



## Worldliness

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Tonight I want to wrap up our series on respectable sins by talking with you about the sin of worldliness. It's something that we sometimes have trouble defining. For the Amish worldliness means electricity and cars. In some churches worldliness means movies or playing cards. But that's not what I want to talk about. I want to look at two Scripture passages that define worldliness from a Biblical perspective. The first is 1 John 2:15-16:

**Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions—is not from the Father but is from the world.**

The other passage is 1 Corinthians 7:31:

**...those who deal in material goods, as though they were not fully occupied with them. For this world, as it is now, will not last much longer. (TEV)**

I particularly like the way the Good News Bible paraphrases that last verse, because it makes it clear what St. Paul was getting at: we all live in the world and we have to deal with material things—with things of the world—but we shouldn't be "fully occupied" with them. The things of the world shouldn't be our preoccupation, because as Christians we know that they won't last.

Worldliness is what happens when we become too attached to the things of this world—when we become engrossed or preoccupied with them. That doesn't mean that worldly things are sinful in and of themselves—the problem is often simply what we do with them or how we value them. St. Paul also says in Colossians 3:2, "Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth." Jesus tells us, "Lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal"

(Matthew 6:20). The things we value most should be the things that are "above"—the things of the spirit that draw us closer to God: the Bible (and time spent with it), prayer, the Gospel itself, obedience to God, fulfilling his Great Commission—and, well, God himself! It's on these things that we should have our focus.

Here's where the distraction comes from. The world doesn't focus on things from above. Our unbelieving friends and neighbours have their focus only on worldly things. And yet if we look at those people, their outward lives aren't really that different from our own. Their houses are pretty much like ours. They take care of their gardens. They go to work. They go to school. They pay their taxes. They usually avoid the same scandalous sins (the "biggies") that we do. That's why living next to them makes worldliness look so acceptable to us. You see, that's the other side of worldliness: Worldliness means accepting the values and practices of our nice, but unbelieving, society around us, without discerning whether or not those values and practices are biblical. Worldliness, especially in our day and place, is just going along with the culture around us as long as we don't see anything obviously sinful about it.

Now, we could go on for hours and hours looking at all the different ways we can be worldly, but since the purpose of these sermons has been to draw our attention to what has become respectable or acceptable to us, and since we have limited time, I want to look at three places where we can be very worldly: money, immorality, and idolatry.

First: money. We live in one of the wealthiest nations on earth. Even poor people in Canada are well off by comparison to those in Africa, South America, or parts of Asia. I looked up the statistics and found that in 2006 the average household income in Canada, after taxes, was \$67,000. But the average credit card debt of each of those households is over \$9,000 and the average household charitable giving, whether monetary or gifts in kind, totalled a whopping \$259 per household each year.

Now those numbers are based on the entire population. Surely Christians do better than that. They do, but not much. In 2003 a survey was made of eight evangelical denominations. It showed that

members of those churches gave 4.4 percent of their income to God's work. This is down from 6.2 percent in 1968 in those same churches. We're becoming less generous toward God with our money. And so are the churches themselves—maybe because they have less money to operate with. In 1920 churches gave 10 percent of their income to missions. Now we give only 3 percent on average.

We're one of the richest nations in history, and yet we're gradually giving less and less to God and to the furtherance of the Gospel. At the same time our credit card debt has increased. So what are we doing with our money? We're not saving it. The average household only saves about 2 percent. In too many cases, we're spending our money on the things of this life: houses, cars, clothes, holidays, and electronics, just to name a few things. Where we spend shows where we've set our minds. In our culture, Christians show that they've tended to set their minds on the things of the world, not on the things of God. We've become worldly in our use of money.

In contrast, Scripture sets the minimum standard of the tithe: by definition, 10 percent. And while the New Testament doesn't specifically mention tithing, neither does it do away with it. In fact, in both epistles to the Corinthians, St. Paul commends the idea of proportionate giving. Under the tithe, the person who earns \$10,000 gives \$1000. The person who earns \$100,000 gives \$10,000. Both give proportionately as God has prospered them.

And yet not many Christians tithe anymore. Instead we've taken a worldly attitude with our money and have become stingy toward God. We may not like that word. Nobody wants to be thought of as stingy to other people, but when we give less than half of what the Old Testament Jews gave to God, isn't that being stingy? Does it please God when we give half of what the Jews gave, especially when he described their failure to give their tithes as robbery of him (Malachi 3:8)?

Jesus tells us that we can't serve both God and money. We serve one or the other. And if we choose to serve money, it's not God who loses—it's us! God may use our money, but he doesn't need it. If we choose to use our money on worldly

pursuits, we're the ones who become spiritual paupers.

Some people will say, "Well, but I can't afford to tithe." If that's your perspective, then what you're really saying is that God's a liar – that he won't make good on his promises to care for us. When I was in elementary school my family was dirt poor. My parents decided to attend a Bible school that had some unscrupulous men in leadership. When we sold our house, those men convinced my parents to give half of the sale price to the school. That meant that when we couldn't afford to buy another house, and since my parents were both students, we had to live off the money left over from the sale – which wasn't much. My dad kept finding jobs, but they never lasted very long. We didn't have money for new clothes. We hardly had money for food. And yet God consistently provided, whether it was a grocery bag of food brought by a neighbour or brand new Converse All-Star hightops (which were all the rage at the time for boys my age) that my mom found at a thrift store for \$2.

In 1 Kings 17 we read the story of Elijah and the widow of Zarephath. She has on the verge of starvation, with only enough flour and oil for one more small loaf of bread. She was going to make one last meal for herself and her son before they died. And yet the prophet Elijah came to her and asked for her to make that bread for himself. He was saying, "Feed me first and God will provide for you." She did what he said and God miraculously kept her flour jar and pot of oil full through the famine. I've seen God provide miraculously and have carried that with me my whole life.

We need to remember that everything we have comes from God. Giving back a minimum of 10 percent is our way of giving him the recognition and thanking him for it. It's also a tangible way for us to tell him that we trust him to provide.

Second: immorality. To clarify: when I say *immorality* I'm obviously not talking about gross immorality; we're talking about what's become acceptable in the Church. What I want to talk about is what one person calls *vicarious immorality*. We may not engage in gross sins, but we get enjoyment and entertainment value from other people doing it. Do you get

enjoyment reading the stories in the paper about people engaged in sin? Do you sneak a look at the trashy tabloids at the check-out in the grocery store – wanting to know all about the sinful exploits of famous and openly immoral people. That's vicarious immorality. Or do you watch TV shows and movies knowing that sexually explicit scenes will be in them (the same goes for books too). That's vicarious immorality. We know the world likes these things or the tabloids and Hollywood would be out of business. This is one instance of values and practices accepted by society around us that are clearly contrary to Scripture, and to the whatever extent we follow along, we're being worldly.

The other area that comes to mind is immodest dress. This issue applies to both men and women, but is especially a problem for women when they dress. Fashions keep tending toward what is obviously intended to attract the lustful eyes of men. I can't count how many times I find that I have to remind myself to look away on any given visit to the mall. I feel especially sorry for young Christian guys on school or college campuses.

There are two areas under this subject in which we can be worldly. First, many Christian women, especially young women, simply go along with the styles of the unbelieving world. It's amazing to me what's acceptable in school, let alone what I've seen some girls wear to church. And yet 1 Timothy 2:9 tells us that Christian women are to dress respectably and modestly, using self-control. Anything less is to cave into the pressures of the world.

But we men have problems too in terms of how we respond to the women dressing immodestly and the temptation to look lustfully. We don't have to project that look into actual images of immorality. Even to linger with the eyes and enjoy what some women deliberately show off is sin. One of my Christian friends in University could always be found between classes sitting on a bench on the campus mall. He'd sit and check out the girls as they walked by and his usual line was that the Bible said not to take a second look at a woman – so he was making sure the first look counted. Now he wasn't the only one making sure the first look counted –

lots of other *non-Christian* guys did the same thing. But that's just it. We do what all the other nice and decent guys around us are doing – and that's being worldly.

For men, the problem isn't going to go away. We need to prepare for the assault on our eyes by memorising verses like Proverbs 27:20: "Hell and destruction are never full; so the eyes of man are never satisfied." My old Scout Master told me about that verse. He knew I was a Christian and he warned me not to look at the pornographic magazines that a lot of the other guys brought along on campouts. He said, and I think he knew from personal experience, that looking never satisfies – it just stokes the fires and makes you want more, which is why "soft-core" pornography usually leads inevitably to "hard-core" and then to all sorts of other sins. St. Paul writes in Romans 6:21, "But what fruit were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death." You need to ask yourself what benefit you get from indulging your eyes in a lustful look. There's nothing more there than the fleeting pleasure of sin. And Paul warns that after the fleeting pleasure, all that's left are the shame and regret.

The third thing I want to look at is idolatry. I don't think any of us is guilty of carving false gods from wood or stone, but we are often guilty of taking the things of this world and elevating them to the spot God should have in our lives.

Our careers or vocations can easily become idols as we obsess with advancement and getting to the top. Jerry Bridges talks about a car salesman he knows. This man told him, "After I became a Christian, I stopped trying to *sell* cars and started helping people *buy* cars." His vocation didn't change, but his focus did. Instead of worrying about how much money he would make, he started focusing on serving people and helping them find the car that would best suit them and their financial situation. He changed his career from an idol to a service to God through genuine service to people. All of us have jobs that we can either see as money-makers or as opportunities for serving God.

I think another issue where we can be guilty of idolatry is in political and

cultural issues. It's important that Christians be aware of what's going on in the world around us and in our government. It's wrong for us to just drop out of the world entirely and not take advantage of the ways God has given us to influence the world, but it's also possible for us to make an idol out of our involvement in political and cultural issues.

Things like abortion or homosexuality are issues that we need to address as Christians, but we have to remember that our first priority is to the Church and to the Great Commission. So we need to work to save the unborn or to preserve marriage, but at the same time our highest priority needs to be rescuing men and women from the clutches of Satan and bringing them into the Kingdom of God through Jesus Christ.

Finally, and this may be so obvious that I don't really need to mention it: sports. Sports have, without doubt, become an idol in our culture. There are places, especially in the States and in the South, where football is even spoken of as a religion and where high school coaches get paid more than their school principals. We may not be quite that extreme with our sports in Canada, but we can be pretty extreme. I learned that the hard way by interrupting Hockey Night in Canada one time... We need to be careful. We need to remember that it's only a game and that God isn't glorified just because our team won. When it really comes down to it, winning only panders to and feeds our pride. We can root for our favourite team, but we need to keep it in perspective.

In conclusion, let's review what worldliness is. First, it's a preoccupation with the things of this world – the things of this temporal life. Second, it's accepting and going along with the values and practices of society around us without discerning if they are biblical or not. The key to our tendencies toward worldliness really lies in those two words: *going along*. Our problem is that we simply go along with and accept the values and practices of the world around us without thought as to whether or not those values are biblical. That's why Christian girls will wear immodest clothes. They just go along with the styles everyone else is wearing without stopping to think if those styles please God. There's nothing sinful

in sports themselves, but if we simply go along with the people around us, we can end up making an idol out of our favourite team. We all have to work for a living, but if we go along with the values of our culture, we may make an idol out of our career.

The answer to our problem of worldliness isn't just being determined not to be worldly. We have to have a standard to judge it the world against. We need to become more godly. We need to grow in our fellowship with God and start looking at every aspect of life through the lens of his glory. Thomas Chalmers, a Scottish minister in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century preached a sermon titled "The Expulsive Power of a New Affection." That's exactly what we need. We need an increased affection for God that will expel from our hearts all of our affections for the things of this world.

Please pray with me: Heavenly Father, we ask your forgiveness for the time when we place the things of this world above the things of your kingdom. We ask that you would give us the grace to draw closer to you, and that our growing affection for you and for the things of your kingdom will expel all of our affections for the things of this life. We ask this through the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

*(This series of sermons is adapted from Jerry Bridges book, "Respectable Sins: Confronting the Sins We Tolerate", NavPress, 2007.)*