

What is 'Worldliness'?

I often hear the term 'worldliness' used in Christian circles and I have myself used it sometimes to challenge Christians not to follow the ways of the world. But recently I was asked 'what do you mean by 'worldliness'?

In an age when the church is increasingly like the world in its thinking and philosophies, it is important to define this word. There are also extremes of thinking in this area. There are Christians today that have a view of Christianity that requires it to be 'like the world to win the world'. In contrast, there are others who follow ideas of separation from the world which end in hypocrisy and legalism.

This article attempts to steer a course through scripture and between the extremes.

Defining 'Worldliness':

The Greek word for 'world' ('*kosmos*') has a wide range of meanings depending on the context. The word in general refers to the present *order* or *arrangement of things*. When it is used 'negatively' it often means something opposed to the kingdom of Christ.

The Bible instructs Christians not to be conformed to the world, (Rom.12:2). The translation here is literally instructing Christians not to be 'fashioned together with the patterns of this age'. An expanded rendering might read, '*Do not be moulded by the external and fleeting fashions of this age*'. Put simply, we are not to be following the pattern of the world with its ungodly philosophies.

'Worldliness' is a love for the organised *system* of the world. When Christ and His Gospel do not rule over the things in the world that we are involved with, then we are becoming 'worldly'. *Being 'worldly' is allowing the world to squeeze us into its mould. 'Worldliness' is the world coming into our heart to take the heart into the world.*

What The Bible Says About The 'World': If the church is becoming more and more secularistic and more like the world, it is at least partly because Christians have not understood *what God says about the world system*. As Christians, it is imperative that we understand that the indwelling Spirit we have received is *opposed* to that of the world, (1Cor.2:12). The Bible clearly says the *system* of the world is evil, sinful and an enemy of God, (Gal.1:4). Its condition after the Fall is arrogant and self sufficient. Its selfish philosophies elevate man. Much of the man invented systems of psychology and philosophy mirror the system of the world - man's goodness and wisdom are elevated and sin is minimised or non-existent. But God has made man's wisdom in the world to be '**foolishness**', (1Cor.3:19; 1:20; 2:6). In scripture, *nothing good is said about the system, the philosophy, the wisdom of the world!*

All temptation is found in the world and comes from three sources: '**For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh** (includes eating, drinking, sleeping, wearing clothes or any desire of the body), **the lust of the eyes** (includes the desire of anything good or bad you want to buy, possess or entertain) **the pride of life** (the vanities of life, the striving for position, recognition, promotion, advancement), **is not of the Father, but is of the world**', (1Jn.2:16). Many of these things are not evil in themselves but it is the lusts thereof that can produce sin in the heart - and that is where 'worldliness' begins! What Christians must realise about the world system is that it is 'polluted' (2Pet.2:20) and in 'darkness' (Jn.12:46). Unless the contrast is understood between the world and the Spirit of God, then worldliness might not be estimated and discerned as it should.

What 'Worldliness' Is Not:

Yet all of the above is *not* referring to the *physical* creation of the earth but to its *spiritual* condition after the Fall, which is found in the sinful *lusts* thereof.

God has made '**all things**' in the world (Acts 17:24) and God Himself says that all that He has made is '**very good**', (Gen.1:31)! It is not the world we should hate, for God loves the world, (Jn.3:16). We are to enjoy the world! '*Worldliness' is not a matter of matter; but a matter of the heart.* It is not the earthly creation but the rebellious *attitudes* that lead to sinful *lusts*.

'Worldliness' is not owning a TV, using the Internet, having plenty of money, an expensive car, clothing, etc. Rather, the question is: are these things shaping our *view* of the world or enhancing its *philosophies* in our hearts? By 'philosophies' I mean the world's order, its system of beliefs and its thinking. The problem of 'worldliness' is not so much from things *without*, but rather a seduction from *within* the heart; it is the philosophy of the heart *within*.

Some shape their view of 'worldliness' from a personal list of don'ts - don't watch movies, don't have TV, don't have any music of the world, no internet, no entertainments, no amusements, etc. But worldliness is not about a list of rules or things to stay away from, but rather it is first an issue of the heart. It is about *lusts within* that come directly from the world without, (1Jn.2:16). *The world is corrupted through lusts*, (2Pet.1:4). 'Worldliness' is about following after the lusts of the world. '**Wherein in time past you walked according to the course of this world...we all had our conversation in times past in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind...**', (Eph.2:2,3).

The Bible teaches us to '**deny ungodliness and worldly lust**' and to '**live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world**', (Tit.2:12). If you take the issue of worldliness away from the issue of *lusts* and make it into a set of personal standards then you make it a 'law' and such legalism God hates! '**By the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight...a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law**', (Rom.3:20,28).

The Warning Signs:

When a Christian, becomes 'worldly' it may not be a quick process but a *drifting*. An example in scripture of one who drifted back to the course of the world is Demas. Demas was once a zealous co-worker with Paul, (Col.4:14; Philemon 1:24); yet Paul wrote: '**For Demas has forsaken me, having loved this present world, and is departed unto Thessalonica...**', (2Tim.4:10). It is arguable that Demas *first drifted, then deserted*. The frightening thing about becoming 'worldly' is that we can attend church, worship the Lord and yet still in our hearts be drifting to the world! *Its a thing of the heart.*

Being 'Religious': One thing that is arguably a sign of drifting back to the world is being *more religious than Christian*. We can easily go through the motions of 'church life', singing in worship services, taking communion, 'fellowshipping' with other Christians, etc. But what about our thoughts and devotions for the rest of the week? Are our thoughts guided by real communion with our Lord or are we hardly different to our unsaved counterparts?

Little application: How often today do we see people who are convicted by a message from the word of God yet it is scarcely remembered at the end of that day or for the rest of the week, and there is little or no *application* enacted?

The conscience: The conscience is a tool for conviction. If that conviction is suppressed, discernment drops off quickly and worldliness or any other sin becomes less clear to the conscience. The conscience is an indicator of the law (Rom.2:15) and the law shows sin (Rom.3:20;7:7). The conscience is a faculty that the Holy Spirit uses to witness truth to us through His word, (Rom.9:1). The Bible consistently speaks of a 'good conscience' (Act 23:1; 24:16; 1Tim.1:5,19) and a 'weak conscience', (1Cor.8:7,10,12). If the conscience is not fed with the truth of God's word or if it ignores convictions, it can be 'dulled' over time, even numbed. It is then that we might well flirt with the ways of the world. *Worldliness has a lot to do with the dulling of the conscience to the ways of the world*. It is imperative to feed our conscience with the word of God and sound teaching. But it is also important to apply the resultant conviction to our thinking and our daily habits.

'Busyness': The reaction to the above warning signs might be 'I have just been too busy'. But 'busyness' or a preoccupation with the things of the world is one way the conscience is dulled and seduced by the world's thinking.

A loss of distinctiveness: How different are we to the lifestyles of the worldlings?...How much different? Have the lines been blurred? Do people soon know that we are different by our conversation and behaviour?

Sometimes we forget that we are but '**strangers and pilgrims**' passing through a hostile world, (1Pet.2:11).

Music: Music often reflects our view or philosophy and therefore *reflects our view of God*. Music also greatly affects our mood and emotions. Many writers believe it has more impact than any other media outlet, including television. Just because music is classified as 'Christian' does not mean it is Godly. Much of contemporary Christian music (CCM) today has little message of the cross, no sin, no guilt, no redemption, no commitment, no blood and no death or dying to self. It is in effect 'worldly'.

Music used in worship should surely be *different* to the world's music, considering the message of the cross is an 'offense' to those in the world who are perishing, (Gal.5:11). The music and the words should glorify the Lord Jesus Christ. The problem with contemporary Christian music and 'Christian rock music' is that it too often focuses more on the worshipper than the *object* of worship - Jesus Christ.

It surprises me how many Christians today ask 'what do you mean by worldly music' when speaking of today's music. A decade or two ago Christians knew exactly what worldliness meant in music. The introduction of contemporary Christian music has blurred the line between what is 'Christian' and what is of the world. The beat has overtaken the melody; the watered down 'I, me, my' lyrics have overtaken those that would set forth the absolute holiness of the person of Christ. And the 'fruit' of CCM is clear - it is littered with leaders who have fallen in the moral and sexual sins *that are common to the world*.

A lack of fruit: Our 'fruit' in the Bible is the '**fruit of repentance**' (Matt.3:8-10); the '**fruit unto holiness**' (Rom.6:21,22); the '**fruit of righteousness**' (Phil.1:11; Heb.12:11; James 3:18); '**fruit of our lips**' (Heb.13:15); and the '**fruit of the Spirit**', (Gal.5:22). The Bible teaches the principle that the '**cares of the world**' **'choke'** the Word of God and a lack of fruit is the result, (Matt.13:22).

False Solutions:

Not by monastic separation: We do not confront worldliness by *physically excluding* ourselves from the environment of the world or selling all our 'worldly' possessions in an effort to get out of the clutches of 'worldliness'. There are groups that separate themselves

from temptation by physically excluding and isolating themselves from activities within the world. In the early centuries some Christians put themselves away in monastic settlements. Yet this exclusion specifically contradicts scripture! The history of such exclusions is also littered with extremes, failures, and the very sins the groups were attempting to isolate themselves from!

The Bible clearly teaches we do not separate **'altogether from the fornicators of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or with idolaters; for then must you needs go out of the world'**, (1Cor.5:10). But rather we are simply not to **'keep company with'** the above people, (1Cor.5:9,11). Jesus prayed to the father: **'I pray not that you should take them out of the world, but that you should keep them from the evil. They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. Sanctify them through your truth: your word is truth'**, (Jn.17:15-17). The passage teaches that we are not to separate from the world in any physical sense. It teaches that it is the Father who keeps us from the evil in that world. It teaches that we are separated from the evil of the world through His truth...and that truth is now found in His Word - the 66 books of the Bible. It teaches we are to be kept not from the world but *from the evil within that world*, (vs.15).

We are in fact *already separated* from the world because of the Spirit (vs.16) and *are being separated* ('sanctified') from the world through the word of God, (vs.17). *The separation is through the word of God*, not by running away from the lusts in a physical sense. The key to combating worldliness is the application of the word of God to the mind! (Rom.12:2). The antidote to worldliness is shown clearly in Romans 12. The antidote to the negative **'be not conformed to this world'** is this positive: **'be you transformed by the renewing of your mind...'**

Not by legalism: We do not wrestle against the physical things of this world, for **'we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places'**,(Eph.6:12).

No doubt the world is increasingly saturated with the media, TV, movies, phones, clothes, fashions, etc. However, these things are 'amoral' - they are not inherently evil in themselves. To watch TV, an occasional movie, read the newspapers, buy fashionable clothing - these are not evil *in themselves*. But the issue is: Am I seduced by them, or desire them inordinately that Christ would be secondary? Worldliness is selfishly desiring or gaining such things to the exclusion of God. Yet, if I am not repulsed by many of the Hollywood stars then I am not repulsed by what God hates and what He sees as worldliness - the *sinful philosophies* and lifestyles of the world.

The world is begging for our senses every day with its philosophies - in billboards, newspapers, radio, internet and TV. It can have great power over our lives unless we control it and feed our minds with God's word. The problem is not TV or the internet itself, but the *thoughtless* watching and the *lack of discernment* that can accompany it. Because of the shallowness of doctrine today, no doubt many Christians lack discernment and might be better off without many media temptations. But the heart of the problem is not the TV or other media, for the *same problem* would show up in many other areas of our lives if such media as TV were non-existent! The core problem is not the actors on the screen but the lack of self control by *us*. The problem is US! However, if we are weak in any area then measures may need to be taken to *avoid* that lustful area. But we do *not* seek God's approval by *not* watching TV, *not* going to movies or *not* doing things...even things that someone else might judge as 'worldly'.

There is also a legalistic danger in addressing 'worldliness' with a dualistic approach whereby we separate the secular from the sacred and see the secular as evil. If this approach were true then we would not work! But the Bible says that **'All things are lawful for me'**, although some of these things **'are not expedient'** and might not **'edify'** me in a Godly fashion, (1Cor.10:23). Therefore, **'whatsoever you do, do all to the glory of God'**, (vs.31) - the **'whatsoever'** and the **'all'** here includes 'secular' things! God gives us **'all things to enjoy'**, (1Tim.6:17)! And our **'liberty'** in any such areas should not be **'judged'** by others, (1Cor.10:29).

Still some legalists would have us only doing things that are 'spiritual'. Secular activities and hobbies that are relaxing and refreshing are considered to be unholy. But if this were true then we would not sleep! When we close our eyes we place ourselves in the hands of God. We have little or no control over our dreams and indeed a large percentage of our time is sleep. Yet this time is necessary for physical, mental and spiritual health and restoration. There might also be other recreational activities that would be helpful for rest and rejuvenation in body and in mind.

The danger of legalism is also that the separation is *from* something but not *to* something at the same time. *If we separate from things that cause worldliness in us, then we must also separate to that which is going to build us in the issues of the heart.* The word of God teaches clearly that sanctification is God working *within us*, (Phil.2:13). It is not just a separation *from* worldliness but a surrender *to* the things of God. Again, Romans 12:2 brings out this two way approach to 'worldliness': **'be not conformed to this world: but be you transformed by the renewing of your mind...'** We are *'not to be conformed to the world system'* and at the same time we *'are to be transformed by the renewing of our minds'*. The contrast here is obvious and shows a *two way separation*. Legalism focuses more on one way only. But *the mind must be trained to address the issues of the heart!* So, not only are we to *avoid* some things, but we must also *pursue* Holiness by being transformed by the Holy Spirit within and the Word of God to our minds.

Legalists forget that we are already approved 100% when we received Jesus Christ and His Gospel and He credited us as *100% legally* righteous. 'Legalism' is actually a false gospel because it sets up ones own laws to follow, and worse, often imposes them upon others! Legalism forgets that **'All things are lawful'**, (1Cor.10:23). *Everything* in this world is lawful. We are to engage the world for Christ. We are to be **'all things to all men'**, (1Cor.9:22). We cannot do that if we isolate ourselves from it. We are to be **'salt to the earth'** and a **'light of the world'** in our communities, (Matt.5:13,14). The world will never accept spiritual things, (Jn.14:17) and we cannot ultimately change society or transform it, but we can still hold back its fleshly ways until the Lord comes. That is what our 'salt' and 'light' are for.

Before some readers might protest at what may appear to them a view of licentiousness or antinomianism (against the law), let me state clearly that the Word of God does not give us the license to include in the **'all things are lawful'** *anything* which is sinful or tempting to lusts!

Solutions and Checklists:

The starting place for a defence against worldliness is *sound doctrine*. I meet people today who could not care less about doctrine - I ask...where is the fear of God? Christians today will hardly stand up to, or allow exposure of, false teachers and false prophets...where is the fear of God? If we tolerate such obvious things which God hates, how can we expect to have discernment and critical evaluation of the world's message? The great church leader, Charles Spurgeon, in 1887 pleaded with churches in his time that were on a 'downgrade' to worldliness: *'Brethren in Christ, in every church let us purge out the things which weaken and pollute. It is clear to everyone who is willing to see it that laxity of doctrine is either the parent of worldliness, or is in some other way very near akin to it. The men who give up the old faith are the same persons who plead for latitude as to general conduct. The Puritan is not more notorious for his orthodoxy than for his separateness from the world. Liberal divines do not always command the respect of the public, but they gain a certain popularity by pandering to prevailing tastes. The ungodly world is so far on their side that it commends them for their liberality and rails at the orthodox as bigots and killjoys. It is a very suspicious circumstance that very often the less he even cares to speak of it, the more heartily he is for the new theology, the theology of evolution, and the condemnation of all settled doctrine. Those who would have a blessing from the Lord must avoid all this and determine to follow the Lord fully. Not only must they quit false doctrine, but they must receive the gospel, not as dogma, but as vital truth. Believers must also sweep the house of the leaven of this worldliness and the frivolities of a giddy generation. The evil which is now current eats as doth a canker, and there is no hope for healthy godliness until it is cut out of the body of the church by her again repenting, and doing her first works.'*

What is it that is in the world that dominates our mind and stirs our heart? What are we captivated by? It is those areas that may need the 'checks and balances'.

Christians who consistently watch ‘soapies’ that thrive on fornication, adultery and deceitful relationships may well risk their consciences being compromised. The question that could be asked is: ‘is sin being put in an appealing way?’. *Filling our minds with the media deceptions without critical evaluation will dull our consciences.*

I often ask Christians ‘Are you like the Bible character, Lot, who was weary and sickened by the ‘filthy behaviour’ and the ‘unlawful deeds’ of this world. Do you want to go home to be with the Lord?’, (2Pet.2:7,8). The answer to this may well determine what we really think of the world. *‘Worldliness’ does not create sin in our hearts, it just reveals what is already there!*

Music affects emotions and the body. Music is not neutral when our sinful hearts are involved. Is listening to certain music done to the glory of God? (1Cor.10:31)? Can I listen to this song in the name of the Lord Jesus? (Col.3:17)? These questions can only be answered personally by our own consciences. This author is convinced that as Abel’s worship was distinct from Cain’s, so any music used in church in the area of ‘worship’ should be as distinct - distinct from the beat and the philosophy of the world.

Materialism is an obvious problem in modern Christianity. Coveting material possessions causes us to have two masters both of which we cannot serve, (Lk.16:13). *The problem is not in having material things, but that the material things have us.* Covetousness chains the heart to things that are ‘fashions that are passing away’, (1Cor.7:31).

We must *separate needs from wants*. Recently I shifted house and when packing found myself wanting to hoard things that I knew I did not need and probably would never use. After some deliberation of the heart I took the resolution to give away anything I knew I would not use within the next 12 months. At first it seemed difficult to give away possessions but soon the feeling was actually quite liberating!

One area that starkly shows our attitude to worldliness is in the area of *modesty*. I am not here just referring only to dress. The word modesty (‘kosmios’) is similar in meaning to the word ‘world’. Modesty refers to ‘order, arrangement, that which is seemly’. The same word is used for the *character* qualifications of an elder in 1Timothy 3:2 - *modesty is closely associated with character*. This concept of modesty is akin to ‘humility’ and is the opposite of boldness, arrogance or ‘showiness’. *Modesty is first an issue of the heart and is about character and unselfish restraint!** Modesty covers many areas of ‘worldliness’. If we are going to avoid worldliness we must understand it as a part of modesty which is the *restraint* of character, the *limiting* of freedoms where necessary and the *restraint* from the fashions of this age.

One of the biggest dangers I see today in young Christians and youth groups is their thinking that they can flirt with the world so long as they do not ‘cross the line’. This thinking I am convinced is deadly! Again, it shows a willingness to flirt with the fashions of this age which the Bible consistently warns of. We need to be keeping *well away from* that ‘line’ as its temptation has its own way of seduction that searches to find a slippery slope.

The ultimate antidote to ‘worldliness’ is the cross. We evaluate the world by the cross and its Gospel. What do I think of the Gospel and the cross? Do I see the cross as also crucifixion of me? Have I crucified my self and died to the ***‘affections and lusts’*** of the world, (Gal.5:24)? ***‘God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world’,*** (Gal.6:14).

Spurgeon once exhorted his hearers to *‘dwell where the cries of Calvary can be heard’*. As a famous hymn says – it is at the cross that *‘the things of earth will grow strangely dim’*. Thus we are to keep ourselves ‘unspotted from the world’, (James 1:27). ***‘You adulterers and adulteresses, know you not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God’,*** (James 4:4).

We have got to keep our *distinctiveness!* When we talk of ‘separation’ from the ways of the world it might help to understand this as more of a ‘distinctiveness’. We are to maintain our distinctiveness as people who are *by nature* distinct to those of the world. We are different in Spirit – we have the distinctive Holy Spirit and not the spirit of the world; and we are different in soul because our mind, will and emotions hunger for the righteousness of God rather than the passing fashions of this world. Although we still are to be with those unsaved in the world, our attitude is to be *different*, our values must be *different*, *because our natures are different* - we are indwelt with the Spirit of Christ, who as the *Holy* Spirit, is *distinct*. J. Grehsam Machen once wrote: *‘Heed me my dear hearer; ‘It is a terrible thing to fall into the hands of an angry God’. If the sharp distinction is ever broken down between the church and the world, then the power of the church is gone. The church then becomes like salt that has lost its savor and is fit only to be cast out and be trodden under foot of men’.*

Worldliness is internal not environmental. It is the false ‘gods’ of this world having sway in our hearts. May we guard our hearts and watch for that spirit of Demas that would cause us to flirt with or drift into the world’s flow. May we keep our conscience clear and sharp by immersing it in the Word of God. Let not the cares of the world choke the daily word that would be transmitted to us. May we be repulsed by what God hates - the *sinful philosophies* and lifestyles of the world. In our weak areas may God strengthen us with a resolve to overcome!

‘All things are lawful to me’, but with three limitations on that freedom: 1. ***‘but all things are not expedient... 2. ...but I will not be brought under the power of any.*** 3. ***...but all things edify not’,*** (1Cor.6:12; 10:23).

Whatever we partake of in the world, let us pursue at the same time the holiness of the Lord, first within and then outward in testimony.

The antidote to ‘worldliness’ is the cross. Have I died to the lusts of the world? ***‘God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world’,*** (Gal.6:14).

He that is in us is greater than he that is in the world, (1Jn.4:4). Brethren, fear God and ‘be not conformed to this world: but be you transformed by the renewing of your mind...’

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Recommended reading: ‘Worldliness - Resisting the Seduction of a Fallen World’, edited by C.J. Mahaney.

* See our article on ‘Christian Modesty’.