

## **CONFORMITY**

### **The Book of Philippians #22**

According to the Random House Dictionary, to conform is “to be in harmony; to act in accordance with a standard or norm; to be or become similar in form or character.”

Conformity can be a good thing or a bad thing. For young kids conformity can be demeaning if they are constantly being ridiculed to conform to what others think is “normal”. I’m sure all of us here at one time or another have been told we are a little odd or weird because we did not look or act like others. Some of us tried to change our looks or our manners in order to conform to what the majority was accepting as normal at the time, all because we did not like the feeling or the ridicule of being “different”.

But we can only be someone else for so long. Eventually the real “us” comes out. Rita Mae Brown, a New York Times bestselling author, once said, *“I think the reward for conformity is that everyone likes you except yourself.”* And this can be a true statement. If you sacrifice everything you are to become everything everyone else wants you to be, eventually there is nothing recognizable left of yourself. It has gone the way of conformity. This type of conformity is not good.

Scripture has much to say about conformity and Paul address it here in Philippians in a positive manner. But he also addresses it in a negative manner in Romans.

#### ROMANS 12:2

*“Do not conform any longer to the patterns 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 and pleasing and perfect will.” (NIV)*

Peter echoes Pauls’ admonition but uses it in the context of being holy (contrasts it with being holy).

#### 1 PETER 1:13-14

*“Prepare your minds for action, keep sober in spirit, fix your hope completely on the grace to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts which were yours in your ignorance, but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior; because it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy.’”*

Both Paul and Peter are saying that we should not be conformed to what we used to know - the ways of the world and how we succumbed to its influence. And we are not to do the things we used to do. We are to forsake these things and this way of thinking. In fact they are both saying that if we do not do this then it will be impossible for us to know what the will of God is because we will be blinded by our conformity to the world.

When each of us became a Christian we all came with a different set of rules and regulations for living than we found in Scripture. And we have all had to shed these habits and ways of thinking in order to conform to what God, through His word, requires of us. For some this has been a long and difficult process but all of understand that we will never be completely rid of the world’s influence on our thinking or our doing unless we follow what Peter and Paul are telling us to do. We have to have our minds renewed – an extreme thought makeover must occur– and we have to be holy in our behavior. We

cannot conform, indeed we must not conform to the world - it's thinking or it's influences.

There is an old joke that gives an example of conformity. It takes place in a prisoner of war camp during World War II. The prisoners are lined up in front of the camp commander and are told to rock back and forth saying "tic, tock, tic, tock" mimicking the pendulum of a clock. So all the prisoners start moving left to right and saying "tic, tock, tic, tock". All the prisoners except one. This prisoner only moves to the left and says, "tic, tic, tic". So the prison commander looks at him with evil intent and says, "Ve have vays to make you tock." This is a funny example but conformity is essential in a prison camp if you hope to avoid punishment. Take for example Louis Zamperini and his fellow prisoners in the movie "Unbroken. For them it was conform or die. And they nearly died trying to conform to the cruel prison camp commander's quest to break them.

Sometimes people conform to each other simply because they have been together for decades. Couples who have been married for any length of time know that conformity to at least some of their spouse's patterns or habits is necessary for a healthy marriage. People have even said that those who live together for 25 years or more eventually start to look like one another. According to a research report published in the New York Times Science section, on August 11, 1987, couples who originally bore no particular resemblance to each other when first married had, after 25 years of marriage, started to look like one another. And the happier they were the more they looked alike. (Article written by Daniel Goleman. Study performed by Robert Zajonc, a psychologist at the University of Michigan.)

So there is a good side to conformity that I think we can all agree on. We enforce Laws that are made to ensure everyone drives on the same side of the road. Whether you are driving in England or America it is important to conform to the standard for the country in which you are driving in order to ensure your safety and the safety of others traveling in the opposite direction. One non-conformity move could mean serious injury and even death. In this case conformity is good, very good.

If you were a Jew alive in the time of Christ you would have strived to conform to every jot and tittle of the Law in order to attain righteousness. The last time I preached on Philippians we spoke of Paul's credentials as a Jewish "Pharisee of Pharisee" and his conformity to the rules and regulations of the Jewish Law. But an encounter with Christ changed his perspective of conformity. After this encounter he determined to count as loss all things which he had gained prior to knowing Christ. In chapter 3 of Philippians we read why he made this decision.

#### PHILIPPIANS 3:7-11

*"But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ, and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith, that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; in order that I may attain to the resurrection of the dead."*

So Paul is saying that He willingly gave up all that he had attained through the keeping of the Jewish Laws and customs in order to gain something far greater – a righteousness that comes through faith in Christ rather than through one's own efforts. He has stopped conforming himself to the Law in an attempt to become righteous because he now knows that only through faith in Christ can complete fulfillment of the Law be found. So he willingly gave up all that he had accomplished prior to Christ. And he did so that he might:

Know Christ  
Know the Power of His Resurrection  
Know the Fellowship of His Sufferings  
Be Conformed to His Death  
Attain to the Resurrection of the Dead

Let's look at the first one.

### TO KNOW CHRIST

To know Jesus in an intimate way is the hope of all believers, for it is in Him that we find the fullness of life and joy. We have all had times in all our lives where the Lord seemed close at hand. Where we could actually feel His presence permeating our lives. But we have also had times when the Lord seemed completely distant. Those were the times in which we struggled the most.

It has been said when the Lord feels distant or removed from us that it is not the Lord who has left us but rather it is we who have strayed from Him. To some extent this is true. James 4:8 tells us to *"Draw near to God and He will draw near to you."* So we do bear some responsibility for the sense of nearness to God. But God has also said that He will never leave us or forsake us. So we may "feel" distant at times from God but His nearness to us remains unchanged. He may not manifest Himself in ways which we are longing for or seek after, but His word remains true. He will never leave us or forsake us (Hebrews 13:5).

Still, there is something more at stake here. It is not simply the presence of God that Paul is after. He is after something deeper. The Greek word translated as "know" here in verse 10 of chapter 3 is the word *ginosko*. It means to "be aware of and to feel, to have knowledge and to perceive". It also means to "understand". But understanding God is not possible without the Holy Spirit. Because Scripture tells us that it is only through God's Spirit that we can truly know His thoughts.

#### 1 CORINTHIANS 2:11-12, 16

*"For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so the thoughts of God no one knows except the Spirit of God. Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may know the things freely given to us by God, which things we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual thoughts with spiritual words..."*

*"But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised. But he who is spiritual appraises all things, yet he himself is appraised by no one. For who has known the mind of the Lord, that He will instruct Him? But we have the mind of Christ."*

It is almost unbelievable to think that the mind of Christ dwells in us through His Spirit. And yet it is true. Because of this we can know the very thoughts of God and come to know Him in a personal way.

I have many people in my life that I can say that I know. And by that I mean I have some knowledge of them and am even aware of some of their likes and dislikes. It is not hard to get to know someone if you are a good listener and let the other person do most of the talking. It is even easier if you follow them on Twitter or Facebook. Sometimes, if you take public transit or fly on an airplane for any

length of time, you can find out a person's life story over the course of a few hours if you will simply listen and ask a few leading questions. It is not hard get to "know" someone in this manner. But this knowledge does not grant you an invitation to their retirement party or the key to their home while they are away. This is superficial knowledge, not *ginosko* knowledge.

The knowledge of understanding another comes from a more intimate relationship, from a sharing of ideas, of disappointments, of heartaches and of dreams. It is an understanding that you can trust yourself and your secrets to another who in turn can trust you to do the same. It's the type of trust that enables us to give ourselves completely to another. If this trust is ever broken the relationship dissolves into the knowing of the person rather than the heartfelt understanding of another. It is the desire to be understood and to deeply understand another that is at the heart of *ginosko* knowledge. It is this deeper knowledge, this knowledge of understanding that Paul is seeking after when he says, "*That I might know Him*". And it is an incredible thing to know that this intimate knowledge of God is possible because He has chosen to give us His very Spirit.

But there is something else which Paul desires to know and that is the power of His resurrection.

### **THE POWER OF HIS RESURRECTION**

Paul says he forsook all other avenues of righteousness in order that he might know Christ and the power of His resurrection. One cannot fully know Christ without coming to an understanding of the power of His resurrection; For this is what allowed Christ to overcome sin and death, and it is this very power that does the same for us.

#### ROMANS 8:11

*"If the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you."*

Now we know that the dead in Christ will be the first to be raised from the dead when Christ returns (1 Thessalonians 4:16). But we also know that after the thousand year reign of Christ on the earth is completed all who have died will be raised and stand before the judgment throne to be judged for their deeds. So this passage is not just speaking of a future life for believers but also of a present life, a present raising of the dead.

#### ROMANS 6:1-14

*"What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase? May it never be! How shall we who died to sin still live in it? Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the father, so we too might walk in newness of life..."*

*"For if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin, for he who has died is free from sin..."*

*"Now if we have died with Christ, we believe we shall also live with Him, knowing that Christ, having been raised from the dead, is never to die again; death no longer is master over Him, for the death that He died, He died to sin once for all; but the life that He lives, He lives to God. Even so consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus..."*

*“Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its lusts, and do not go on presenting the members of your body to sin as instruments of unrighteousness; but present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God. For sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under law but under grace.”*

These verses give the full meaning of what Paul is saying in Philippians. He wants to know the power of His resurrection because it is this same power that frees us and keeps us from sinning. If we do not know we have this power, or do not understand what this power is, then we are helpless to take advantage of it.

Wendy and I recently made the decision to put solar panels on our roof. It was a lengthy process because we’re both a little leery of salesmen. We had some concerns about the viability of solar for us. But I did my own research and determined that we really would save money by using solar power; and the savings would be significant enough to go ahead with the install.

So we signed the contract and the panels were installed on July 15<sup>th</sup>. We had to wait for several inspections before we could turn it on, but 3 weeks later, on August 5<sup>th</sup>, we got the approval from PG&E to turn the solar panels on. During that 3 week period the solar panels on my roof were ready to be used but their ability to transmit the sun’s power was cut off. They were active and in working order, but there was no ability to empower them.

The life of a Christian can sometimes be like this. We are told that we have resurrection power but we don’t seem to be able to harness that power. Like the powerless solar panels on my roof the Holy Spirit seems to be ready for power but unable to transmit it. There is a disconnect somewhere. And that disconnect is not from the fault of the Spirit but rather the fault that lies within our sinful nature.

I believe most of us know more about sin than we do about the Spirit. We have more experience giving in to sin than we do with giving in to the Spirit. We understand more about how lust conceives and gives birth to sin (James 1:14-15) than we do about how the power of Christ works within us to resist sin. As a result we pay more attention to the power of sin to tempt us than the power of the Spirit to resist it. And this is where the disconnect occurs.

Once I got the go ahead from PG&E to turn on the power to my solar panels I could have ignored it. I could have left the switch in the off position and wasted all the energy that was being produced. But instead I chose to turn it on. Why? Because I knew the benefit of turning it on. I had done my research and ‘knew’ that I would see energy savings so I was eager to turn it on and start reaping the benefits. It should be the same for the believer. The knowledge that the same power that raised Christ from the dead lives in us should cause us to turn on the switch for this power. We could save a lot of wasted energy and avoid disappointment if we would just turn our “Holy Spirit” switch on so that will transform the power of God our the power to resist.

When Paul says he wants to know the power of Christ’s resurrection he is speaking about understanding how the power that raised Christ from the dead is able to raise us up to newness of life – to be free from the power of sin, to be connected to the source of life, and to be reaping the benefits of empowerment that the Spirit brings to bear in our lives. He wants to understand so that he may cooperate with the Spirit in this transformation.

We too need to understand how the power that raised Christ from the dead works in us. We need



to understand how the body of sin which we inherited is now done away with and the power which it held over us is gone. We need to understand more fully how we have died to sin and are no longer slaves to it so that we may resist temptation. We need to understand how to locate the connection switch and turn the power on so that we can reap the benefits of His powerful presence. We need to know how to stop drawing power from the flesh (which is our earthly source of power, our PG&E if you will) and start drawing power from the Son (which is our heavenly source of power, our solar source).

Most Christians understand that they have died with Christ but they do not understand what that means. So they walk around like the zombies we see on TV and in films – dead but alive in their death. We call them the walking dead because nothing has changed. They still inhabit flesh and bones but the evil which inhabits them has become predominant and now seeks to bring everyone into their permanent state of “deadness”. When you are infected with the Zombie disease you have no choice but to remain dead while you walk around in your dead corpse with no hope of ever experiencing life. We did not die with Christ to become the walking dead.

When Paul says the Spirit of God has raised us from the dead with Christ he is speaking of the resurrected dead. And there is quite a difference between the walking dead and the resurrected dead. Resurrected men and women have a choice when it comes to temptation, the walking dead do not. The sinful bodies of the resurrected dead have been done away with. They are free from that body, free to choose between life and death, slavery and freedom. They do not inhabit a corpse. They have the power to move out of walking death into resurrected life; Free to be masters over sin rather than being mastered by sin; Free to live a new life rather than inhabiting the old.

To understand the power of Christ’s resurrection is to understand it in such a way as to put it to use; to know how to turn the power on; to allow it to freely flow in us and then through us to others. Paul does not want us to have a casual acquaintance with the Spirit. He wants us to fully know and comprehend all the benefits of having an intimate knowledge of who the Spirit is and how He works in the lives of all believers.

So Paul wants to know Christ and the power of His resurrection. The next thing Paul says he wants to know is the fellowship of His sufferings.

### **THE FELLOWSHIP OF HIS SUFFERINGS**

Christ suffered on the cross and suffered beatings during His imprisonment awaiting the cross. Christians throughout history have suffered martyrdom and imprisonment as well. All of these have experienced the fellowship of suffering that Christ experienced. And this continues even today. In the middle east ISIS has beheaded, burned, beaten and killed, raped and tortured anyone they can get their hands on that states they are a follower of Christ. All of these people have and are sharing in the same fellowship of suffering that Christ experienced.

When Paul was first called to the ministry after being knocked off his horse on his way to Damascus, Jesus said that He would show him how much he must suffer for the name of Jesus. So we know from this that Paul expected some type of suffering. What it was we do not know. But we can see from what happened to him what type of suffering he actually did endure.

#### **2 CORINTHIANS 11:24-25**

*“Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep.”*

Certainly Paul had his share of physical suffering and many today in Iraq, Syria, Iran, the

Philippines, Pakistan, Africa and other nations are experiencing their share as well. One can hardly look at the headlines without seeing a Christian who is being physically persecuted for their faith. Some of those who have been imprisoned have been released thank to the efforts of many Christian legal organizations. Recently two pastors imprisoned in Somalia were released. Unfortunately Pastor Saeed Abidini remains in prison, still suffering from his beatings with little or no medical attention. We must not forget but continue to pray for those who are beaten and imprisoned for their faith in hopes that one day they too will be released.

I do not mean to discount or deemphasize physical suffering. But there is another aspect of knowing the fellowship of His sufferings that I want to address and that is the denying of the flesh. Christ was tempted just as we are tempted but He did not give in to temptation, He did not sin (Hebrews 4:15). But it was a struggle for Him none-the-less, just as it is a struggle for us not to give in. The struggle was the pull of the flesh to do one thing and the pull of the Spirit to do another. The victory was that the Spirit won and the flesh was defeated.

The Scriptures say that although He was a son, (Jesus) learned obedience from the things which He suffered (Hebrews 5:8). We too learn obedience when we suffer in our struggle with sin. And that is why we are told:

#### HEBREWS 12:3-4

*“Consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in your striving against sin.”*

When we strive against sin we share in the fellowship of Christ’s sufferings; but only if we win the struggle. Continual defeat by sin is not the fellowship of Christ’s sufferings. Victory over sin and the struggle to do so is the shared suffering.

Paul is not lacking in being physically persecuted for His faith. And certainly when we share the same fate as Christ we are in fellowship with whatever that suffering is – whether mocking’s, hostility, false statements, beatings, imprisonment, or death. But that is because these persecutions stem from our resisting sin and standing for righteousness. Christ resisted sin all the way to the cross. Without that resistance we would have no hope. There would be no Christ to know, no power of His resurrection to know, and no fellowship of His sufferings to know. For if Christ did not overcome sin by the power of the Spirit, then there is no power or hope for us to ever overcome sin.

That is why we must strive to know Christ better, to understand what made His struggle against sin so successful, how He was able to persevere to the end even to the point of shedding blood in His striving against it. We must know this Christ. We must know this power that raised Him from the dead. And we must better understand the sufferings he experienced in His struggle against sin so that we too can be victorious.

#### **BEING CONFORMED TO HIS DEATH**

Perhaps the key to it all is what Paul expresses as “being conformed to His death”. The way Christ died and how He handled the events leading up to His death are certainly exemplary and should be emulated. He did not retaliate; He did not even speak at times (Mark 15:5). When He could have summoned legions of angels to His defense He chose not to (Matthew 26:53). When He could have rallied His followers to rise up and help Him He did not (John 18:36). Why? Because His kingdom was not of this world. This world was not His home and neither is it ours.

But the death Christ died did not begin and end on the cross. It started in heaven and continues to this day. Here's why I say this. When Christ left heaven He emptied Himself of His God powers. Taking on the flesh of men He died to who He was in order to become what His Father wanted Him to become.

#### PHILIPPIANS 2:5-8

*"Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross."*

While on earth He also emptied Himself of His own will in order to do the will of the One who sent Him.

#### JOHN 6:38

*"I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of Him who sent Me."*

Even in heaven Jesus subjects Himself to the Father; For it is God who is on the throne and Jesus who sits at His right hand.

#### HEBREWS 12:1-2

*"Since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God."*

To be conformed to the death of Jesus is to die to your own will in order to do the will of the Father. To be conformed to His death is to be conformed to His obedience throughout His earthly life. We call this dying to self and it is the embodiment of conformity.

So when Paul says he wants to be conformed to His death, he is not just conforming to how Christ died but also to how He lived. For in His living He died to self in order to live for God. He crucified His own will in order to do the will of His heavenly Father. If we are to be conformed to His death we must emulate His life as well, for in His life He was constantly experiencing death.

### **TO ATTAIN THE RESURRECTION FROM THE DEAD**

When Paul says he wants to know Christ and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings *"in order that (he) may attain to the resurrection of the dead"*, he is not questioning if he will attain the resurrection. Rather he is stating that the purpose of him knowing Christ, the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings is so that He might be conformed to the death of Christ and thereby inherit the resurrection that is promised for all who believe and do the same. When you know Christ intimately, as Paul did, then you know you have eternal life. You will not be refused entrance into heaven because Jesus never knew you (Matthew 7:21-23). Rather you will hear, *"Well done good and faithful servant... enter into the joy of your master"* (Matthew 25:1). For Jesus Himself has said that if you know Him you have eternal life.

#### JOHN 17:3

*"This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent."*



According to Jesus when you know the only true God and Jesus Christ whom He sent, you have eternal life. The two go hand in hand. You can't have eternal life without knowing who Jesus and the one true God are, and you can't know who they are without obtaining eternal life as a result of this knowledge.

This is not head knowledge, for James says, *"You believe God is one. You do well; the demons also believe and shudder"*. Their knowledge of God does not save them for they are in constant rebellion against Him. It is the understanding of who God is and what He requires of us that allows us to humble ourselves before Him and confess our sins. When this occurs the Holy Spirit comes and dwells within us. It is this indwelling presence which allows us to truly know and come to understand the one true God and His Son Jesus Christ. And it is through this knowledge that faith is found and eternal life is secured.

Paul has already told us how he started his process of knowing God, of coming to a true understanding of who He is and the power He holds. He started by giving up everything he previously valued in order to find the true riches of heaven.

#### PHILIPPIANS 3:7-9

*"But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ, and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith."*

Paul was willing to give everything he had in order to truly know and understand who Christ was, how the power of His resurrection worked within the life of a believer, how he shared in the sufferings of Christ, and how he conformed to the death of Christ in order that he might attain to the resurrection from the dead. In the next several verses Paul will reveal to us how he continues in this process of understanding Christ by not looking back but always looking ahead.

But we'll save that for next week's sermon. Today, if you have the same desire that Paul did to know Christ, the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, if you desire to be conformed to His death so that you might attain the resurrection of the dead, consider this. Paul gave up everything he valued in order to find something of greater value. If you truly desire these things, as Paul did, what are you willing to count as loss for the sake of knowing Christ? If you truly want to know Christ more ask Him what is getting in the way. Then be ready to give it up, no matter how painful that process may be.

#### MATTHEW 13:44

*"The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in the field, which a man found and hid again; and from joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field."*

The knowledge of Christ is a field and there is a treasure in that field. Will you sell everything you have to buy it? Or will you take a pass this time around and let someone else buy it? The choice is yours.