

WHAT IS WORLDLINESS? Romans 12:2

by Dr. Jack L. Arnold

Everyone in this world has a philosophy of life, and while there are thousands of variant philosophies, they can be boiled down to just two: the world's and the Christian's.

The philosophy of the world is: "My life is my own to live as I please." This is a man-centered and self-centered view of existence. The philosophy of the Christian is: "My life is God's to do as he wills." This is a God-centered view of existence. These two philosophies are diametrically opposed and can never be compatible. One is revelation, the other reason; one supernaturalism, the other naturalism; one theism, the other atheism. No person will ever understand the Christian philosophy of life until he accepts Christ as his personal Saviour and the Bible as his only standard of authority.

In Romans 12:1, the Apostle Paul addressed Christians, asking them to make the decision to lay their lives on the line for God. They were to present their bodies to God as a living sacrifice. They were to lay their bodies on the line for him and live God-centered lives. This means they were actively, through the human will, to hand over their lives for God's use and service. It does not mean that they would be perfect or that they would never again sin. The point is that every decision a person makes and everything he does will be related to the fact that he has made an initial dedication of himself to God. The presentation of the body is an official announcement to God, self, and others that the Christian believes in God's philosophy of life over against the world's philosophy.

NONCONFORMITY TO THE WORLD — Romans 12:2a

Having already made a positive request to present the body to God, Paul now gives a negative command to stop conforming to the world. The Christian life involves keeping negative commands as well as living a positive life of obedience.

A better translation of the word "world" in Romans 12:2 is "age." "This age" is the time from Christ's birth to his second advent and it is evil in nature: "Who gave himself for our sins, that he might deliver us from this present evil world, according to the will of God and our Father" (Gal. 1:4). It is closely related to the world system which is under the control of Satan:

"Now is the judgment of this world: now shall the prince of this world be cast out" (John 12:31).

“In whom the god of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them” (2 Cor. 4:4).

“And we know that we are of God, and the whole world lieth in wickedness (the lap of the wicked one)” (1 John 5:19).

This world system has its own philosophy and standard of conduct:

“Wherein in time past ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience” (Eph. 2:2).

The world system, headed up by Satan, is opposed to the world of the elect, headed by Jesus Christ. The two systems are antagonistic.

“And be not conformed to this world.” Phillips translates this, “Don’t let the world around you squeeze you into its own mold.” The philosophy of the world is dog-eat-dog; it is self-centered, self-pleasing, indulgent, and indifferent to others. This world system puts constant pressure on the Christian to conform to it. This view looks at people as those who help or those who oppose, and resents or blesses them accordingly.

The world wants everything and everyone to conform to it, but for the Christian to be poured into its mold is sin and quenches the working of God in his life. When most Christians think of worldliness, they think in terms of man-made taboos (i.e. “I don’t smoke, drink, dance, or chew, And I don’t go with the girls who do”). While these things could be a manifestation of worldliness, real worldliness is much more subtle and devastating. The tragedy is that there are many Christians who do not practice the taboos but who still are extremely worldly.

How does the Christian conform to the world? The world has the philosophy that “money talks,” that “every man has his price,” and that “there is nothing that money can’t buy.” In those who live for pursuit of fortune alone, there is a ruthlessness that stops short of nothing. To try to get, merely in order to possess, is nothing short of idolatry: “covetousness ... is idolatry” (Col. 3:5). An obsession for money characterizes America today and it shows itself in our materialistic society. People strive to “keep up with the Joneses,” and go up to their ears in debt to make the world think they are high in the world’s standing.

Money is not evil, but the love of money brings evil to men. If the Lord in his grace brings fortune to a Christian, he should rejoice and remember that he is to be a good steward of that money. There is nothing sinful about Christians having money! But the Bible constantly exhorts the rich to give to the poor and to support the Lord’s work. With much wealth comes much responsibility.

Some time ago I was invited over to a Christian man's home to discuss a personal problem. His home was lovely and would have been the envy of any couple. One subject led to another until we got around to the problem of giving faithfully to the Lord's work. The man and his wife went on and on about how they wanted to give more but couldn't because they had too many debts with the house and all. I then asked the man a simple question, "Have you ever considered moving out of this house and living on a lower standard so you can pay your bills and give faithfully to the Lord?" There was a dead silence and the subject was soon changed. It was obvious that they loved their home more than they loved the Lord's work.

Fame: There is an inherent drive within men for public recognition. The world will bootlick, polish apples, politic, and stop at nothing to become famous. Christians should thank the Lord if fame comes their way in God's providence, but their fame is to be used as a testimony for the grace of God and for reaching others for Christ.

Power: Every person in the world wants to be "top man on the totem pole." Men have a great lust for power and desire to dominate others. This is why we have Nazis, the Ku Klux Klan, communists, black power, racial hatred, wars, husbands who dominate their wives, and parents who dominate their children. Man loves power! Authority may be given to the Christian, but it is from God and is to be administered in the fear of God. Christians become worldly as they lust for power in the local church. There are always some who try to dominate a local church by their prestige or money.

Pleasure: The world lives for pleasure and thrives on the evils that some pleasures bring. The Bible says that there is pleasure in sin, but the consequences of this sin are devastating to the human soul. God has richly given the Christian "all things to enjoy" (1 Tim. 6:17). There are thousands of legitimate pleasures that God has given us. But pleasure must never be put ahead of Jesus Christ. God wants us to enjoy nature, sports, music, the arts, reading, friendships, and social contacts. But these pleasures should only be used when they can glorify God. Anything that does not glorify God is not of God and is not for the Christian.

Everything must be done with moderation. God wants us to read widely and be intelligent Christians, but we must be selective in our reading and need not fill our minds with smut. If it is our conviction that movies may be attended, then we must be selective in the movies we see so as not to fill our mind with trash. If we have a cabin on the lake or a boat, this is fine as long as it does not take the place of Christ. If a woman wants to dress in style, she should wear her clothes to glorify God and not to woo men. Most of us are probably more worldly than we realize as we sit in front of the TV hour after hour but then complain because we do not have time to study the Word and pray. TV is to be used in moderation. A person who judges other Christians because God has blessed them with material substance is also worldly and the world thrives on jealousy.

The Christian is to use the world but not abuse it: "And they that use this world, as not abusing it: for the fashion of this world passeth away" (1 Cor. 7:31). Conformity to the world (i.e.

worldliness) is really a mental attitude that excludes Christ, for then the world system is swaying us to its side and way of thinking.

If one of our Christian friends were to show up at a girlie show some night to enjoy the dancing girls and live it up, we would say that this was worldliness, and it would be. But he could sit at home in a perfectly dark room and be thinking about being at a girlie show or something comparable and be just as worldly. Why? Because his mind is not occupied with Jesus Christ. The person who has his mind on Christ will not be at a girlie show or thinking constantly on similar subjects.

CONFORMITY TO CHRIST — Romans 12:2b

“But be ye transformed.” The verb “transformed” is in the passive voice in the Greek and indicates that the subject is being acted upon. The Christian is to allow himself to be transformed by the power of Christ through the Holy Spirit. This is an inward action that brings outward change of character. Transformation comes when one is dependent upon the Holy Spirit and surrendered to God’s will. When this takes place, we begin to look on people as persons with real needs, not just as instruments we can use. We begin to see that money and material things are no longer as important as they once seemed to be. The big thing in life is no longer whether you can close this deal and make so much money, but whether you will do it in a way that honors and glorifies the Lord, whether you make money or not. A sign of transformation is a person becoming less self-centered and more objective with his own life, not taking everything so personally but being willing to evaluate it.

I remember the story of a preacher who said from the pulpit (quite unwisely) that it was characteristic of women to take everything personally, even those things that were said in a general way. At the end of the message, a supposedly mature Christian woman came to him and said, “What do you mean? I don’t take these things personally at all!”

“By the renewing of your mind.” Transformation comes as one has a radical renovation of the mind. The mind is the key to conformity to Jesus Christ. What we put into our mind is what we will be! If we think about money, pleasure, fame, sex, or power all the time, we will certainly reap these things in life. If we think about Christ and relate these things to him, then we will have a Christ-oriented mind, “casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ” (2 Cor. 10:5).

Our minds must be active for Christ. Evangelicals are often afraid to use their minds, and sometimes have actually closed their minds to divine revelation. Mental atrophy is a mark of worldliness because we have stopped using our minds for God.

The late Dr. Barnhouse found that at night he would often have dreams that were not glorifying to God. The sensual thoughts of his subconscious mind were finding release. So he began to memorize Scripture before he went to bed at night in order to put his mind on Christ just before falling asleep. He found that this did not completely cure his thought life at night, but it certainly made a big improvement. Oh, that we could all have this same consciousness of sin!

The world is struggling for our minds. It tells us that it is all right to cheat on income tax returns if no one finds out. It tells us that premarital and extramarital sex are not wrong, and morality is what we make it. It tells us that the way to change government is through revolution, not legislation. It tells us that all religions are good for we are all going to the same place, just traveling different roads. If we listen to the lures of the world long enough without relating things to Christ, we soon fall into the devil's trap.

PROVING GOD'S WILL — Romans 12:2c

“That ye may prove.” The word “prove” means to “test with the idea of approval.” Thus, the believer is to test God's will for approval. This is not so much a proof to others but a proof to the Christian himself. In doing God's will we approve it as good. We come to understand that doing his will is not burdensome but a blessing.

The philosophy of the world is: “Show me, and I will believe.” But Christian philosophy is: “Believe, and I will show you.” There is a leap of faith and obedience for the Christian, after which he will come to understand and love God's will.

“What is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.” By presenting the body to God and having a Christlike mental attitude, the Christian approves God's will as good, well-pleasing and perfect. It is wholesome, satisfying and complete. Only when the Christian puts God to the test will he find a deep, satisfying experience of being in the center of God's will.

CONCLUSION

Christian, do you want God's will? Then you must present your body to God for a living sacrifice. And you must not be conformed to this world, but have a mental attitude that is occupied with Christ.

A young Christian woman said to a dear old saint who had walked with the Lord for many years, “I would give the world to have your experience.”

The devoted Christian lady said to her, “My dear, that's exactly what it cost me. I gave away the world for it!”

You can never experience the satisfaction of obeying God's will until you receive him as your personal Saviour from sin and Lord of your life. You can never know God's will intimately until you say, "I will," for Christ.