

DO NOT BE CONFORMED TO THIS WORLD

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

August 23, 2026

“[Jesus] asked his disciples, ‘Who do people say that the Son of Man is?’” My friends, this is a crucial question that we all must answer; “Who do we say that Jesus is?” According to our scriptures and the church’s ancient Creeds and Councils and our Articles of Religion, Jesus is the Son of God; he is both human and divine; he is the redeemer and liberator of the world; and he died for humanity’s sins.

If Jesus was indeed all of that, then it stand to reason that his vision of his father’s kingdom; the eternal reign of God’s infinite love that he ushered in through his preaching and teaching and ministry, must be our vision as well; must be the pattern and standard by which we live our lives and set our priorities and establish our values. But how certain are we that our lives are patterned according to this vision? The apostle Paul in his letter to the church in Rome that we heard this morning tells us that even in his day, not all Christians were patterning their lives after that vision.

Paul wrote to them: “I appeal to you; I plead with you, brothers and sisters, on the basis of God’s mercy, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your reasonable act of worship.” Paul would not have felt the need to appeal to them, and plead, unless he knew that they had not been fully living according to the vision; the standard that God had meant for them to live.

He wrote about the sacrificial systems that was well known in the ancient world. Yet instead of speaking of animal sacrifices, he spoke to them of

human sacrifices; of offering their bodies, as living sacrifices; sacrifices that would be holy and pleasing to God.

Paul explained what these sacrifices were to look like. You might be surprised to learn that his expectation was a bit different than the standard list of sins that the church has tended to teach and emphasize. Paul said: “Do not be conformed to this present world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may test and approve what is the will of God—what is good and well-pleasing and perfect.”

The early Church often focused on a list of seven deadly sins. Paul used a broader standard when he told the believers that their lives were not to be conformed to the world around them. The Greek word here for “conformed,” is in the passive voice. The New English Translation of the Bible explains the meaning of the passive voice here: “It is very telling that being ‘conformed’ to the present world is viewed as a passive notion, for it may suggest that it happens, in part, subconsciously. At the same time, the passive could well be a ‘permissive passive,’ suggesting that there may be some consciousness of the conformity taking place. Most likely, it is a combination of both.”

Here is what Paul is saying; do not allow yourself to adapt to, and be conformed to, this present world’s systems. He is speaking of systems in the world of his day; systems in our world as well, that often run contrary to the life and teaching of Jesus in various ways. Apparently the early church had been accommodating to those systems in some ways; and the church today has as well. We may have conformed to these contrary world systems without even knowing it; or possibly having some awareness of this accommodation.

We may consciously choose to conform when we taking the easier road; knowing that something around us is not the way Jesus would want us to live our lives, but we may keep our mouths shut or be a team player or simply go along with the crowd. The Message Bible translates this sentence from Paul well. It says: “Don’t become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking.” Paul pleads with us to not fit in. In fact, First Peter tells us that instead of being permanent residents here, Christians are temporary residents and foreigners in this world. We are from another eternal country; living according to its culture and standards.

Paul appeals to the Christians in Rome, and us; pleads with us all, to recognize how we may have conformed our lives to this world’s systems. He says; stop addapting. Instead, “be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may test and approve what is the will of God—what is good and well-pleasing and perfect.”

Paul came at this appeal against this world’s systems from another angle in his letter to the church in Ephesus. There he wrote: “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world rulers of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavens.” Paul was pointing out the spiritual forces that were exerting influence in the institutions and civil and social structures of his world; forces that were also influencing the church.

These forces are also mentioned in the Book of Revelation. In John’s vision he wrote to the seven churches in Asia Minor; to the angel of the church of Ephesus; to the angel of the church of Smyrna; to the angel of the church of Pergamum, to the angel of the church of Thyatira, to the angel of the church of Sardis, the angel of the church of Philadelphia, and the angel of the

church of Laodicea; writing to the angels/messengers that held influence over those seven churches and cities in that country.

We do not often realize the subtle spiritual battle that rages all around us. We do not realize, because we have grown up often adapting to that world. The writer who knew best this spiritual battle raging with this world's systems was Walter Wink. He was a theologian, Methodist pastor, and activist in the late 20th and early 21st century. He wrote three books specifically addressing this issue; a Trilogy with the titles: "Naming the Powers," "Unmasking the Powers," and "Engaging the Powers." These "Powers," were this world's systems.

In his book, *'Engaging the Powers'*, Wink wrote: 'In the biblical view [Powers] are both visible *and* invisible, earthly *and* heavenly, spiritual *and* institutional. The Powers possess an outer, physical manifestation [such as] (buildings, portfolios, personnel, trucks, fax machines) and an inner spirituality, or corporate culture, or collective personality...What people in the world of the Bible experienced and called "Principalities and Powers" was in fact real. They were discerning the actual spirituality at the center of the political, economic, and cultural institutions of their day." So, when Paul wrote his appeal to the church in Rome, he was warning the believers to avoid conforming their lives to this world; to the systemic ethos of communities and churches and countries that act in ways that are often contrary to the ways of Jesus, and of God's reign.

Jesus' vision; the vision of the kingdom of God, is clear. He stated it this way: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your mind. And love your neighbor as yourself. And your neighbor includes everyone; even your enemies. Jesus' standard was love. Anything that was not love was not of God.

This standard; and Paul's standard; calls us to a wholistic and comprehensive pro-life stance; one that advocates in love for all life; the pre-born and the aged and the vulnerable and the homeless and the foreigner and the Muslim and the Iranian and the Palestinian and the Jew and the earth and the water and the living creatures and the entire eco system. Anything that does not support that loving stance is not of God; it is of this world's systems. This would include militarism, and the power of domination, and playing the zero-sum game; and the oppression of the vulnerable and marginalized. We could even include in this list, to a degree, one of our own sacred cows in America, the capitalistic economic system when its priorities and values run contrary to God's loving standard for all life. These systems that are found in our political, religious, civic, and national structures must be evaluated based on the life and teaching of Jesus.

In order to avoid accommodating, we need to see more clearly the ways in which this world runs contrary to the ways of Jesus. Paul helps us here. He says: "be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may test and approve what is the will of God—what is good and well-pleasing and perfect." We begin to open our eyes to these spiritual forces; these world systems when we begin to renew our minds through regular reading of the gospels; immersing ourselves deeper and deeper into the life of Jesus. When we do this, we will test and approve what is God's will, and what is not of God's will.

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