What is Worldliness?

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Worldliness is not the appreciation of the beauty of the physical world that God has created (Psalm 8:3; Romans 1:19-20). It is also not engaging in serious study or carrying out one’s business with fervency (Ephesians 4:28; 1 Thessalonians 4:11-12).

However, if one engages in any of these endeavours at the expense of God’s will and His glory, it is worldliness. Jesus said, “No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon” (Matthew 6:24).

“Mammon” is an Aramaic word for an idol which the ancient Aramaic world worshipped as god of wealth and it came to represent all kinds of material possessions and profits. A captivation with material wealth and glory that hinders the soul from loving and obeying God is worldliness. We cannot love God and the world at the same time. James 4:4 unequivocally declares that “the friendship of the world is enmity with God” and “whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God”. If one loves the world, there will be no room in his heart for the love of God.

Are your worldly engagements constantly distracting you from spiritual activities (“means of grace”) and stunting your spiritual progress? If so, then you are affected by worldliness. A preoccupation with the cares and riches of the world will inevitably prompt a scandalous departure from God and His will concerning His people (Matthew 13:22; Mark 4:19). Christians ought to be fascinated with God’s glory and not that of the world.

According to biblical truths, worldliness can also be explained as the acceptance and engagement with ungodly philosophies, passions, fashions, amusements and activities of the world. All worldly practices that draw the soul away into ungodliness are considered as worldliness. So “the grace of God that bringeth salvation” teaches us that “denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world” (Titus 2:11-12).

Worldliness, then, is the unholy conduct of the unregenerate people, which Christians should avoid. In fact, Christians are exhorted, “Mortify therefore your members which are upon the earth; fornication, uncleanness, inordinate affection, evil concupiscence, and covetousness, which is idolatry: For which things’ sake the wrath of God cometh on the children of disobedience: In the which ye also walked some time, when ye lived in them. But now ye also put off all these; anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy communication out of your mouth. Lie not one to another, seeing that ye have put off the old man with his deeds” (Colossians 3:5-9).

Christians are strongly warned by the apostle John: “Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world” (1 John 2:15). The term “world” here refers to the ungodly or wicked systems of the world. John also forewarned: "the whole world lieth in
wickedness” (1 John 5:19). Likewise, the apostle Paul taught us that to walk after the ways of the world is to be under the direction of the prince (or god) of this world, the devil and his demonic forces (2 Corinthians 4:4; Ephesians 2:2; 6:12). In the apostle Peter’s language, worldliness is the “pollutions of the world” (2 Peter 2:20). Hence, loving the activities and amusements of the world, which are satanic and contrary to God’s holy and perfect will, is prohibited in God’s Word.

What constitutes worldliness?

John, the apostle, provides a clear understanding of what constitutes worldliness in 1 John 2:16 – “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.”

THE LUST OF THE FLESH

Worldliness, first of all, consists of “the lust of the flesh” which is the sinful craving of our fallen body. God has created our body with certain desires such as hunger, thirst and sex. These desires are good, and are not at all evil in themselves but they should always be controlled according to God’s intended design and plans.

However, the world, which is under the control of the devil, urges us to satisfy these bodily desires through all forms of distorted ways which are forbidden by God. When these bodily desires are stirred up contrary to God’s design and purpose, they become sinful.

Thirst, as mentioned, is not evil in itself but drunkenness is. Hunger is not sinful but gluttony is. Money is needful but the love of money is covetousness, a form of idolatry. Sleep is a gift of God but laziness is condemnable. Sex is God’s gift to have a joyous wedded life between a man and woman, and to beget children, but when used wrongly, it becomes immorality.

The world appeals to the natural appetites and tempts us to satisfy them in forbidden ways. All the allurements of this world are designed to stir our fleshly desires to go against God’s specific plan and purpose.

THE LUST OF THE EYES

Secondly, worldliness consists of “the lust of the eyes”. The sinful fleshly craving finds its expression through the lust of the eyes (e.g. pornography). A man’s eye is after women. Jesus warned against this sin in Matthew 5:28 – “That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart.” So Job said, “I made a covenant with mine eyes; why then should I think upon a maid?” (Job 31:1). The psalmist also prayed in Psalm 119:37, “Turn away mine eyes from beholding vanity; and quicken thou me in thy way.”

The lust of the eyes seduces man to do evil in many other areas of life as well. It is the lust of the eyes that caused the fall of Achan (Joshua 7:21) and David (2 Samuel 11:2). Through the eye, our corrupt minds seek satisfaction, glory and all that would excite its pride. These include costly raiment and ornaments, gold and silver, diamonds and jewels, huge and splendid houses, expensive cars, gorgeous furniture and appliances.

King Solomon in Ecclesiastes 4:8 observes: “...neither is his eye satisfied with riches; neither saith he, For whom do I labour, and bereave my soul of good? This is also vanity, yea, it is a sore travail.” Through our eye, the world exerts its pressure on us to seek its glory. Thus, we engage in intellectual pursuits that are contrary to God’s will. So the lust of the eye is also the craving of our corrupt
intellect. Let not our passion for the world’s glory push God out of our mind.

THE PRIDE OF LIFE

Thirdly, worldliness consists of “the pride of life” which is the boasting of life’s possessions. The Greek word for “life” is bios and it refers to the means or possessions of life. Therefore, the phrase “the pride of life” means pride in what one possesses. Generally, man feels great about flaunting the things he possesses. He wants others to know that he is cleverer, stronger, wealthier and even holier than the rest. Because of the pride of life, some fall into many foolish and hurtful situations.

Now we can see how the three descriptions of worldliness are interrelated. Have you ever wondered why people in general like to buy bigger houses and cars or new appliances and wardrobes even though they cannot afford them? Why do they succumb to the “travel now, pay later” or “drive first, pay later” advertising, and get themselves into a hopeless debt-paying situation? It is largely because they want to impress other people; they want folks to notice how affluent or successful they are because of their “pride of life”.

The first two forms of worldliness – the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes – refer to desires for what we do not have; and a third – the pride of life – refers to the pride in what we do have. The world is driven by these two things: passion for pleasure and pride in possessions.

Sadly, there is much worldliness in the church!

Especially in these days, worldliness is found in great measure among churchgoers. Churches are worldly. Worship services are worldly. Pastors, preachers and their families are worldly. Elders, deacons and their families are worldly. Churchgoers are worldly. Their homes and businesses are altars of worldliness.

Christians are living like worldlings. Churches are producing more carnal men than saints of God. Few today separate themselves from worldliness. There is hardly a distinguishable boundary that separates Christians from the world. In fact, many go to church with the hope that this will give them the material prosperity they are craving for. They refuse to believe that godliness can lead to much loss of material comfort. So many fall away from the church when their wealth, health, houses, businesses and other secular interests are endangered.

There is also worldliness in the motives and actions of many Christians. There is worldliness in their domestic life and in their interaction with society; there is worldliness in the education of their family members; there is worldliness in their businesses and employment; there is worldliness in their expenditure – so much being laid out for self-pleasure and self-glory, and so little for God; there is worldliness in their religious schemes and activities; there is worldliness in their reading materials and conversations, and there is worldliness in their sports and entertainment. In short, there is too much of the spirit of fervent worldliness in the life of a great many who claim to be Christians.

Are you, my reader, more concerned about your worldly advancement than spiritual advancement? Do you sacrifice your spiritual nourishment for worldly gain? Have you been too occupied with material and sensual matters rather than the Lord, His church and His truth? If your answers to these questions are “yes”, then you are being gripped by worldliness. Repent and turn to the Lord now.