

WHAT IN THE WORLD IS WORLDLINESS?

PT. 1: IS YOUR IDEA OF WORLDLINESS WORLDLY?

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Worldliness is notoriously difficult to define, and the worldling has never been easy to identify. Inadequate definitions tend to false application and result in phariseeism and different forms of “protestant asceticism” and breed spiritual pride and judgmentalism. The upshot of a false understanding of worldliness is always, ironically, other forms of worldliness.

Many view worldliness merely as an *attraction* to the world—the pursuit of materialism, a proclivity to high-street fashion, a particular genre of music or a style of hair. It is therefore very often viewed as a sin of the youth, what Paul called “youthful lusts” (2 Timothy 2:22). The quintessential worldling is identified then, as the young person recklessly pursuing his dream of fast cars and career, or the young woman devoting herself to the glitz and glamour, immodestly mimicking celebrity fashions, and piercing her body, etc.

While these may well evidence a measure of worldliness they are only symptoms of worldliness. Some perhaps have looked at these external symptoms as the definition rather than the effects and as a result they have gone in the opposite direction in an aggressive rejection of all things “worldly.” There are many whose austere anti-worldly Christianity would disdain current fashions, condemn Hollywood, and cause them to break out in a rash at the very thought of cosmetic makeup.

It is possible, however, and indeed very probable, for many who are as conservative as the day is long to be as worldly in other areas as the young dream-catching, fashion-following, body-piercing, movie buff in the street. It is possible for the gospel preacher to preach the truth in a worldly fashion and for worldly motive or gain. Paul identified this in the early church (Philippians 1:15). It is possible—and indeed has happened—for the fundamentalist to defend the truth in a way that reeks of the world both in his method and manner. Paul likens this to the emptiness of a noisy gong show (1 Corinthians 13:1, “sounding brass”). It is possible also, for the Reformed Christian to study the deep things of theology for worldly self-aggrandizement—“knowledge puffed up” (1 Corinthians 8:1). It is possible for the child of God to serve the Lord in the local church with dutiful regularity and dependability but to do so under the burden of regret and resentment towards the Lord or His people (Martha served with selfish resentment [Luke 10:40] and Jonah preached with selfish regret [Jonah 4:1]).

Many have glibly brushed others aside as worldlings with the statement, “Well if the heart is right, then the life will be right.” This trite response, often made with the authoritative tone suitable only to a biblical truism, denies the scriptural doctrine of progressive sanctification and overlooks the necessary development of the mind in Christian living. Many have been converted to Christ and have immediately fit into the status quo of a particular denominational form of Christianity without having their minds sufficiently engaged. Many of these converts have, over time, fallen prey to disappointment, disillusionment, and spiritual decline because they were not taught the power of the renewed mind. They had a form of godliness without the power to sustain it (2 Timothy 3:5).

Furthermore, simplistic statements like this that leap from the heart to the life focus on the externals and ignore the deceitfulness of the heart and the possibility of hypocrisy. Some may have the external life in order but have a heart of unchecked rebellion, resentment, bitterness, or selfishness.

The point is clear—worldliness is not always as overt and identifiable as one might think. Furthermore, the command to “love not the world” is not only obeyed by distancing oneself from certain activities and objects in the world or by entrenching oneself in a particular form of Christianity. Worldliness is not so much in what we *reject* of this world—the material things, the pleasures, or the fashions. Worldliness has more to do with how we *respond* to the influences of the world around us. It is not so much about right *living* as it is about right *thinking*. Worldliness is not so much about *things* as it is about *thoughts*.

In obeying the command “Love not the world” the easy path is to emphasize conservative living rather than biblical thinking. Scripture demands, however, that we try the spirits (1 John 4:1), search our hearts (Psalm 139:23), and to inform our minds (1 Peter 1:13). If we invest in these biblical methods we will certainly be less worldly and our children will be more prepared to meet the changing culture that they will face.