



The Reflector

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Respectable Worldliness

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To trace the development of the word from which we discuss worldliness (*kosmos*) is an interesting, if somewhat disappointing, exercise. Initially it meant an ornament, then the ordered or beautiful arrangement of the universe, next the earth, then the inhabitants of the earth - most of whom are bad, and thus finally the evil that characterizes the world. It started out beautiful and attractive, but ends up bad and ugly. Most sin is that way. It can take something good and lovely and misuse it so that the result is evil. And this is doubly demonstrated in the title of this article. Doubly, because it takes something good and misuses it; but then to compound the tragedy, the bad is endorsed and becomes respectable so that something evil is portrayed as something good! "Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil" (Isa. 5:20). But perhaps you wonder: Just what is respectable worldliness?"

Let it be noted to begin with, by respectable worldliness I do not mean that such is respectable with God. The very concept behind worldliness eliminates any idea of God's approval of it. John tells us that it "is not of the Father" (1 John 2:16), and James says, "friendship with the world is enmity with God" (James 4:4).

Just as goodness stems from the good, and kindness from the kind, so worldliness stems from the world ("the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life," 1 Jn. 2:16). It has both its origin and fruition in the kind of thinking and/or action which springs from such considerations.

Fundamentally, worldliness is an emphasizing (Which often runs to obsession) of that which is temporal, material, physical (which frequently involves the sensual) at the expense of (and more often than not, to the exclusion of) that which is spiritual. It is the opposite of spirituality. Clearly this can involve "a multitude of sins." As a rule, however, worldliness is thought of in terms of that which is either immoral or tends to immorality, and, to be sure, there are many worldly people who hate both God and all who would live godly. Yet there are many others to whom immorality is abhorrent, who nonetheless have little or no interest in God or spiritual things; who emphasize the material, the physical at the expense of, and all to frequently, to the exclusion of, the spiritual. All such are worldly. They "mind earthly things." And they do this, not only in their own lives, but so uphold it, exalt it, and encourage it, that such have come to be looked upon by most people as not only not degrading, but positively desirable, respectable.

By respectable worldliness, then, I do not mean the immoral, the vulgar, the sensual, but rather that which the world considers respectable, and this in areas that in themselves are honorable, noble, and upright. This has had its influence on the church. For example, I do not preach to many people who are murderers or bank robbers. I would like to think that most assemblies to whom I preach are not characterized by too many adulterers (and one would be too many to be a part of the people of God) or drunkards. And chances are good that most

in these audiences would find such repugnant. Yet they have been so affected by the world's standard of respectability that many are guilty or respectable worldliness, and without some intense vigilance, many more will be. Let me illustrate.

An industrious brother (concerned about the high cost of living, the needs of his family, the requisites of a good education for them) takes a second job. This he does, knowing when he does it that it will entail his being unable to assemble with the saints as the word of God teaches, and if not that, surely knowing that it will preclude his being available for any significant amount of his individual responsibilities in the church.

As the world looks on this type of individual, he has many respectable qualities. He is concerned about his family's financial welfare and future. He is no leech on society. He wants to provide for his own, and even the Bible endorses this (1 Tim. 5:8). But he attains one lesser goal at the expense of a more important one. The one he attains may be good, noble, and respectable, but it is "worldly" nevertheless, because it emphasizes the physical and material at the expense of the spiritual. And certainly he has not sought "first the kingdom of God and his righteousness" (Matt. 6:33).

And what shall I say about working mothers? First of all, I want to say, because the Bible shows, they do right to work! But the word of God also tells them where to work. It does not say, "good secretaries, excellent clerks, workers in factories." It says, "workers at home, keepers at home" (Titus 2:5). 1 Tim. 5:15 shows there is more to this than sweeping floors and washing the dishes. It says, "guide the home." This is a spiritual endeavor, and to "farm it out" so as to increase income for things, is to exchange the spiritual for the material. How depressing that people no longer believe that the hand that rocks the cradle is the hand that rules the world. What a tragedy that Christian mothers have allowed themselves to be cheated out of one of the noblest of tasks by having the false idea foisted upon them that they cannot be "fulfilled" unless they get out of the house and into the business world. So successfully (respectable) has this been done that 16 million USA mothers with children under 18 work outside the home. Forty per cent

(40%) of the women who have children under 6 years of age leave them with somebody else while they go off to work. What is it that prompts such? Will it help them participate more in "church work"? Will it increase their opportunities to visit the sick, to attend Bible classes, and do many other activities in the Lord's work? I do not recall ever hearing anyone say, "I think leaving my children to someone else will help them and me grow spiritually." Quite a few just "took the job temporarily, till we get these unusual expenses paid." (And these turn out to be about as temporary as taxes!) I visit in some of these homes, and from what I observe, they certainly could not be said to be in any kind of dire financial circumstances. Most of them are in financial circumstances as good as most and better than many. Was it spiritual reasons that demanded they so do? And consider this:

1. The training of children is not the responsibility of the government. It is not the responsibility of the grandparents, and not the responsibility of baby sitters. It is the responsibility of fathers (Eph. 6:4) and mothers (1 Tim. 5:14). It is a spiritual activity and no part-time job.

2. Who is going to be the source of "influence" on that child while its mother is away at work? Who will nurse it when it cries, kill its bruised knees, warn it against the dangers that lie ahead? Does the nursery really care about the kind of TV being watched?

3. Frequently such arrangements allow the child to spend most of its waking hours with someone other than its mother. I have even known children who called the "sitter" mother, but would not call the mother, "mother."

4. It is an open secret that many, many wives are too tired after a "hard day at the office" to be the spiritual influence and companion that she needs to be.

5. We will not discuss the resentment, the temptations, etc. that come her way. But for two excellent lessons dealing with this entire subject, see one by Horace Huggins, and another by James Cope in the 1979 Florida College Lecture Book.

If this results in the emphasis on the material at the expense of the spiritual (and the evidence seems

overwhelming), it is worldliness. The world may “respect” it but it does not change it.

Free Time

Vacations exert a wholesome influence. They can refresh the individual and stimulate a renewed vigor in the return to normal activity, and I believe such can be justified by the scriptures. But Christians can never take a vacation from God! This is true whether it involves a two-week vacation or simply a weekend at the lake. But there are many members of the church who abuse such blessings and during these times emphasize the material and physical at the expense of the spiritual, and that’s worldliness. The spiritually minded person does nothing but that he first considers it in the light of how it will fit in with the will of God for his life. Of primary importance is: Will this allow me to discharge my obligation and enjoy the privileges of being a child of God?

1. What shall I do? There are many things that the world calls respectable that a child of God cannot engage in because he has a different standard. Since other articles in this issue will probably deal with this, I forego a discussion of these here.

2. Where shall I go? Those who are concerned about this world will consider the scenery, the entertainment (and there is plenty of this that is respectable), but the spiritually minded person, while he can enjoy the scenery and the respectable entertainment, is primarily concerned with such things as: Will it be where I can worship with God’s people while I am away from home? Far too many members of the church wait till Saturday or Sunday morning, if then, to “look for a Church of Christ.” The spiritually minded did that before he left home. I am thrilled that I know a teenager who toured the western states with a foreign friend, but before beginning, wrote various congregations along the route to insure attendance at church services would be possible. And I cannot emphasize it too strongly; a Christian ought to have the same convictions away from home that he has at home! If he cannot conscientiously worship with a liberal congregation at home, he ought not to worship with one away from home. Just having up a sign that says “Church of Christ” is not enough. A Christian

wants the vacation, but not at the expense of spiritual considerations.

There are members who get so involved in civic affairs, all of which may be perfectly good and wholesome (respectable), but they can become so involved in them, that some even miss the services to attend to such. And I am delighted that I know others who let it be known to begin with that, with them, God comes first and they will engage in nothing at any time that interferes.

Marriage

Perhaps the problem that eventually led to the flood was begun when the children of God began to be more concerned with the physical beauty (“fair”) than they were with spiritual qualities (Gen. 6:1-2). When a person takes only the materialistic and physical into consideration in choosing a wife or husband, he is making a grave mistake. These may be respectable considerations, but they are too often at the expense of the spiritual. Is she attractive? Does he have a good paying job? (And this does not mean that you must try to find the ugliest one around, nor one who is “on welfare.” Ugliness is no guarantee of spirituality, and laziness is certainly no virtue.) The thing that really matters is the spiritual. Is he a faithful Christian (not merely, “Is he a member of the church?”) Will she help me in the rearing of our children to be Christians? What are his/her spiritual qualities? Is he actively engaged in the Lord’s work? Companions may be respectable in the eyes of the world by the world’s standards (she is beautiful; he is successful), but what about in the eyes of God?

These are but a few of the many areas that demonstrate the need to be concerned about “respectable worldliness.” Those involved in it usually bear very little, if any, fruit for God, but like those sown on the thorny ground, “the cares of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the lusts of other things entering in, choke the word, and . . . become unfruitful” (Mk. 4:19)

Attitudes That Prompt Worldliness

1. An erroneous evaluation of life. It says things “here and now.” In so doing it turns the world upside down. It puts the world on top and the kingdom somewhere below that. It says, “I will seek the physical and the material, and then I will add

the kingdom of God later.”

a. Things come first. Yet Jesus said, “A man’s life does not consist in the abundance of the things which he possesses” (Luke 12:15). Respectable worldliness contradicts this.

b. Time. It says, “Later.” The Bible says, “Boast not thyself of tomorrow; for thou knowest not what a day may bring forth” (Prov. 27:1). Respectable worldliness fails to properly evaluate life.

2. Satisfaction With Mere Membership.

No need is felt to supply something for the edifying of the body (Eph. 4:16).

3. Indifference To Individual Growth and Development.

The admonition of Peter to “grow in grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Pet. 3:18) is not appreciated. All such will remain a spiritual dwarf or baby.

4. A “Free-Loader” and a Sponge. “Let George do it” attitude.

5. Nearsighted. “. . . Seeing only the things that are near” in this world, such are mindful of this world, rather than seeking the one that is to come (See Heb. 11:14-15 for the proper evaluation).

What Is The Remedy For Respectable Worldliness?

1. Recognize the danger. In fact, in some ways it is even more dangerous than the immoral and the ungodliness. This will indeed sap the very vitality from a person’s spiritual well being, but it does not look all that bad. One of its most fearful dangers is in its subtlety. It stems from what appears to be respectable motives; so many others are engaged in it, etc.

2. Look at things through the eyes of God. Before beginning any activity, ask: What will this do with my relationship with God? Would I want to appear before God right now? Will it allow me, yea even encourage, my wholehearted participation in all phases of His work, both in the church and as an individual Christian?

3. Seek transformation rather than conformation. Never be content to be as the world is, or as it approves. Remember, “God does not see as man seeth” (1 Sam. 16:7) and His ways are higher than man’s ways (Is. 55:8-9). “And be not

conformed to this world, but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Rom. 12:2).

4. Get involved in the work of the church.

5. Seek the association of other Christians. Perhaps it would be better to seek it among these who are somewhat ahead of us in spiritual development. If you want to be a better tennis player, play with someone a little better than you are. If you want to develop spiritually, be with those who are a little more spiritually advanced than you are.

Consequences of Respectable Worldliness

1. God is robbed. Anytime we do not give God that which is rightfully His, we are robbing God. Since we are to “seek ye first his kingdom and his righteousness” (Matt. 6:33), to put anything else first (and that is exactly what respectable worldliness does) is to rob Him of what belongs to Him.

2. The church is robbed. If you do not share in the work and function of the congregation, it is being deprived of one more talent and time.

3. The individual is robbed. He is robbed of spiritual development. He is robbed of true peace of mind. He is robbed of the contribution of that most valuable possession, himself. And worst of all, he may be robbed of his soul in heaven for “the world passeth away and the lusts thereof, but he that doeth the will of God abideth forever” (1 John 2:17).

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Becoming a Christian will not resolve all your earthly issues. It will not relieve all of your earthly suffering – in fact, it will likely create more suffering. But by being a faithful Christian you will have the tools to cope with them (cf. 2 Cor. 12:7-10) and you will be constantly reminded of the “hope of the gospel” that points to the eternal blessing of heaven. You can, as Paul said, “consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.” (Rom. 8:18). So, even in the midst of all the issues and suffering you will have reason to “rejoice in hope.” (Rom. 12:12). – EOB