

Not Fitting in: It's Actually Good for You!*Romans 12:1-2*

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

How powerful is the pressure to fit in – to be like everyone else? Indulge me for a minute – pretend that you live on a Pacific island – sounds pretty good, right? But here's the catch – it's a volcanic island. The volcano hasn't had a major eruption in 100 years, but it is far from dormant. You can see the smoke venting from the top. Not infrequently, you feel the earth quake beneath you. Geologists have warned the islanders frequently, "You live too close! With this type of volcano, you won't have enough warning or time to evacuate!" Still, almost all of the people on the island have chosen to live directly in the shadow of the volcano. Why? The best ocean view on the island, the most soil fertile soil. The temperature is perfect there. The most beautiful flowers and vegetation are there – and almost all of the people are there. It's where the stores, shops, and restaurants are. To live outside of the volcano's shadow while possible, would mean long drives on not-so-great roads – drilling a well on the property, unreliable electric, no ocean view, no shops, more bugs, very few people nearby, and the ones that do live there, well everyone kind of scoffs at them. "Fear mongers. Overly cautious. Why give up the good life to live way out there!" So, where would you choose to live? Up with the weird people in the hills, or where things are happening, where all the trendsetters are – where it's easy to shop, easy to go out, easy to get around, close to work. Isn't it true that the pressure to be like everyone else would be immense even though the danger of doing so would be very high? Would you be willing to face the ridicule, the possibility of stifled work possibilities, the rejection of the popular and powerful people, the eye rolls, the added expense and inconvenience to do the smart thing? What is it that would be powerful enough, convincing enough to get you to live safely outside of the volcano's reach? Let me suggest a few: Someone you knew experienced an eruption in a similar place, and barely escaped death. You personally know a volcanologist who shows you clear evidence of multiple similar situations where the eruption happened and the town was wiped out. You take a hike up the mountain and witness the fumaroles and earthquakes and ominous changing landscape. And even then, you might need to be told; you might need to see the evidence multiple times to convince you that the sacrifice of not fitting in would be worth it.

Well, we don't live on a volcanic island, but we do face tremendous pressure to fit in – to fit in with people and a culture that by and large rejects Jesus and the Bible. And so, we follow Jesus in name – we call ourselves Christians, but how easily don't we fall into a pattern of being a follower of Jesus for an hour or so on Sunday, a follower of Jesus on the inside where no one can see, but no one would know it by observing what we say and do the other six days and 22 hours of the week? Sadly, if we live that way, we actually lose out on so many of the blessings God want us to have – and we put our faith and our place in heaven at risk. The title of our summer sermon series is "Fight the Urge to Fit In." Over the next three months, we'll be looking at the blessings of living openly as a follower of Jesus. This week, we'll look at how fighting this urge is a blessing to us. Next month we'll look at how this call to be different is God's clear plan for us, and in August we'll examine how living as a follower of Jesus is a blessing to the people around us.

So today I invite you to open your Bible as we look at Romans chapter 12, and examine how fighting the urge to fit in is a blessing for those who live openly as followers of Jesus. **Romans 12:1-2 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.**

I'd like you to take a moment to think of one or two ways in which you feel pressure to do what isn't in line with God's direction in order to fit in. Try to come up with at least two. In preparation for today, I asked this question of a number of Faith members and some other Christian friends who said I could share their answers if they remained anonymous. Here are a few answers I received. One teen responded, "The pressure to join in shutting certain girls out of my social group, especially online." Another teen responded, "The pressure to be sexually active to impress my friends." One adult shared, "The pressure to shut up and keep my 'religious views' quiet, especially when it comes to marriage and family and sexuality and gender." Another, "The pressure to give my kids all the experiences and opportunities that their friends have no matter how much time or money it takes." One simply said, "To live for stuff – keeping up with the Jones's." The most intriguing answer I got was, "The temptation to live as my own master."

Were your answers similar? This is real, right? The pressure to fit in is real! Everyone else is doing it. If I don't, I'm going to seem a little bit weird – I'm not going to fit in. And it's so easy – so easy just to go with the flow, trying to sooth our consciences with thoughts like, "I'm here on Sunday! I still believe in Jesus; when push comes to shove, deep down, I still have my faith."

So let me ask you this. If you follow the urge to ignore God's directives in order to fit in, will it help you? Will it be good for you? Let me play the devil's advocate here – in many cases the answer would seem to be "yes!" The teen that follows the urge to shut out another from the group often gets to be part of the popular group along with the power and influence that it brings. The one who follows the urge to be sexually active outside of marriage enjoys the pleasure of the act as well as the heightened status among his peers. The adult who keeps quiet about their Bible-based views on morality or spiritual things avoids the stress of open conflict, the possible effects on employment or education, and strained personal relationships. The family that prioritizes time and dollars for academic, art, and athletic opportunities for their children over and above time and resources used to train them and build them up in the Christian faith may very well result in their children being praised and popular, maybe even with a scholarship and unique career opportunities. The adult that lives for stuff could very possibly keep up with the Jones's, and you know what? Having all the latest and greatest can be pretty fun – I remember a comedian saying, I can't recall ever seeing someone on a jet ski without a smile on their face! And the one who lives as if they are their own master and not God. The nagging of the conscience is gone. You don't need to feel any compulsion to do anything that doesn't make you feel instantly good. I do what I want when I want how I want! It's so freeing!

Is it any wonder that the pressure to fit in is so strong? It's often instantly gratifying! But is that the whole story? Would you agree that while living to fit in can bring instant gratification, the passage of time reveals that it often doesn't deliver what it promises. How often does the teen who ostracized another from the social group ends up being the one shut out a few months later? How frequently

does the instant pleasure of sexual activity lead to complicated and bitter emotions and unfulfilled future expectations? The countless hours and dollars poured into opportunities for our kids – more often than not, they don't live up to the dreams we had for them, and not infrequently, children are embittered when they realize their parents were imposing their own dreams on them. Living for stuff – well stuff gets old and there is always something new and better. I will grant that people don't always experience these negative consequences of living to fit in, but this I guarantee: it always distracts us from the real problem and the real solution – the volcano on the island if you will.

When we become so consumed with fitting in, what do we forget? Mortality. You and I are going to die. The person next to you is going to die. The richest, most popular, most powerful, best looking, most athletic, smartest people in the world are all going to die. And everyone will have a face-to-face with God. All he asks of us is this one thing: that you be sinless. Then life after death in heaven will be yours. See the problem? God could care less how much money you make, how many friends you have, what your job is, or how many points you scored. He just needs you to be sinless. But you can't be, neither can I. That's a huge problem. And it isn't solved by fitting in and doing what everyone else does. It is only solved if someone can credit us with that spinelessness. Well, someone has. That someone is Jesus. Jesus never sinned. Jesus died in our place. Jesus endured that wrath of God in our place. When we die and stand before God, we are sinless, we inherit heaven. Our problem is solved so long as we die trusting in Jesus. But when we live to fit in, when we are distracted from the real problem and the real solution, what will happen? When we are ashamed of the solution to the real problem – ultimately, we lose the solution to the real problem. We lose what Jesus did for us. We lose heaven – all for the pat on the back and less stress! Let me ask the question again. Is it good for you to follow the urge to fit in? No, it is disastrous. That's why God calls on us to fight that urge.

And he doesn't hide the fact that the fight will not be easy! We see that by the words he chooses in these verses. The phrase **“Do not conform to the pattern of the world...”** restates and explains the phrase before it, **“offer your bodies as living a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God...”** I want to key in on the word *sacrifice*. If I came up to you and said, “I'm going to ask you to make a sacrifice,” what would that tell you? Doesn't it mean that whatever I ask you to do will be hard – you will have to give something of yourself? But saying “I want you to make a sacrifice” is different than saying “I want you to do something hard” right? The word sacrifice implies that the hard thing you will do will be beneficial in some way. An athlete sacrifices – uses time, endures body aches and pains. The benefit? He can run faster. A parent sacrifices time and money to feed and clothe a child. The benefit? Health and safety for the child. Sacrifice is doing something hard, but with a beneficial result.

God isn't pretending that fighting the urge to fit in will be easy, but it will be beneficial. It's a sacrifice. In two months we'll look at how it benefits others, but today, we focus on how this sacrifice benefits us. And it's simply this – it keeps our focus on the real problem and the real solution. When we don't *conform to the pattern of the world*, we don't forget our mortality. We don't waste our time with constant worry about how much money we have or how many people like us or approve of us. And that doesn't mean that our lives are miserable as a result. When we don't live to fit in, the instant gratification might not be there, but often times God blesses us as a result of our following his directives. The teen who doesn't engage in ostracizing others might have a tough time of it for a while, but a few years later realizes that she is much better off with the friends she made down the line. The one who avoided sexual activity before marriage often ends up with a healthier marriage and sexual fulfillment down the line. The one who resists the urge to prioritize earthly opportunities for their children over spiritual ones often ends up reaping the blessings of a stronger relationship with their children down the line and children who also have a sense of what is temporary and what is eternal. The one who doesn't live for stuff often reaps the blessing of relationships with people rather than relationships with things. But that doesn't happen every time – that's why the main reason to fight the urge to fit in is because we know what's coming in our inheritance: heaven. And we want to keep that inheritance! It's not following the urge to fit in that's good for us, it's fighting that urge.

Yes, but how? What will make us willing and able to make these sacrifices of not conforming to the pattern of the world? What is it that will empower us to live willingly and openly different lives, not just on Sunday morning, not just in our minds, but every day in real life? Think back to the volcano story – if you knew someone who had barely survived an eruption, if you knew a geologist who constantly reminded you of the danger, if you went and saw the signs personally – if you did all of these things frequently, that's the kind of thing that it would take for you to be willing to live differently. When we read in **verse 2, ‘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 gracious will.** It reminds us that it is similar when it comes to our not conforming to the pattern of this world – when we learn from those who have experienced the danger of living by the pattern of the world, when we see examples of those who didn't fight the urge and paid the ultimate price, when an expert tells us frequently of the flawed and temporary pleasure of living to fit in and shows us the flawless and permanent pleasure of staying faithful to Jesus, that's what empowers us to live differently. All of that happens when we go here – the Bible. Here we find example after example of those who lived to fit in and paid the ultimate price. The Israelites who followed the pattern of the nations around them and rejected the true God, the religious leaders in Jesus' day who lived for wealth and popularity to name just a few. Here we find example after example of those who made the sacrifice of not conforming and died as faithful followers of Jesus who inherit heaven. Joshua who said, “Choose this day whom you will serve, but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord!” Here we see an expert laying it out for you. How about the expert Jesus himself telling us in the book of Mark 8:36-37 **What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? ³⁷ Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?”**

Listen to God speak as you read the Bible on your own, as you gather here to listen and to encourage those around you. Memorize, read, and gather. That's the how! That's where the power comes from so that we aren't just living as Christians for two hours on Sunday. Rather, we gather here so that we can go out there and live our lives as Christians. We gather here so that when we are feeling battered – and if you are living your faith openly, there are days when you are going to feel a little bit battered – we are encouraged and built up again and can go out there and make that sacrifice to fight the urge to fit in. Hard? Yes, but with a clear benefit – that you die with faith in Jesus and receive your crown of life in heaven. Fight the urge to fit in! It truly is good for you! AMEN.