

The Gospel According to the Olympics 2: Do Not Conform to This World
Romans 12
September 29, 2024
Rev. Kelley Becker

This is Amir Ansari. He was born in Iran but grew up in Afghanistan before he was forced to flee in 2015. Since then, Amir has taken refuge in Sweden, where he began training with Stockholm Cycling Club. He has participated in national and international championships in time trial and road race competitions.

This is Saman Soltani. She was raised in Iran. She was a national champion in artistic swimming before switching to kayaking, where she won a silver medal at the Asian U23 championships. Soltani's life took an unexpected turn in 2022 when she sought asylum in Austria after attending an artistic swimming training camp in Spain. Solatani now lives in Austria and trains with the Austrian Canoe Federation. She has won national championships in kayak marathon and sprint races.

Besides being born in Iran and forced to flee their home countries, these athletes have something else in common. They were both members of the Refugee Team at the Paris Olympics.

In the Paris Games, the Refugee Olympic Team represented more than 100 million forcibly displaced people worldwide. The team was comprised of 37 athletes, hosted by 15 National Olympic Committees, and competed across 12 sports. The majority of the athletes on the team were supported by the Refugee Athlete Scholarship Program.

The Refugee Olympic Team's participation in the Olympic Games was a testament to human resilience, strength, and determination. Their presence at the Games also sent a powerful message of hope, belonging, and unity to the rest of the world. This team of talented athletes is a powerful example of human beings who have seen the world at its worst but have chosen to give back to the world, their best.

It seems fitting, as we talk about the Olympics, that we take a little trip to ancient Rome. Sometime between 55 and 57 BCE Paul wrote a letter to the church in Rome. This letter has significantly impacted the history of Western Civilization and the development of Christian theology. It represents a pivotal moment in Paul's ministry and the developing Jesus movement. .

When we read any of Paul's letters, we should remember that we are followers of Jesus and not followers of Paul. Paul was no more qualified to interpret Jesus' teachings than I am (or you are), so let us filter what he says through the lenses of how we understand Jesus' teachings and what we believe about God and human beings.

One of the primary purposes of Paul's letter to the Romans was to strengthen the social identity of the Christians in Rome. He was providing some leadership to those Jesus followers who were in turmoil over many things, among them was ethnic status...some were Judean, others Greek. They disagreed a lot about the place of Gentiles in the movement. Paul was trying to get this divided group unified around their new identity as Jesus followers. If Paul could have sent them all matching t-shirts he would have. Today we are reading the first 8 verses of Romans 12. In this chapter, he turns his attention to giving advice about how to be Christ followers in that time and place. This is Romans 12:1-8.

I appeal to you therefore, 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. 2 Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of the mind, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

3 For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. 4 For as in one body we have many members and not all the members have the same function, 5 so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. 6 We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; 7 ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; 8 the encourager, in encouragement; the giver, in sincerity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

This is one of the most familiar passages in Romans, maybe in the whole New Testament. Here and in 1 Corinthians Paul talked about what it means to be part of "the body of Christ." He used the metaphor of the human body to talk about the unique gifts each person offers the community and the connectedness between them. We all have different abilities, but we are all connected; we depend on each other. What affects one of us, affects us all. You know...the foot bone's connected to the leg bone and the leg bone's connected to the knee bone, etc. Since we are talking about the Olympics, another metaphor that would work to get at what Paul was saying is a sports team. Each person on the team brings different skills and energy to the team. If one person gets hurt or has an off day, it impacts the whole team.

Let's focus, though, on the verse before Paul brings the body of Christ metaphor to the Romans. In verse 2, he urged them to be different. He told them not to be "conformed to this age." Translations vary here, some use "age," others choose "world" in this verse. Whether "world" or "age," Paul was writing about what was going on in the context in which he was writing. Specifically, he was pointing his audience to the hierarchical systems, oppression, and assumptions that defined people and culture in first-century Rome.

Today, we would probably say something more like “dominant worldview.” Do not be conformed to the dominant worldview.” Worldview, according to Merriam-Webster, is “a comprehensive conception or apprehension of the world especially from a specific standpoint.” The “dominant worldview” or “this age” as the text says, can be anything that stems from what is considered normal or what is expected belief, practice, or behavior. The dominant worldview is held by conservatives, liberals, and moderates alike. In the United States, we generally see the world through the lens of things like heterosexuality, whiteness, being an American citizen, capitalism, patriarchy, cissexism, and ableism. Any dominant worldview is practiced at the expense of other worldviews. It’s the stuff that feels normal. Like “this is how it is,” as if the world was created this way and this is the only way the world can be perceived.

Our worldview tells us what’s right or wrong. How we “should” be. How others “should” be. What to feel. Why to feel it. Who we can trust. Who we should be afraid of. What and who is important. It’s the stuff that is so deeply embedded in our minds and hearts that we don’t even realize it’s there. It is just the way we see things and that way we see things impacts our decisions. It keeps possibilities narrow. It upholds the status quo.

Let me show you how it works. Last week, after the Voter’s Guide was published, a member, having read my submission on immigration emailed me. She did not necessarily disagree with my article but made the point that talking to people (even Christians) about what the Bible says or about morality doesn’t usually change people’s minds. She said that if we want people to change their minds about policies that impact people who are undocumented, we have to show them the positive economic impact they have on our nation. Americans need to understand how deporting millions of people who are undocumented would affect their bank accounts.

As I reflected on what she was saying, I knew she was right. My guess is that most of you would agree with her that people are more likely to advocate for better immigration policies if they benefit from them financially. According to the website, New American Economy, there are currently an estimated 11 million individuals living in the United States without legal status, the vast majority of whom are working, paying taxes, and contributing in both economic and non-economic ways to their community. The employment rate for undocumented immigrants as of 2018 was 95.8%. Over the last decade, undocumented immigrants have generated a \$100-billion surplus in the Social Security program and between 2000 and 2011, undocumented workers generated a 35.1 billion dollar surplus in the Medicare Trust Fund.¹ These are programs people who are undocumented pay into but never receive benefits from. Imagine the impact on those programs without their contributions.

But this sermon isn’t about immigration. It is about the impacts of the dominate worldview in the United States and those impacts go way beyond immigration.

¹ <https://www.newamericaneconomy.org/issues/undocumented-immigrants/>, accessed 9/28/24.

Problems like homelessness, healthcare accessibility, climate change, and student loans are all affected by our “what’s in it for us” worldview. I don’t know about you, but that makes me sad. It makes me sad that the American worldview seems to insist on a solution that makes or saves money. Why can’t “because it will ease the suffering of our neighbors” be enough? “Do not conform to this world,” Paul said.

All Americans don’t share the same exact worldview. In Oklahoma, we hear a lot about the biblical or Christian worldview. A biblical worldview is a framework of beliefs and ideas that’s based on the Bible and shapes how a person interacts with and interprets the world. Politicians love to tell constituents that they have a biblical worldview, which they would say means they center their decision-making and the way they live their lives on what the Bible says.

Based on when and from whom I have heard talk of the importance of having a biblical worldview, I don’t think that means what they think it means. For example, I’ve heard clergy colleagues talk about a biblical worldview as they say awful things about the LGBTQ+ community. I’ve heard Christians with a “biblical worldview” say things like, “I paid my student loans off without help, so the government shouldn’t help the ones struggling today.” I’ve heard Christians with a “biblical worldview” devalue the contributions of women and I’ve seen pictures of them burning crosses in front of the houses of Black families.

Just yesterday, on social media, someone posted a complaint about the presence of people who are homeless in Bartlesville. Someone responded to her post by saying that people who are homeless choose to come to Bartlesville because it is such a kind, Christian community. And then, almost every other response was about how we should bus them back where they came from and stop giving them handouts. A lot of responders talked about these human beings as a burden on the citizens of Bartlesville. Based on what I know of the Bible, that does not sound like a biblical worldview. That sounds a lot more like the dominant worldview that is fixed on solutions that benefit the ones with the power.

We don’t know exactly what the people who were part of the Roman church were doing, but Paul was basically telling them to check themselves and to align their worldview with Jesus’. Here’s the thing, he wrote to the church in Rome less than 30 years after Jesus’ death. Already Jesus’ followers were having trouble remembering how they were supposed to be in the world. They were already being seduced by a worldview that wasn’t what Jesus or God had in mind. When Jesus talked about the kingdom of God, he was talking about a world where all of creation flourishes, where there would be no “others,” and people would not be afraid of other people taking what they have because there would be enough for everyone. Jesus’ kingdom of God was a place where God’s will and ways were lived out.

Just 30 years after Jesus' death things were already going off the rails, so, it is no wonder that here we are 2000 years later, in need of our own letter from Paul. I imagine if Paul was writing to the American Churches, he would admonish us not to "conform to the age" as well. Isn't it interesting that the world we live in has so many of the same problems as the world in Jesus' day or in Paul's day? We are still trying to figure out how to live together and not kill each other. We are still trying to figure out how to live together as equals. We are still trying to figure out how to be good stewards of this planet and how to make sure everyone has what they need. We are still trying to figure out what real belonging looks like. When will we be, in Paul's words, "transformed by the renewing of the mind, so that we can discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect."

One of the great appeals of the Olympic Games, I think, is that they help us imagine what that kind of world could be like. They give us hope. If we can come together around sports, surely we can come together around other things too. What if the scientists working on the technology for new weapons of war came together and worked on climate change instead? What if the whole world worked together to redistribute food so that nobody is starving or food insecure? What if we discovered, like Paul's body of Christ metaphor, we all have unique gifts and our differences show us that we are truly better together.

"We do not all need to contribute what others contribute.
We do not all need to acquire every skill or bring the same offerings.
We do not all need to become knowledgeable about or proficient in every matter.
We do not all need to respond in the same way to the same things.
We are invited to show up to the work of love and justice as our whole selves - nothing more, nothing less - trusting it is enough for the day; knowing the journey of growth continues. We all have gifts. We all have limitations. It's so simple and so very difficult to practice. To do so requires us to trust in each other, to rely on one another, and to honor one another's roles - and our own."²

The thing is, we, as individuals or as a church, can't fix the world. But we can grow and learn. The Refugee Olympic Team has something important to teach us. Each one on the team has had life experiences that most of us cannot imagine. They've seen things we don't want to imagine. They have lived through violence, injustice, and division. Instead of putting into the world more of those things, they have chosen the ideals of the Olympics. They have chosen to imagine peace. They have chosen to imagine a world transformed by mutual understanding, friendship, solidarity, and equity. We can make the same choice.

We can change the way we see the world and the people with whom we share it. We can choose to value and celebrate each person's unique gifts and contributions. We can choose to make decisions and policies that benefit other people, that ease their

² <https://enfleshed.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Aug23.pdf>, accessed 9/27/24.

suffering, just for the sake of easing their suffering. Because the truth is that easing the suffering of others is ultimately good for all of us. It is good for our hearts. As the kids say, "It is very demure, very mindful." We were created to love one another. We are happiest when we are loving and being loved. Let's keep doing that. Amen.