

THE CHRISTIAN AND WORLDLINESS

by Ray C. Stedman

What does Christian separation mean? Your effectiveness as a Christian hangs on your concept of what separation means. Perhaps most of our personal and church problems would be solved if we had a biblical concept of what it really is. This question of separation has been a bone of contention among Christians for many, many years. Though I believe that the Scriptures are very clear on the matter, still I am sure that we will not solve all the problems in this article. But we do want to take a good look at the subject.

You won't read very far in the New Testament without becoming aware of some very pointed warnings to Christians concerning their danger from the world around them. Second Corinthians 6:14 is a very well known passage.

"Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers ..." {2 Cor 6:14a KJV}

"and I will receive you, and will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty," {2 Cor 6:18 KJV}.

These words, "come out from among them, and be ye separate" {2 Cor 6:17a KJV} have been nailed to the masthead of many denominations and church groups as the supremely important idea that Christians should heed in these days.

Then we have that very strong passage in First John 2:15-17:

Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. {1 Jn 2:15a KJV}

For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof, but he that doeth the will of God abideth forever. {1 Jn 2:16-17 KJV}

James comes out with probably the strongest word of all along this line for he says very flatly and plainly:

know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? Whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is an enemy of God. {Jas 4:4b KJV}

Christians have rightly taken these passages very seriously. They have recognized that the Lord would not speak so plainly if there was not something serious involved. They've remembered the sad words of Paul concerning one of the young men who traveled with him: "Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present world," {2 Tim 4:10 KJV}. Christians have often had reason to see that a worldly Christian is a useless Christian. He is of no value to the world, and no good to God. No man can serve two masters!

So Christians, as a result of these warnings, have, through the centuries, drawn up lists of things they considered worldly. Naturally, their ideas have differed widely on these matters. Whenever people had difficulty with some temptation or some particular type of recreation or some activity which gave them trouble, they learned a lesson from it, or thought they did, and marked that particular thing down as worldly.

So there came into being a great many different lists of worldly things, varying widely because of the different places of origin. As a result of this, we have today certain folks in the South called "hook-and-eye Baptists." They were given that name because they believe that buttons are worldly and that the proper biblical way to fasten your clothing is not with a button but with a hook and eye. So the button-wearing folks are worldly in

their estimation, and the hook-and-eye people are spiritual. And they mean it! They're quite serious about it. It's as much a worldly thing to them as some of the things on your list are to you. And they feel quite as upset over violations as you do when your standards are transgressed.

Standards differ widely in Christian circles about many things. Drinking beer by Christians is very normal in places such as Germany. They think nothing of having a glass of beer with their meals. Nobody thinks they are unspiritual because of it. But in this country, it's quite a different matter. Here, beer drinking is almost always considered a worldly thing for Christians.

I have been in parts of this country where people regarded mixed bathing with horror, that is, boys and girls going swimming together, even though they were all clad in quite acceptable bathing suits. It was the mixing of the sexes that was reprehensible. They thought it was terrible. Yet, in most places in the West, mixed bathing is not frowned upon at all. We consider it quite a normal, natural thing, and few would regard it as wrong.

There are places in this world today where lipstick is called "devil's grease" because some Christians are sure the devil is behind the lipstick business.

Now, I have mentioned things that most of us would laugh at as being considered worldly. I have touched upon a few of the things that are on our particular lists. The point I want you to see is that others may be just as disturbed about these things as you are about the things on your list. And they, as we, pass along our taboos from generation to generation.

We all have a tendency to think that the things that we have been taught while we were growing up are inspired truth. Few of us have ever taken time to check these with biblical principles as to whether they are really true or not. I am afraid that many of us often mistake our prejudices for convictions. It is a very easy thing to do. But we must remember that it is not what we have been taught, or what our fathers believed, or the way we were raised that is the standard of Christian behavior, but what the Word of God says. Always! And if what we are taught is not in accordance with the principles declared in the Bible, then we had better review our standards and our thinking in accordance with those principles.

This is a very simple thing to say, and we all agree with it, but it is hard to carry out. If we follow it through, we will discover that it will make some great changes in our lives.

One result of this habit of categorizing things as worldly, and making an index of that which is right and wrong in the Christian life, has been that, today, nine out of ten Christians have mental lists of do's and don'ts. They call these lists their "Christian standards." And solely on the basis of such a list they blithely determine whether they are worldly or spiritual.

Now I don't wish to suggest that there are no Christian standards. There are necessities along that line, and those standards once arrived at in each individual life must be carefully adhered to. What I am saying is that the method by which we determine those standards must be in accordance with the Word of God and not simply our upbringing.

Now then, since most of the things that are on your particular list (and on mine) are being done by the unsaved, worldly-minded people around us, there comes a tendency for us, consciously or unconsciously, to avoid temptation by avoiding worldly people. There comes a marked tendency to withdraw, to seek our own crowd, to create our own little separate world -- a world that is as complete as we can make it, with recreation, and education, and all that we need from the cradle to the grave. We create our own smug, airtight circle in which we live, and which we have set up to run competition to the "worldly" world outside.

Now, ultimately, that kind of thinking produced the monasteries that appeared in the Middle Ages. Men decided that the way to avoid the temptations of the world was to completely seclude themselves from it, so they built high-walled monasteries and lived their lives inside, and thus sought to avoid the world.

Today we do not build walls of brick and mortar in order to avoid these things, but we still have walls of

thought and seclusion that are almost equally effective. In this way, we become 20th century monks, doing this very same thing. And the worst tragedy of all, in my estimation, is that we are passing all this on to our young people. We are handing along these conceptions, as they pick up our way of life and our way of thinking. Instead of teaching them to overcome evil, we are teaching them to avoid it. They are not learning how to fight the good fight of faith. We do not know how to fight it ourselves, many of us, so how can we tell them? How can we show them?

Now what are the results of this type of separation? I do not speak from hearsay or from mere observation on this matter. I speak from very sad experience. An experience born of at least ten years of my Christian life that I now consider almost utterly wasted, because I was thinking and acting along these very lines.

Here were the results in my own life. I am confident, from observation, they are the results in other Christians' lives who think like this.

- The first result is a terrible sense of boredom and frustration. Life becomes pale and uninteresting, especially Christian things. You just go through a routine. You go to church and go through a set formula of things you are supposed to do, but there is nothing very gripping, very fascinating, very challenging about it. Life becomes very boring. The challenge is gone.

Why? Because there is no sense of danger! There is nothing which demands a response from a young Christian faced with that kind of thinking. He is protected. He is sheltered. His life is arranged in such a way that the temptations are reduced to a minimum, and, consequently, he becomes bored and frustrated and feels no challenge. Life becomes very lackluster.

When we sense this in our lives, we often try to correct it by creating false challenges. "Come on, let's win the attendance contest," and we get all excited about the attendance contest. Or, "Let's gain a reputation in our church for having a tremendous missionary program, and let's parade the figures in front of us all through the years as to how much we are giving for missions," and so we create false challenges and false goals. Not that these things are wrong in themselves; the trouble is, it is done as a group, and the personal challenge in the individual life is gone.

You remember what Peter Marshall said so graphically,

"Today's Christians are like deep-sea divers, encased in suits designed for many fathoms deep, marching bravely forth to pull plugs out of bathtubs."

That is putting it rather incisively, isn't it? But it is true! We are taught all the resources of the Christian life. For what? To win attendance contests with! To build buildings with! The challenge is artificial, the goal is sub-Christian. Perhaps this is the major reason why our Christian young people today (and I say it sadly, because I see it in my own church) are so lethargic, so lackadaisical, so utterly pepleless about their Christian lives. We find difficulty in getting them to avoid the things on our lists any longer. They would rather feel some of the stimulation and challenge and temptation of the world than to live such colorless, lackluster lives. God made youth with a desire to dare. It is no less so with Christian youth.

- The second result of this isolationist separation is a tremendously increased amount of worldliness in Christian living! Does that seem strange? It is a paradox. Christians isolate themselves from the world to avoid worldliness, and it inevitably results in more worldliness.

You see, if you really believe that the only worldly things are those on your mental list, and you are careful to avoid them, then the result is you let down your guard at other points, and the world begins to seep in in a thousand places, unrecognized by you. Instead of being worldly in the ways that are on your list, you are worldly in a thousand other ways, all of them equally bad. The truth is that worldliness is not a matter of things, of doing this, or not doing that. But worldliness is a matter of the attitude of the heart, the attitude of life in thinking and dealing with things. If we would just learn that, what a difference it would make.

Let me see if I can illustrate that:

- If you ladies wear a new dress in church in order to attract attention, that is worldliness! You are trying to attract attention to yourself, just as the world continually seeks to do. The fact that you do it in church makes no difference whatsoever. If anything, it makes it more reprehensible. If the opinions of others mean much to you in this matter of dress or conduct, then you are worldly. You may never drink, dance, smoke, or go to a nightclub; but you are just as worldly as if you did.
- On the other hand, if you wear a dowdy, out-of-style dress to church in order to be thought spiritual, that is worldliness, too. The dress, you see, has nothing to do with it. It is the attitude of the heart, the motive behind the act, that constitutes worldliness.
- If you must have a new car every year in order to keep up with the style, that is worldliness, pure and simple. If you need the car in your business for some reason, and you are quite honest with yourself about it, that is another matter entirely. For this reason, no one else can sit in judgment on you in such a matter. But the Lord knows the heart, and if you trade your car each year just to be in style, you are worldly.
- If you are hurt because people do not notice you, that is worldliness. If a TV program conflicts with something that you know the Lord wants you to do -- your attendance at church or prayer meeting, or to help your neighbor -- that is worldliness. You have chosen that in place of the Lord's will.

Now I am not trying to make up new lists for you. If I kept on, you would soon stop me and say, "Why the way you talk, everything is worldly." And you would be quite near the truth. For everything is worldly, if the heart is concerned with the approval or disapproval of those around you, just as everything is spiritual when the eye is single unto the Lord. This is a tremendously important point.

Read what John says again,

... all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh [that includes eating and drinking and sleeping and wearing clothes or whatever your body desires to do], the lust of the eyes [that includes the desire of anything you want to buy or possess, good, bad, or indifferent], the pride of life [the vainglory of life, the fighting for station, for promotion, for advancement], is not of your Father, but is of the world. {1 Jn 2:16 KJV}

What does he mean by that? He means that everything is worldly if your attitude is worldly, but if your attitude is "of the Father," nothing is worldly. You see what he is getting at? This is why Paul said:

"All things are lawful to me, but there are three limitations:
 1. I will not be brought under the power of any,
 2. All things are not profitable for me, and
 3. All things do not help others." {cf, 1 Cor 6:12, 10:23}

Those are the only restrictions. Everything else is fine.

This is why we must not make up lists of "things" which we regard as inherently worldly and evil in themselves. Each of us may have our own personal areas into which, under God, we cannot enter. There are certain things you cannot do, or do not want to do, not because someone else does not want you to, or because you think the church will frown on it, but because you feel the Lord does not want you to do this. But that must be decided individually.

What makes a thing worldly? Listen to John again, "All that is in the world ... is not of the Father," {1 Jn 2:16 KJV}. That is the thing! You exclude the Father from your thinking, and when you do that you are worldly, no matter what you do. You do some act or take some step or make some plans without the Father, without taking him into consideration, or concerning yourself with his will. That is worldliness! It may be a perfectly innocent thing in itself, but when you exclude the Father, it is of the world.

So the making of lists only increases worldliness. We then let down our guard about the things that are not on the list, and, as a result, we become saturated with the world, steeped in worldly thinking, worldly acts, and worldly deeds. And he that is "a friend of the world is an enemy of God!" {Jas 4:4b KJV}.

- Now the third great result of this type of thinking is a noticeable lessening of the spirit of sacrifice in our

lives. When we avoid worldly people because we are trying to avoid worldliness, we also lose most of our opportunities to give of ourselves for Christ's sake. This process of withdrawing into our own watertight Christian circle of affairs results in people becoming insensitive and unsympathetic and eventually smug and complacent in their views toward others.

We can get all worked up over missionaries ten or twelve thousand miles away, but people can live right next door to us and be perishing in their spiritual agony, and we do nothing. That is worldliness. It results from this business of thinking we can live our own lives; that we can withdraw from the world and create our own Christian world and live within it. Consequently, we have changed the Lord's words, "Go ye," into "Send ye," and we think if we are sending out people to the mission field, this is the adequate answer to our own responsibility. But the Lord did not say, "Send ye." He said, "Go ye into all the world," {Mark 16:15 KJV}. And I don't think he meant that only geographically; I am sure it is meant psychologically, as well. Go into all the ways of the world, into its thinking, into its attitudes, in order that you might understand and have some sympathy with the poor dying wretches who live next door to you that are in the world and lost in the world.

This is one of the most tragic things about our Christian lives. We become disobedient Christians: We forget our own personal responsibilities in witnessing.

- We talk about witnessing, but we seldom ever do it.
- We are embarrassed about it.
- We confess in moments of honesty that we are very ill at ease in this process of trying to witness about Christ.
- We really feel little enthusiasm for it, yet this is what he asks us to do.

We are supposed to be imitating our Master who gave up all things, who pleased not himself, who laid down his life in order that he might win the lost worldlings to himself.

But when it comes to us, we don't want to give up an afternoon of golf, or a night of bowling, or open our homes, or even give up some time on Sunday to do something to win these lost ones. And we justify it all by the excuse, "They are so worldly that we have nothing in common with them."

Isn't this the truth?

Doesn't this describe us?

When I think sometimes of our comfortable, easeful, luxurious lives, and then read in the Scriptures about those early Christians who loved not their lives unto death, I tell you I grow sick with the very shame of it.

Why have we lost the spirit of glad sacrifice?

I think it is due greatly to our view of separation which has built a shell about us, so that we no longer see the need for our help. This is the terrible tragedy of it. We are living in the midst of people who are dying for what we have, who are hungry of soul and are putting bullets through their heads, jumping off bridges, turning on the gas, and living in utter misery year after year after year. And they don't live 10,000 miles away. They live two blocks down the street, two houses away, right next door to us, behind us, all around us, and we don't see the need for sacrifice!

We have become deaf in the cries that surround us. We have become indifferent to all hands that reach out from every side. We have taken the place of the Pharisee and the Levite in that parable of the Good Samaritan, who each passed by on the other side of the road when they saw the wounded traveler, lest they become defiled themselves by helping him. That is not the modernist or the liberal. That is the fundamentalist Christian, who is so concerned about being defiled with worldliness that he has lost touch with the world. He is no longer interested in helping worldly people, in meeting their problems, in becoming friends with them and meeting their needs.

Now there are many people who sense the hypocrisy of this kind of living, and they try to remedy it by going

to the other extreme. They rush out and begin to mix with the world in every way. They drink cocktails, and take up card playing, and small gambling, and learn how to dance, and thus try to live in with the world. Now, again, I am not trying to make lists of taboos, please don't misunderstand me. I am simply trying to characterize the thinking of many who react to Christian isolationism. They adopt the world's standards and the world's values in the hope of being some influence to the world for Christ. The result of that is always tragic. When we become like the world, we lose all our power to influence the world.

I remember reading of a boy who had a cage full of sparrows, and he thought it would be nice to teach the sparrows to sing like canaries. So he bought a canary and put it in the cage with the sparrows. After a couple of weeks, he came running to his mother and said, "Mother! The sparrows are not singing like the canary. The canary is now chirping like the sparrows!"

That is the inevitable outcome of becoming like the world in order to reach the world. If you want to see the folly of a life like that, go out and stand by the shores of the Dead Sea and look at the cheerless, dreary, lifeless waste. Then go read the story of Lot who moved into Sodom in order to win it and influence it by his life, and see what he lost as a result. That dreary desolation stands as a mark of the folly of moving in to be like the world.

Well, then, what is the answer? How do we reach the world and still not be like it?

The answer is, we must learn to live on a frontier between these two extremes. We must learn to be in the world, but not of it. We must be in the world, we must seek out worldly friends and deliberately cultivate their friendship. We must invite them into our homes, and go into theirs. We will have to ignore some things that are irritating to us, their habits, their ways of thinking and talking. But we must make friends with them. We dare not shut ourselves away from the perils and dangers and dilemmas of the world around us. Our Lord forbids us to! We must be in the world, seek worldly friends, but we must not be like the world.

The word that we need to emphasize is not *separateness*, that is, if you think of it as withdrawing. But the real word, and perhaps the best translation here is *distinctiveness*. We are to be distinct, different.

DARE TO BE DIFFERENT!

We must be in the world like our Lord was -- in it up to the hilt. But, like him, we must never live under false colors. We must not think like the world. Our attitude is to be different, our values must be different, yet we are to be with them.

We are to be out-and-out Christians. Distinct, but not distasteful. We are to be sheep among wolves, as our Lord said. That is, we are not to stay in the sheepfold. If we do, we are disobedient, for he sent us out of the sheepfold. He wants us out among the wolves!

"But," you say, "isn't that dangerous for sheep to go out in the midst of wolves?" Yes, it is. Of course, it is. But that is what makes it gripping and vital. That is exactly what makes the Christian life so revolutionary, so interesting, challenging, stimulating. It is the danger! The Lord wants us to live on a frontier where we are constantly under subtle attack, yet he knows we will be safe among the wolves and we become the instruments by which some of the wolves become sheep like ourselves.

"But," you say, "isn't this difficult? Doesn't it present a lot of problems? Aren't you constantly having to make adjustments and make decisions, and wouldn't it be so much simpler just to avoid the whole matter?" Of course it would. But where did we get the idea that we are here to avoid difficulty. Jesus said, "I am come to cast fire on the earth, and would that it were already kindled!" {cf, Luke 12:49}. Whoever said the Christian life was to be easy? That is the whole trouble with it. We have made it so easy that we have few problems any longer, and so we have no power. Our Lord wants us to have problems. He wants us to be constantly wondering what to do about a particular situation and to think it through, and test solutions according to the Word, and pray our way to an answer that satisfies and works. He likes us to live that way. That is what makes life challenging and interesting. Any other approach becomes boring and meaningless.

Let me share with you a brief paragraph from a letter that came recently from a woman in Southern California. She says:

My husband is getting rather fed up with church. He is from a very strong Christian family, and was a strong Christian himself. But now he says to get ahead in the world, and make the kind of money he wants to make, you can't be a full-time Christian, because you either give up all you've got to follow Christ's claims, or you're not worthy. Since he's not worthy, why go half-way? I can't make him see otherwise.

This is a common tragedy. Here is a modern prodigal son who has chosen to go out from the father's house, seeking the things he wants, and he doesn't realize that what he really wants is to be found only in the father's house. And he's going to have to learn by going down into the pig-pen, or by drinking of the empty, unsatisfying cisterns of this world; how barren and meager such living is. This man is choosing a dead-end street, and when he gets to the end of it, there will be nothing to do but to turn around and come back. But, though we pity his choice, let me say I admire his honesty. This young man has seen that the Christian life is insipid and tasteless if it is only lived half way.

Let me bring you another quote from another source, that says it much better than I. The author writes very penetratingly about the problem of the Christian and the world. He says:

To sum up, the Christian's vocation is to be in the world, but not of it; to represent Christ in it and to intercede on its behalf because it is under judgment (this is the Christian's priesthood), to identify himself with its sufferings but not with its attitudes, to bring his influence to bear upon the world's life without being corrupted by the world's ways; to stand on the frontier, holding forth the Word of Life, and so to love and obey that Word that he has been delivered from the evil one and sanctified in the truth. Such a calling involves a cross. The man who separates himself from the world and seeks to escape it does not know the cross. The man who submits to the world's pressures and loses his distinctiveness as a Christian does not know that cross. The man who seeks to be in the world, as our Lord was in it, but shows that he is not of it because he is a Christian and in Christ; that man will find his cross. It's only the disciple who follows Christ in both these respects who has a cross to take up.

Now, let me say, if this sounds hard, and harsh, and unappealing, it is because you do not have your own values straight. Let's be honest now. Is God right, and is the Bible right when it says this world is passing away, and is really very unimportant? Is it really peanuts to us, this world in which we live? If so, than it's the easiest thing in the world to live a Christian life. But if this world's things mean much to us, it's a hard and grueling thing to be a Christian.

Perhaps you have heard the story of the woman who went to the psychiatrist and said to him, "My friends have asked me to come to see you. They think I've blown a fuse or something, and I don't know why." "Well," he said, "what's your trouble?" She said, "The only thing is that I like pancakes, that's all." "Well," he said, "there's nothing wrong with that. I like pancakes myself." "Oh," she said, "you do! Well, you must come over sometime. I've got six trunks full of them up in my attic." Now that sounds silly to us. But do you know that is exactly what most American Christians are doing today? Storing up pancakes in the attic!

These passing temporal things, these transient baubles that we are so everlastingly concerned with, are nothing but pancakes compared with the eternal values of Christian life and truth. But the world is concerned with saving up pancakes. We live in a world so confused, that has its values so twisted, that people think you're crazy if you don't store up pancakes in the attic like they do. Isn't that right?

But Christians have seen the truth. They have the light. They're not to be interested in pancakes, primarily, any more; "... we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal but the things which are not seen are eternal," {2 Cor 4:18 KJV}.

Then let's be done with nursery stuff.

Let's be done with kindergarten, with playing children's games.

We've a man's job to do in this world.

We're co-laborers with God.

Do you know what that means? We're to supply the hands and feet and the voices that he needs today. Every day should see us at the task of binding up the broken-hearted; of bringing sight to the poor, sightless, blinded creatures that live next door to us; of leading thirsty men and women to the waters of life; of bringing beauty for ashes, and the oil of joy for mourning, and bringing happiness and harmony into the desolate homes that are all about us today.

Years ago Robert Moffat, after 30 years in Africa, was asked by a slip of a girl to sign her autograph album. He wrote these words:

My album is a savage breast,
Where sorrow reigns and darkness rests,
without one ray of light.
To write the name of Jesus there,
to speak of worlds both bright and fair,
And see that savage bow in prayer
is all my soul's delight.

There are savage breasts like that all around us today. They're not naked. They're dressed in gabardine and nylon, but they're just as savage as these in Africa.

Are you willing to be expendable for Christ?

Are you willing to count not your life dear unto yourself, but put yourself out to make friends with these wonderful people?

- To put up with all their irritating ways and for Christ's sake go after them no matter how little they encourage you?
- To learn to talk about storing up pancakes until you can find an opening to talk about more wonderful things? And
- To pray and invite them over, and pray again and invite them over again, and pray again until you see the darkness lift and God's Spirit write the name of Jesus on that savage breast?

Are you willing to do that?

I'll tell you what will happen when you try it:

- You'll learn first of all the wonderful thrill of a Christian life! How challenging it can be. How wonderful it can be. And then you'll discover how utterly inadequate you are for the job.
- Then you'll come to your pastor, or to some other Christian leader, and you'll say, "I tried to say something to so and so and I made an awful botch of it. Could you show me how to study my Bible so I'll know the answers?"
- You'll be at prayer meetings because you'll realize the power there to reach behind the mask of this world and open up doors that can't be opened any other way.

You'll become an effective Christian when you begin to live this way in dependence on Christ. And do you know what else? You'll discover what Christian separation really means!

Prayer

Our heavenly Father, we thank Thee now for the promises of Thy Word and for the revelation of it. Here is truth. This is the way things really are in this universe. The things we read and see outside are not always true. Many of them are but perversions of the truth. Here is truth. Help us to live by it. Help us to believe it, and obey it, and walk in this light, and dare to be different for Christ's sake. Amen.

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