus. To be a Christian, you have to decide about Jesus. The word "convert" means to turn. If you have been converted to Jesus, it means you have turned from the world. When the Bible talks about turning to Jesus it uses dramatic language. Listen to what it says: "We have been born anew to a living hope..." (I Peter 1:3) "We know that we have passed out of death into life..." (I John 3:14) "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold the new has come..." (II Cor. 5:17). Is the life you are living in your home, your office, in your social relationships one that can be described best in those dramatic terms?

If you are a student of American history, you will remember that one of the most significant events in the development of our country were the so-called religious awakenings. Writing of those revivals in early America, Bernard Weisberger said, "A mixture of motives brought the Kentuckians from far and near to the log church at Gasper River. They were looking for a rare chance to hobnob with neighbors unseen for a year at a stretch. They hoped for entertainment in the form of rousing sermons, and a chance to let out feelings which were cramped by a hog and hominy existence. But it is important to remember that fundamentally they were expecting to be converted by divine influence. Put simply, they came expecting a miracle." Has that miracle happened in your life? You see, there really is no cheap way for that to happen in anyone's life. Jesus himself once put it quite plainly when he said, "No, you either conform to the world or you are transformed by a decision about Jesus."

The second choice we make has to do with specifics. Cheap religion is religion in general. It conforms to the world. But transforming religion is religion in particular. Let me illustrate what I mean. In the U.N. building in New York City there is a chapel or meditation room. The symbols of every religion have been banished from that room for fear that one of the world's religions might be offended. The room is empty except for some chairs and, in the center, a polished tree trunk on top of which is a cluster of philodendron, illuminated by a shaft of light. One writer described the spiritual impact of the room this way, "It seemed to me standing there that this nothingness was so oppressive and disturbing that it became a sort of madness, and the room a sort of padded cell. It seemed to me that the core of our greatest contemporary trouble lay here, that all this whiteness and shapelessness and weakness was the leukemia of non-commitment sapping our strength. We had found, finally, that only nothing could please all.

Yes, "we had found, finally, that only nothing could please all." But if we are trying to please God, we can't please all. As a matter of fact, Jesus once said that if we followed him, we would be so displeasing to the world that it would hate

(John 15:19) Yes, religion is specifics. For example, when you get to the ten commandments, you are getting to specifics. And when you get to the Sermon on the Mount, you are getting even more specific. Jesus says we shall not only not kill, we shall not even be angry with our brother. He says that we shall not only not commit adultery, we shall not even look on a woman lustfully. He not only says we must abandon the practice of an eye for an eye, we must also turn the other cheek when someone strikes us. He says that it is not enough just to love our neighbor, but we must go still further and love our enemies.

At the end of his life, just before his crucifixion, Jesus talked with his disciples about heaven and the day of judgment. And the ones who would be welcomed into heaven would be those who had been specific, who had done the will of God, "Then the King will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundations of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.'"

No, do not be conformed to the world, but be transformed... There is no cheap way to live a life for Jesus. It involves specifics. You can't love people in general, you can only love individuals; you can't serve in general, you can only do a particular job.

See how it works! At the age of 37 William Mellon, Jr., retired. He had family, money, prestige and a life of pleasure and leisure ahead. One night he read an article about Dr. Albert Schweitzer who at the age of 30 had given up successful careers in music, writing, and teaching to go to Africa as a medical missionary. Because of that article, the day came when William Mellon made a decision. He went to medical school and when he graduated he decided to work in the disease-ridden tropics of Haite. Today he is the chief doctor in the first hospital in that area, a hospital built with his own money. That was no cheap decision. Or look at the disciples themselves. When Jesus stood by the Sea of Galilee and said to Peter and Andrew and James and John, "Follow me," they made no cheap decision. No, they left their homes, their nets, their boats--everything.

So being transformed means first making a decision about Jesus and secondly it means committing ourselves to costly specifics. Notice in the third place it also involves the disciplined life. Whittaker Chambers became a Christian after having first been a Communist. In his book he described the disciplined life of a Communist cell. He writes, "Underground workers were absolutely forbidden to drink...after the fashion of Communist friends we all shared our lodgings, our food, our money and even our clothes." He went on to describe how party members belonged to a study group that met once a week and that it was not unusual for members to give 10 percent of their income to the party. Because of this kind of discipline we have seen a relatively small minority of Communists take over country after country. Yet, it was precisely this kind of discipline that characterized the life of those early Christians. Some people once bitterly complained that Christians had turned the world upside down and only a disciplined group of people could have done that.

Will we turn the world upside down in our day? If we do, it will not come cheaply. You see, we must not conform to the world but we must be transformed.

Many years ago Cyprian of Carthage wrote to his friend, "It is a bad world, Donatus, an incredibly bad world. But I have discovered, in the midst of it, a quiet and holy people who have learned a great secret. They have found a joy which is a thousand times better than any of the pleasures of our sinful life. They are despised and persecuted, but they overcome the world." And then Cyprian concluded his letter this way, "These people, Donatus, are Christians--and I am one of them." Yes, do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed...are you one of them, too?