



Hindrances to Discipleship: *The World*

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In the previous issue of *Knowing & Doing*, we began a series on the three major hindrances to following Jesus Christ: the world, the flesh, and the devil. In that issue, we focused on the devil, his revolt against God, his resistance to God's kingdom, and his schemes against believers. In this issue we will seek to understand the world system, its origin and nature, and how the devil works through it to enslave and destroy God's people and thwart His kingdom.

What Is "the World"?

What does the New Testament mean by the word *world*? There are three Greek words translated as "world." *Oikoumene* usually means the inhabited world, especially the Greco-Roman world. *Aeon* means an "age" and is sometimes also rendered "world." But the most significant word used is *kosmos*, which originally meant "order or arrangement" and can refer to the created order or to the inhabited world or to the world in revolt against God, depending on context. It is this latter, more sinister, use that we are especially concerned with here.

In the Bible, the world in this negative sense represents the "stage of history" upon which human life has been lived since Adam and Eve's rebellion against God. Their tragic revolt unleashed a cascade of terrible effects on human life. We know the story of how they forfeited God's Spirit, became curved in on themselves, and lost the happiness of Eden. We also know that everyone born into the world since has inherited their corrupted, self-centered nature, a nature that is dead to God and enslaved in sin. It is this fallen nature that has shaped human societies, expressing our rebel-

lion against God on the corporate level.

The depths to which such societies can descend are seen in God's assessment of the world that developed after the fall: "The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (Gen. 6:5).¹ But even when societies do not fall to such levels of depravity, at the most fundamental level fallen human beings are alienated from the true God and dominated by sin, the devil, and his minions. Thus, in a very real sense, "the world represents the systematic expression of human sin in human cultures."²

With penetrating insight, Richard Lovelace elaborates on this world system:

When world is used in a negative sense in Scripture, what is meant is the total system of corporate flesh operating on earth under Satanic control, with all its incentives of reward and restraint of loss, its characteristic patterns of behavior, its anti-Christian structures, methods, goals and ideologies. It is substantially identical with Babylon and with Augustine's City of Man. It involves many forms and agencies of evil which are hard to discern and to contend against on the basis of an individualistic view of sin. Included are dehumanizing social, economic and political systems; business operations and foreign policy based on local interest at the expense of general human welfare and culturally pervasive institutionalized sins such as racism.³



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The Bible describes such a world as “godless,” that is, lacking reverence and awe for the true God. It takes only a moment’s reflection to see evidence of this all around us today. The five major institutions of society—the family, education, economics, religion, and government—are organized and operate without any consideration of the existence of the true God and His righteous will. (Religion may seem to be an exception. But any religion that does not profess the God of the Bible as revealed in Jesus Christ is operating in spiritual blindness and error. And even much so-called Christianity, including our own, is often moribund, nominal, or riddled with pagan superstition.) Godlessness is evident in most newspapers, magazines, television programs, movies, and other forms of communication, advertisement, and entertainment. They pursue their purposes as if the God of heaven and earth did not exist. This powerful, negative environment presses upon people from all directions to shape and mold how they think, feel, and act.

Underlying the many and varied expressions of this godless world system is a profound idolatry that blinds the minds and enslaves the wills of fallen people. It is first of all an “idolatry of self,” because we are curved in on ourselves and seek our own desires above the will of God and the good of others. However, this takes tangible form in a manner suited to the tastes, inclinations, and passions of the individual and may range from the crude to the highly sophisticated. As with Adam, pride and covetousness feed this idolatry:

The two dominant characteristics of “this world” are pride, born of man’s failure to accept his creaturely estate and his dependence on the Creator, which leads him to act as though he were the lord and giver of life; and covetousness, which causes him to desire and possess all that is attractive to his physical senses (1 Jn. 2:16). And, as man tends in effect to worship what he covets, such covetousness is idolatry (Col. 3:5).⁴

It is this pride and covetousness and the idolatry it generates that the devil exploits (along with the flesh) to keep people blind to “light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God” (2 Cor. 4:4). And it is precisely because of this blindness that they worship what is created instead of the One who created it. The result is that the world, in spite of its original goodness and great natural beauty, has become a grim place, “red in tooth and claw,”⁵ where, as Thomas Hobbes

said, life for most people who have ever lived has been “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.”⁶

The world is therefore a battleground in which a war rages between God and the devil, seen in the struggle between good and evil, truth and error, life and death. And the devil and his forces work relentlessly and skillfully to seduce and ensnare people with the godless values of this fallen world. We cannot escape being in this world, but we can and must avoid being of it.

Good News

Although the people of the world are spiritually blind, enslaved to sin and hostile to God, He still loves them. Indeed, so deeply does He love them that He sent His only Son to atone for their sins and reconcile them and the entire creation to Himself. This began unfolding with the coming of Jesus into the world. He proclaimed, “The kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15). Signs of the kingdom’s arrival abounded through Him: the sick were healed; the blind received sight; the crippled were made whole; the dead were raised to life; those who were possessed by demons were set free; and good news was preached to the poor. This signaled that God’s long-awaited invasion of this world had begun; the darkness was being rolled back, and the liberation of the devil’s captives was now in progress. It was a time of crisis and decision. People must forsake their sins and turn to Jesus in confident trust of rescue. What would it profit someone to gain the whole world at the price of his own soul? Let people come under the reign of Christ and become soldiers in the army of their rightful King. Denying self-centeredness, taking up their cross and following Jesus in their homes, workplaces, and communities, they would help liberate others and spread His kingdom far and wide.

Jesus began with twelve disciples, and from there the numbers grew. When the Spirit came upon the church at Pentecost, multitudes were swept into the kingdom, as the church spread from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria to Rome and to the ends of the earth. As long as the followers of Jesus continued to give themselves to Him in wholehearted devotion and obedience, they gained increasing freedom from the worldly beliefs, values, and behaviors that characterized their former life. And they became salt and light to the world around them.

But whenever they began to drift from that devotion and commitment, the love of the world would regain

lost ground in their hearts. Tragically, this happened to a key leader on Paul's apostolic team, which included Mark, Luke, Timothy, and Silas, among others. When Paul was awaiting execution in Rome and needed him the most, we read that "Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me" (2 Tim. 4:10; see also Col. 4:14; Philem. 24). Love of this present world is a perennial temptation for every believer. If a member of Paul's team, which included the writers of two of the Gospels, could be seduced by worldliness, we must not think we are immune.

About thirty years later, Jesus strongly rebuked the church of Laodicea for its worldliness,

I know . . . you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth. For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. (Rev. 3:15–17)

Over the centuries the church has waxed and waned, at times being zealous in love for Christ and expanding, at other times being seduced by love of this world, leading to spiritual stagnation and at times outright moral decadence.

Where Is the Church Today?

Anyone born into a fallen world, with a fallen nature and fallen parents, will assimilate worldly ways of thinking and behaving. When you submerge a clean white sponge into a pail of dirty water, it comes back with a dark, dirty residue. So it is with us and the world. And when we come to trust in Christ, it is inevitable that we will bring a certain amount of this unrecognized worldly baggage with us, and thus into the church. And every day we are at risk of accumulating more.

In 1979 church historian Richard Lovelace observed that "much of the Christian community today is deeply penetrated by worldly patterns of thinking, motivation and behavior, and thus its spiritual life is deadened and its witness rendered ineffectual."⁷ Since then things have only gotten worse. More recently George Gallup, commenting on the Gallup organization's decades-long research on the American church, said,

We find there is very little difference in ethical behavior between churchgoers and those who are not active religiously . . . The levels of lying, cheating, and stealing are remarkably similar in both groups. Eight out of ten Americans consider themselves Christians, yet only about half of them could identify the person who gave the Sermon on the Mount, and fewer still could recall five of the Ten Commandments. Only two in ten said they would be willing to suffer for their faith.⁸

In 2011 Barna Research reported that "less than one out of every five self-identified Christians (18%) claims to be totally committed to investing in their own spiritual development."⁹

Commenting on the evangelical church in 1994, theologian David Wells said,

The stream of historic orthodoxy that once watered the evangelical soul is now dammed by a worldliness that many fail to recognize as worldliness because of the cultural innocence with which it presents itself . . . It may be that Christian faith, which has made many easy alliances with modern culture in the past few decades, is also living in a fool's paradise, comforting itself about all the things God is doing . . . while it is losing its character, if not its soul.¹⁰

Today there is good evidence that what Wells suspected is correct. To cite just two examples, in 2008 Pew Research reported that 47 percent of evangelicals believe the pluralist idea that "many religions can lead to eternal life,"¹¹ something that would have been unthinkable fifty years ago. In a 2008 report, Barna Research found that the combined divorce rate of evangelical and nonevangelical Christians was 32 percent versus 33 percent for the population at large.¹² Many other examples could be given, but space prevents it. Jerry Bridges sums up well what is happening in the American church:

The world . . . is characterized by the subtle and relentless pressure it brings to bear upon us to conform to its values and practices. It creeps up on us little by little. What was once unthinkable becomes thinkable, then doable, and finally acceptable to society at large. Sin becomes respectable, and so Christians finally embrace it.¹³

What Does Worldliness Look Like?

In the middle of the twentieth century, the fundamentalist subculture identified worldliness with smoking, drinking alcohol, dancing, playing cards, and the like. Today some would identify it with driving fancy cars, living in expensive homes, wearing costly jewelry or clothing. Others might suggest it involves watching R-rated movies, listening to certain types of music, going to parties, and so forth. How do we distinguish true worldliness from cultural taboos? F.F. Bruce offers wise insight, “Worldliness, it must be emphasized in the face of much superficial thought and language on the subject, does not lie in the things we do or the places we frequent; it lies in the human heart, in the set [orientation] of human affections and attitudes.”¹⁴

If we think of worldliness then as a list of prohibited behaviors, which is a common approach, we are on the wrong track. James gets right to the point when he says indulging worldly desires is spiritual adultery and that “whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God” (James 4:4). Worldliness is not a matter of “keeping the rules” but of the desires of the heart, as Bruce reminds us. It is first and foremost a matter of what the heart loves. It is “the enthronement of something other than God as the supreme object of man’s interests and affections.”¹⁵ What’s more, the object does not even have to be evil. “Pleasures and occupations, not necessarily wrong in themselves, become so when an all-absorbing attention is paid to them.”¹⁶

Biblical Insights on the Peril of Worldliness

The Bible provides much valuable insight and direction for dealing with this deadly snare. In the parable of the sower (Matt. 13:1–9, 18–23; Mark 4:1–9, 13–20; Luke 8:4–15), for instance, Jesus speaks of four responses people can make to the word of God.

In the first hearer, there is no understanding of the word, which allows the devil to snatch away the word before it can make an impact.

In the second, the word is received with joy, and the hearer believes for a while. But because he has no root in himself, when tribulation or persecution arises because of the word he immediately falls away. This person’s religion rests on feelings, lacks adequate understanding and commitment, and doesn’t penetrate the heart. Thus it is only temporary. America is awash

in this feel-good religion. It offers the benefits of salvation without repentance, commitment, or the possibility of suffering; it offers what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called “cheap grace.”¹⁷ It begins with a bang of excitement but soon ends with a whimper.

In the third hearer, also common today, “the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful” (Matt.13:22). The parallel passages in Mark and Luke add: “the desire for other things” (Mark 4:19) and the “pleasures of life” (Luke 8:14). This person appears to be growing in response to the word of God and bearing at least some fruit. But then the word is smothered out by money, pleasures, the cares of the world, and other desires. (What is included in the latter two causes is unspecified, perhaps because there are so many possibilities, including unbridled pursuit of success, achievement, power, or fame.) This hearer is a graphic example of the seductive power of money, pleasures, the worries of life, and other worldly desires and their corrupting effects on hearts. How easy it is amid the narcissism, hedonism, and materialism of contemporary culture to be drawn away from wholehearted devotion to Christ! And how easy it is to rationalize our embrace of the world by clever arguments and subtle movements of the soul that blunt the conscience and quench the Spirit.

The deceitfulness of wealth is a good example to explore further. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus warned His disciples (and thus you and me) very pointedly not to lay up treasures on earth. Instead we are to lay them up in heaven, because where one’s treasure is, there one’s heart will be also (Matt. 6:21). It is impossible to give our hearts to two masters; we cannot serve God and mammon (Matt. 6:22–24). However, most believers pass right over this, assuming that it doesn’t apply to them, since they are not as wealthy as Bill Gates or Warren Buffett. They don’t have a million dollars or even a hundred thousand. But this is to miss the point. We may love money without having it (Judas), just as we may have money without loving it (Abraham, Job). The issue is not what we have but what we love, and whatever we love, our hearts will cling to. If we love money and material possessions, they will become idols that displace God in our hearts and destroy our souls.

The fourth hearer in this parable is held up as the true convert and faithful disciple, the model for us to emulate. This disciple hears, understands, and accepts the word of God (Matt. 13:23; Mark 4:20); this disciple holds “it fast in an honest and good heart,” bearing

“fruit with patience” (Luke 8:15). His or her obedient response to God’s word is the fruit of faith and love and demonstrates saving grace.

Additional insight into worldliness comes from the apostle John. Worldliness was a concern in congregations with which he was familiar in Asia Minor. John warned them,

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. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever. (1 John 2:15–17)¹⁸

His first point is very direct and sobering: those who love the world no longer have the love of God dwelling in them. As Matthew Henry observed, “The more the love of the world prevails the more the love of God dwindles and decays.” Love of the world drives out love for God. This, of course, is exactly what we just read from Jesus and James. John also gives insight into the nature of worldliness. The Greek word translated “desires” (“cravings” in the NIV) of the flesh here denotes desires that are morally corrupt. They are aroused through the desires of the eyes, things we see, and produce covetousness. And they stimulate pride, leading to pretentious display of our possessions.¹⁹

Gaining Freedom from the World

The dangers and snares we have been considering are the fruit of living for this world not the world to come, living for time not for eternity. We are looking through the wrong end of the telescope. J.I. Packer says,

Today, by and large, Christians no longer live for heaven and therefore no longer understand, let alone practice, detachment from the world. Does the world around us seek pleasure, profit and privilege? So do we. We have no readiness or strength to renounce these objectives, for we have recast Christianity into a mold that stresses happiness above holiness, blessings here above blessedness hereafter, health and wealth as God’s best blessings and death not as thankworthy deliverance from the miseries of a sinful world but as the supreme

disaster and a constant challenge to faith in God’s goodness. Is our Christianity out of shape? Yes, it is, and the basic reason is that we have lost the New Testament’s two-world perspective that views the next life as more important than this one and understands life here as essentially preparation and training for the life hereafter. And we shall continue to be out of shape until this proper otherworldliness is recovered.²⁰

How do we proceed? C.S. Lewis said, “You and I have need of the strongest spell that can be found to wake us from the evil enchantment of worldliness.”²¹ A vital step for Americans would be to give careful attention to what the apostle Paul urged upon the believers in Rome as the only proper response to God’s grace:

With eyes wide open to the mercies of God, I beg you, my brothers, as an act of intelligent worship, to give Him your bodies as a living sacrifice, consecrated to Him and acceptable by Him. Don’t let the world around you squeeze you into its own mold, but let God remake you so that your whole attitude of mind is changed. Thus you will prove in practice that the will of God is good, acceptable and perfect (Rom. 12:1–2 PHILLIPS).

Clearly some in the Roman church were infected with values, attitudes, and behaviors of the world. Paul urged them to give themselves wholeheartedly to God and stop allowing the world to shape their lives. Through radical abandonment to God they could be transformed by the process of the renewing of their minds, then begin to understand God’s will and live in obedience to Him and experience genuine transformation. *The Message* further clarifies verse 2: “Don’t become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You’ll be changed from the inside out” (Rom. 12.2).

Such wholehearted commitment to God is precisely where most believers in the American church fail—including the evangelical church. We have had it too easy for too long and have become soft and self-indulgent. As Jerry Bridges observed more than thirty years ago, “Quite possibly there is no greater conformity to the world among evangelical Christians today than the way in which we, instead of presenting our bodies as holy sacrifices, pamper and indulge them in defiance of our better judgment and our Christian purpose in life.”²²

One reason we do this is because wholehearted commitment is costly (and often excused as optional, if not ignored altogether). As Chesterton once said, “Christianity has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult and not tried.”²³ Recent research confirms this:

*Only about 3% of all self-identified Christians in America have come to the final stops on the transformational journey—the place where they have surrendered control of their life to God, submitted to His will for their life, and devoted themselves to loving and serving God and other people.*²⁴

We consider ourselves right with God even as lack of commitment and worldliness continue to encumber our lives. We have a religion of convenience like that which Anglican Bishop J.C. Ryle confronted in his time: “There is a common, worldly kind of Christianity in this day, which many have, and think they have enough—a cheap Christianity which offends nobody, and requires no sacrifice—which costs nothing, and is worth nothing.”²⁵ Until we make a total surrender and commitment to God, consecrating all we know of ourselves to all we know of God at the time, we are only deceiving ourselves. We are harboring an enemy in our hearts, an enemy that will quietly erode our love for the Father and Jesus and quench the work of the Holy Spirit and leave us in the grip of worldliness. And unless we renew our commitment again and again over the years as we mature, we are also deceiving ourselves. Eventually, like the seed sown among the thorns, we will discover that the cares of the world, the deceitfulness of riches, the pleasures of life and other things have smothered out the word of God, leaving our souls barren and our lives fruitless.

Once we have made that surrender to God, the Holy Spirit will be able to enlighten, teach and guide us in the way of holiness. Among other things, He will open our eyes to our worldliness. If we are in a good church, where the Bible is clearly and faithfully taught, if we read our Bibles regularly and have fellowship with mature believers, if we ask the Spirit to search our hearts and reveal it, some forms of worldliness should begin to come clear. Honest self-examination is essential in this process. We should ask ourselves questions: What do we love? What does our mind dwell on when it is free? How do we spend our time and money? (This often reveals what our hearts are attached to.) Do our answers point more to this world or the next? This is just the beginning; we will need to examine ourselves

periodically throughout our lives. For not only do we need to be freed from existing unrecognized worldliness, we must remain alert to new forms of seduction day by day.

As we seek to eradicate worldliness from our lives, we must guard against the perennial temptation of excessive asceticism. This is actually another form of worldliness, which denigrates the good world God has made. It fails to appreciate that the good things God has provided for us to enjoy, such as food, sex, material possessions, and pleasures, are not evil; they become a problem only when our own fallen hearts misuse and idolize them.

The Importance of the Church

Paul addressed Romans 12:1–2 not to an isolated individual but to an entire church. Obviously, it was not a perfect church, but it was a good church. This underscores at least two important points. First, even good churches have deficiencies, and their members will have varying degrees of worldliness. More important, we cannot mature in Christ and overcome worldliness unless we are part of a healthy congregation. For it is chiefly in His church that the Lord has provided the medicine our souls so desperately need. And we receive it through faithful preaching and teaching of God’s word, sharing life with likeminded believers, prayer, worship, and communion (Acts 2:42). In a good church the glory of God and of Jesus Christ will be the dominant concern of leadership and will influence worship, preaching, teaching, discipling, counseling, outreach, and missions. In such a church we will be taught to “seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God” and to “set our minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth” (Col. 3:1–2). We will be challenged with “the expulsive power of a new affection,”²⁶ in which our love for Jesus dislodges love of the world in its varied forms. We will learn of a world more glorious and desirable than the one we are called to forsake. We will be reminded that we are passing through this world as strangers and aliens who brought nothing into it and will take nothing out. And we will hear God’s call to be stewards not owners of the blessings of this life—achievements, possessions, power, fame, influence, opportunities—and use them to glorify Him and fulfill His purposes in the world.

When we are fully engaged members of the body of Christ, in a good local church, grace will flow into our lives and help us increase in faith, hope,

and love for God and others. In such a community, the Holy Spirit will increasingly enlighten us to the snares of the world, the lust of the flesh, and the schemes of the devil. And He will also empower us by the Holy Spirit to cast off the works of darkness and grow in love for Christ, obedience to His Word, transformation into His likeness, and mission to the world.²⁷

Notes

1. Unless otherwise noted Scripture references in this article are from the English Standard Version.
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4. D.R.W. Wood and I. Howard Marshall, *New Bible Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996), 1249.
5. Alfred, Lord Tennyson, “In Memoriam.”
6. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, part 1, chap. 13, <http://oragonstate.edu/instruct/phl302/texts/hobbes/leviathan-c.htm>.
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9. Barna Group, September 13, 2011, <http://www.barna.org/faith-spirituality/524-self-described-christians-dominate-america-but-wrestle-with-four-aspects-of-spiritual-depth>.
10. David Wells, *No Place for Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 11, 68.
11. Pew Forum on Religion in Public Life, December 18, 2008, <http://www.pewforum.org/Many-Americans-Say-Other-Faiths-Can-Lead-to-Eternal-Life.aspx#3>.
12. Barna Group, March 31, 2008, <http://www.barna.org/family-kids-articles/42-new-marriage-and-divorce-statistics-released>.
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15. Wood and Marshall, *New Bible Dictionary*, 1249.
16. Ibid.
17. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Macmillan, 1963), 45–48.
18. Matthew Henry, *A Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, n.d.), 6:1069.
19. Colin Cruse, *The Epistles of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 95; I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 145.
20. J.I. Packer, *Hot Tub Religion* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1987), 89–90.
21. C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 29.
22. Jerry Bridges, *Pursuit of Holiness* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1978), 109.
23. G.K. Chesterton, *What’s Wrong with the World* (1910), chap. 5, “The Unfinished Temple,” http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1717/1717-h/1717-h.htm#2H_4_0051.
24. Barna, September 13, 2011.
25. J.C. Ryle, *Holiness* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 204.
26. A phrase used by the nineteenth-century Scottish pastor Thomas Chalmers. See his helpful sermon with that title at the Theology Network, <http://www.theologynetwork.org/christian-beliefs/the-holy-spirit-and-christian-living/the-expulsive-power-of-a-new-affection.htm>.
27. Even the best church cannot supply everything we need at a given time. Thus we will sometimes need supplementary resources, such as good books, recorded sermons, teachings, seminars, etc.

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