

## Separation from Worldliness

Over the years, the term “worldliness” has come to mean many things to many different people. For some it is a reference to behavior that one *imagines* to be sinful, such as owning a nice car, wearing make-up, going out to dinner at a restaurant, or incorporating musical instruments in a church service. For others, the term “worldliness” describes non-negotiable sins such as taking a job as a stripper in a local bar or choosing x rated films as one’s favorite form of entertainment. Somewhere in between are folks who use the word “worldliness” to refer to behaviors considered questionable or simply unbecoming of one who professes to love God. One thing is certain—the word “worldly” has developed a host of definitions, each depending on whose “list” of worldly behaviors are being discussed and to what degree one excuses or condemns a particular behavior.

“Worldly” lists (and everyone has one) are a reflection of each individual’s views of right and wrong, godly or ungodly. While anything modern or new is worldly to some, anything related to drinking, smoking, gambling, immodesty, or fornication sums up worldliness for others. In every age and in every culture Christians are compelled to decide what constitutes worldliness, and what doesn’t. How important is it to one’s Christian happiness and should it be a high priority matter?

The “worldly” problem has always been a thorny and emotionally charged issue. For starters, we who are human (and still breathing) tend to believe what we prefer to be true. Furthermore, we often condemn in others what we excuse in ourselves. And like it or not, we are prone to viewing our own stubborn (and beloved) habits in a congenial light while the sins and nasty habits of others appear obviously ungodly (and worldly). Add to the mix our human tendency to desire instant answers that don’t require one to weigh or discern (let alone painstakingly search the scriptures or humbly seek the Lord) and we’ve got a recipe for potential contention.

We like it when things are spelled out plainly, never have an exception clause and never require us to think for too long. Life is easier that way. Many have wondered why God didn’t make a “black and white” list of every possible evil so we might always clearly know what is right and what is wrong, what is pleasing to Him and what isn’t. In essence, He has. While there isn’t a passage of scripture that says “Thou shalt not take a job as a stripper in a bar,” or “Thou shalt not make purchases with a credit card,” there *are* very clear principles which enable us to discern the evil of strip dancing in a bar or how to spend money wisely. God never intended us to follow a “list.” Rather, He intends for us to cultivate such a close relationship with Christ that we become intimately familiar with Him. His will for all believers is that they know Him and the governing principles found in His Word so well they develop the ability to discern good and evil, right and wrong, good, better, and best when faced with those “not so easy” questions. We need to remember, “...strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.” (Hebrews 5:14)

“Worldliness” is a thorny issue, not only because we sometimes have difficulty identifying good and evil, but because it is a term that is used by the most humble as well as the most prideful believers. Sincere believers who desire to live a life pleasing to God genuinely want to stay as far away from “worldliness” as they can get. These will take passages like 2 Timothy 2:19 to heart. “...and, Let every one that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity.” At the same time, the term is used by believers who are often more interested in comparing themselves with others so they will “feel” righteous or superior to others. These folks often accept or reject other believers based on personal preferences rather than biblical issues that truly warrant separation from them.

Self-righteous condemnations of people one disapproves isn't new with our generation—it existed when sin made its grand entrance into the hearts of people way back in the garden of Eden and it existed in the lives of many scribes and Pharisees and lawyers of Jesus day. The Pharisaical practice of honing self-discipline to an art form and adding prohibitions and rituals to the written Word of God was prevalent when Jesus walked the earth, and continues even now. The Pharisees weren't content just to impose their scrupulous lists of laws on themselves—they imposed them on others and then treated with contempt those who didn't perform to their expectations. It is no surprise there exists Christian folks today who do just as the Pharisees did—drawing attention to their own supposed righteous behavior then comparing themselves with people they view as being inferior and unrighteous, or “worldly.”

If we would be gut level honest about it, I suspect every one of us would have to admit there is a proud little Pharisee lurking in his or her heart that likes to surface in subtle ways now and then. Even those who condemn the “Pharisee” mindset can begin to view themselves as more reasonable and spiritual than those who adopt more prohibitions than even the scribes could think up. So one “Pharisee” in essence is often found condemning the other “Pharisee.” One calls the other “worldly” while the other slings back the accusation of being a “legalist” even as both view themselves as being more mature and spiritual and the other as being ungodly and immature. In reality, it is often only a matter of opinion as to what is truly heinous and worldly and what isn't. So... what do we do with the term “worldly” and how do we use it as careful Bible believers and Biblical counselors? What *is* “worldliness” and is it a justifiable concept and helpful term?

### **“Worldliness” according to Christ**

Rather than define the term subjectively, according to our own individual perspectives, let's examine the scriptures and do our best to discern its biblical meaning. The Bible often uses the word “world” in reference to those that are unsaved or ungodly. Sometimes the word refers to the physical earth and all the inhabitants of the earth, but very often it is used to describe a world system that is void of any spiritual understanding or light. References to “men of the world, cares of the world, children of this world, prince of this world, riches of this world, foolish things of the world, wisdom of the world, things of the world, sorrow of this world, this present evil world, the course of this world, rudiments of the world, and

pollutions of the world” all describe the particular mindset, values and ways of those who are unsaved, wicked, or haughty.

Every one of us begins life with a sinful nature that naturally blossoms like a weed into selfish, prideful, self-willed, rebellious, sinful behavior. Except the natural bent of human nature is thwarted by parental discipline, a fear of painful consequences or the censorship of peers, every human being tends toward such things as unrestrained dishonesty, anger, anxiety, despair, and all manner of godless, sensual living. The typical behavior and vices of those who do not know God and do what comes naturally is plainly described throughout the Scriptures. There is no mystery here!

The characteristics of human nature apart from God are described as “works of the flesh” and include adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, envyings, murders, drunkenness, revellings, and such like (Galatians 5:19-21) The apostle Paul described the lost as people whose behavior is motivated by the lusts of the flesh, fulfilling the desires of one’s sinful human nature and mind. He tells us they are “by nature the children of wrath.” (Ephesians 2:3)

We get another picture of the human heart in the book of Romans. “As it is written, there is none righteous, no, not one: There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God. They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one. Their throat is an open sepulchre; with their tongues they have used deceit; the poison of asps is under their lips: Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness: Their feet are swift to shed blood: Destruction and misery are in their ways: And the way of peace have they not known: There is no fear of God before their eyes (Romans 3:11-18).

In Revelation 21:8 we see the unsaved described as “the fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars...” Elsewhere they are described as “lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, Without natural affection, trucebreakers, false accusers, incontinent, fierce, despisers of those that are good, Traitors, heady, highminded, lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God;” (1 Timothy 3:2-4)

In Noah’s day God told us “every imagination of the thoughts of his [man’s] heart was only evil continually” and the “whole earth was filled with violence.” (Genesis 2:6, 11) The book of Proverbs is filled with comparisons between those who are saved (the righteous and the wise) and those who are lost (the wicked and the foolish). Yet all of these references represent only a small number of passages found in the Bible that describe the proud unregenerate human heart! No wonder God sums it up by saying, “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?” (Jeremiah 17:9)

It is these characteristics so commonly found in a world of lost sinners that constitute “worldliness” or behavior patterned after the lost world. Anything that is in opposition to the character of Christ is of this world and is therefore, “worldly.” When we think of “worldliness” we tend to picture such things as Las Vegas style entertainment, vulgar language, sensual clothing, drinking, smoking or anything we wouldn’t personally think about doing. True, these things *do* often characterize the lives of the lost—but just as “worldly” and characteristic of the lost is behavior God hates such as a proud look, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked imaginations, feet that are swift in running to mischief, a false witness that speaks lies, and he that sows discord among brethren. (Proverbs 6:16-19)

It’s no accident that our human made list usually contains outward behaviors easy to change by our own power while God’s list zeros right in on the heart and addresses behavior that can only be changed by His power. A Christian might do all the “right” things, dress the “right” way and know a multitude of scripture—yet be ungodly. Though he looks spiritual and wise by man’s standard, he is “worldly” if he doesn’t pass God’s “spiritual maturity” test. One who is truly spiritual produces spiritual fruit. James asks, “Who is a wise man and endued with knowledge among you? let him shew out of a good conversation [behavior] his works with meekness [humility] of wisdom. But if ye have bitter envying and strife **in your hearts**, glory not, and lie not against the truth. This wisdom descendeth not from above, but is earthly, sensual, devilish. For where envying and strife is, there is confusion and every evil work. But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be intreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy. And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace of them that make peace.” (James 2:13-18)

When we stop to consider God’s view of worldliness rather than our own, we suddenly realize it’s a serious matter that *all* of us need to recognize as a human problem, whether we are saved or lost, spiritually mature, or spiritually immature. Worldliness is something that needs to be thoroughly removed from *all* our hearts—and that’s a lifelong process. For we who proclaim to be saved, it’s not an option—it’s the mark of a true believer. “For whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world: and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith.” (1 John 5:4)

Perhaps no definition of worldliness sums up the meaning of the word or draws a line in the sand any better than the words we find in the book of first John. “Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. 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 for ever.” (1 John 2:15-17) The lust of the flesh refers to inordinate things our human nature longs to feel and experience. The lust of the eyes refers to inordinate things our human nature longs to possess. The pride of life refers to inordinate praise and esteem our human nature longs to receive from others. Who among us has the ability

to purge these things from governing our own heart? Not one of us. We can be changed only by the power of God that is given to believers who walk with Him by faith, obey His Word, and depend on Him. (Galatians 5:16-17; Galatians 3:1-3)

### **The desire to be holy accompanies a genuine relationship with Christ**

In direct contrast to the works of the flesh that characterize the unsaved, God is actively transforming the hearts of His obedient children until they are characterized by His divine nature. We read, “Whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises: that by these ye might be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust.” (2 Peter 1:4) Instead of hatred, fellowship with God produces a heart filled with love. The Holy Spirit replaces misery and anxiety with joy and peace, unforgiveness and intolerance with longsuffering and forgiveness, anger and selfishness with gentleness and goodness, fear with faith, pride with humility, and reckless indulgence with self-control. (Galatians 5:22-23)

Furthermore, we are told, “And they that are Christ’s have crucified the flesh with the affections and lusts.” (Verse 24) In other words, they that are Christ’s are *different* than they who are not. As a Christian grows in grace, the difference becomes increasingly more obvious until one is as different from the other as day is to night. “But the path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day. The way of the wicked is as darkness: they know not at what they stumble.” (Proverbs 4:18-19)

This night and day difference originates, not in outward behavior, but in an inward change of heart and mind that ultimately affects outward behavior. Anyone is able to discipline himself to *act* godly—but only the Holy Spirit is able to transform a human heart to *be* godly. When God describes the difference between an obedient believer, changed by the power of God and an unsaved person who has not experienced such a change of heart, He contrasts the two by calling one group “children of darkness” and the other “children of light.” One group loves the works of the flesh, while the other hates the works of the flesh and loves instead everything that God loves. One group is characterized by the ways of an unregenerate world, and can be described as “worldly.” The other group is to be characterized by the ways of God’s kingdom making them “godly.”

If every Christian lived in obedience to Christ and centered his or her life around a relationship with Christ, every Christian would manifest the byproduct of “walking in the Spirit”—a life filled with love, joy, peace, longsuffering gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness and temperance. Instead, many hang on to their familiar human ways and follow their old sinful tendencies rather than the Word of God. They come to Christ for forgiveness and receive salvation, then struggle with following Christ and living by faith. As a result, they experience little of the abundant joyful life that is their birthright and bring untold sorrow and heartache into their lives that could have been avoided. What hinders them from making an emotional break with their old life with all its deceitful pitfalls? Jesus said “the cares of this world, and the deceitfulness

of riches, and the lusts of other things entering in, choke the word, and it becometh unfruitful. (Mark 4:19) These set their hearts on things of this world rather than things that have eternal value.

Sadly, disobedient Christians can look more like unbelievers even while some unbelievers can outwardly appear more like Christians. One thing is certain. A true believer who is disobedient is a miserable person who will doubtless experience the discipline of his Heavenly Father until he is emotionally severed from his attachment and love for the world and embraces instead a love for his God. One who professes to be saved while living a disobedient life yet experiences no such misery or discipline is one who has made a profession but has not been redeemed, or truly saved. "But if ye be without chastisement, whereof all are partakers, then are ye bastards, and not sons." (Hebrews 12:8) Worldliness, you see, is a very serious issue. Not all "worldly" Christians are Christians. Many are self-deceived folks who love the world because they are at heart, children of this world and not children of God.

### **What does it mean to separate ones self from worldliness; the world?**

Separation from the world *doesn't* mean refraining from everything a lost person does. There are many things we do throughout our daily lives just the same as others, saved or lost, that are neither sinful nor displeasing to God. It also doesn't mean refraining from something new simply because it is new. New technology, ideas, medicines, and ways of doing things more efficiently are blessings, not something to be avoided. The fact that human beings have the ability to be innovative and imaginative is a gift from God that man can use for good, or for evil. All forms of technology, old or new, can be utilized by those who are wicked or those who use it for the good of others. We don't avoid the telephone because people use it to exploit sexually explicit conversations for a price—we simply avoid the "sex line" numbers and people who engage in this behavior. Nor do we shun using cars for transportation because some use them to transport illegal drugs.

Separation from worldliness means drawing a line between what is clearly sinful and what is not and standing on the side of righteousness away from and in opposition to sin as God defines sin. Douglas McLachlan made some outstanding and thought provoking comments about the Christian's challenge to live godly in an ungodly world. In his book, *Reclaiming Authentic Fundamentalism*, he says,

*"It is undeniably true that Jesus Christ has called His followers to assume a posture of radical non-conformity to the world system. At the heart of the Sermon on the Mount, the manifesto of Jesus, we find these words: "Be not ye therefore like unto them" (Matthew 6:8). That is a clarion call for Christians to be different from the world around them. To be perfectly honest, most of us do not like this "difference talk." And the reason is clear: moral difference does not make for social acceptance, and social acceptance is the one thing for which a good many contemporary Christians are prepared to sell their souls. The world thrives on conformity, it gags on diversity. It is always attempting to force us into its mold (Rom.12:2). "How dare you be different," the world says to Christians, and far too many of us conform.*

*But why are Christians to be different? Why has Jesus Christ called His followers to be radical, but Godly, non-conformists? It's not so that we can pour contempt on the world. That's what the punk culture has done. They, too are radical non-conformists, but of an ungodly variety. They refuse to conform, and for some of the right reasons, but in all the wrong ways. This contemptuous reaction manifested in outrageous hair styles, eccentric wardrobes, and shameless lifestyles is not fitting for Christians. Christians are not to have contempt for the world but compassion for its needy people. Neither are Christians called to be different so that they can call attention to themselves. As a matter of fact, authentic Christians are always seeking to divert attention away from themselves and up to Christ.*

*Why, then, are we called to be different? I believe the reason is two-fold. First we are called to this radical difference for the sake of conforming to the image and likeness of Jesus Christ. If Jesus would not go there, say that, listen to that, see that or think that, neither should we. Second, we are called to this radical difference for the sake of modeling before lost men and women, boys and girls, the genuine possibility of change."*

### **Be ye transformed...**

Change—*real* change—is possible for a believer. It is not only possible; it is expected as the natural outcome of a believer's relationship with Christ. The scriptures exhort believers not to be conformed to this world, but to be *transformed* by the renewing of their minds. (Romans 12:2) The process of being transformed (or changed) from one who naturally follows the principles and ways of the world to one who naturally thinks and behaves like Christ, is called "sanctification." While salvation occurs instantaneously and depends wholly upon the work of God, and not anything of ourselves, the progressive side of sanctification is a gradual process that requires our willing participation and cooperation with the work of the Holy Spirit and our efforts to know, understand and obey the Word of God. We experience this change and growth only to the degree we cooperate with and obey God's commands to set ourselves apart from that which is ungodly and consecrate ourselves to that which is pleasing to God.

The command is clear, "...And let everyone that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity [sin]...If a man therefore purge himself from these, he shall be a vessel unto honour, sanctified, and meet for the master's use, and prepared unto every good work." (2 Timothy 2:19-21) As our minds are renewed and transformed by God's truth, we naturally progress in our desire to live a godly and spiritually productive life. We come to understand that separating ourselves from sins that control us is a prerequisite for God's blessing and usefulness in God's kingdom. Whether we are a vessel of honor or vessel of dishonor in God's house is a matter we choose—but we *will* be one or the other.

James tells us that it pleases and honors God when we keep ourselves "unspotted from the world." (James 1:27) To keep ones self unspotted, or uncontaminated by the

philosophies and ways of the world means to separate ourselves from anyone and anything that encourages ungodly behavior that is characteristic of the unsaved world. Separating ourselves from evil influences protects us from contamination the way washing one's hands and wearing gloves protects a surgeon and his patient from contamination with germs and viruses. The surgeon doesn't abandon surgery and stay out of hospitals because germs are dangerous—rather he protects himself and follows specific procedures proven to keep the surgical area free from devastating germs.

A skillful surgeon is not made skillful and useful because he wears surgical gloves to protect himself and his patient. The gloves are absolutely necessary to a skillful surgeon and indicate the surgeon has a proper understanding and fear of the destructive power of tiny germs and viruses—but gloves do not make him skillful. We would not view the surgeon who takes such prudent precautions and teaches others to do the same as one who is prideful. Rather, we would view the surgeon who *refuses* to believe he needs to wear surgical gloves for protection as arrogant and prideful. The wise surgeon does not refuse to wear gloves on the basis he is a skilled surgeon or an experienced older surgeon. He wears them because he knows that danger is always present, no matter what his skill level or age.

The practice of keeping ourselves and our children uncontaminated from evil influences keeps us, and them, from being destroyed, but it does not in itself make us useful or holy. It makes it possible for God to use us and bless us in greater ways, but it does not provide us with any reason to boast or feel superior. Nothing but the blood of Jesus can wash away our sin. God's power alone makes us holy, and God's grace alone makes it possible for us to understand and obey God's will. We practice principles of separation from evil influences, to glorify God and to protect ourselves and our children from that which God tells us will corrupt godly behavior, bring sorrow into our lives, and prevent spiritual growth.

Separation from worldliness doesn't involve dropping out of society and sequestering ones self in the wilderness. The monks tried that and found they brought their sinful hearts with them to the secluded monastery. What it does involve is a willingness to keep one's life clean by eliminating worldly thinking and any sinful ways or influences that corrupt ones relationship with Christ. Not only does it involve keeping ourselves *from* something, but it involves as well, attaching ourselves *to* something, namely all that encourages obedience to the Word of God and ways of God. We are to fill our lives with good and lovely things and purge our lives of things that do not pass the Philippians 4:8 test. "Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things."

### **What about rules and standards?**

Every human being has a code of conduct he lives by, whether he is a gang member on the streets of Los Angeles who believes vengeance is his right, or an upstanding citizen who believes it is responsible to separate his recyclable trash, or a Christian

who believes the Bible and chooses not to make an angry man his companion in order to protect himself from becoming like him. (Proverbs 22:24) All of us act consistent with what we desire and what we believe. So if we believe God's ways are good and profitable, we naturally seek them out and align our behavior accordingly, implementing that which is good and removing from our lives that which is evil and detrimental to our good. In essence, we adopt "rules" of godly conduct we believe are pleasing to our God and keep us from being destroyed by our enemy, the devil.

Abiding by standards or rules that have a biblical basis is not something one does to appear godly—it is something one does because he *is* godly and delights in God's ways. The godly person drinks all the alcohol he wants, hangs out with all the wicked people he wants, attends all the x rated movies he wants and indulges in all the illicit sex he wants. The difference is—a godly person doesn't *want* to do these things. They are things Satan loves—not things Christ loves. The godly person wouldn't be godly if he loved sin, for everyone who loves God hates evil. "Ye that love the LORD, hate evil..." (Psalm 97:10)

Rules of conduct are not something implemented only by extremists. Parents of every spiritual persuasion establish rules of some sort for their children. Sometimes they are arbitrary, self centered rules that have no resemblance to godly principles whatsoever (Don't get pregnant, use protection; don't drink anywhere but at home.) Sometimes they include rules that simply make home management easier and more pleasant for a family (Put your wet towel over the towel rack, not on the floor; Don't talk on the phone longer than 15 minutes when someone is waiting to use it.) Sometimes rules are implemented to help train children to become responsible adults (Brush your teeth before going to bed; don't borrow things without asking.) In the case of Christian parents, rules are often implemented that help children become disciplined and Christlike (Ask your brother's forgiveness if you sin against him; be kind even when others are not kind.)

Rules are often something used to train and govern one's behavior until right behavior becomes habitual—in Christian as well as non-Christian homes. But rules and standards must never become a substitute for living in obedience to Christ out of love and confidence in His Word. Rules, or standards, act as guardrails for us as well as our children, providing much needed security and guidance that keeps us safely "on track." We implement good and purposeful rules that keep ourselves and our children growing in the right direction, and we remove impediments that divert us and make it easy to stumble and fall.

The mature believer who understands the principle of Christ's Lordship (Christ's right to govern one's life), learns to understand, love, and implement biblical principles and rules of conduct that are built on them. As he grows in wisdom, he grows in his ability to implement scripture into his daily life in practical ways. He realizes developing biblically based standards for his life is a means of protecting himself from the corrupting and destructive influence of evil as well as a means of eliciting God's special blessing and reward for obedience.

The mature believer understands he possesses God's free gift of grace—which is the God given freedom and ability to know and obey God's will, *not* the freedom to disregard God's will. He doesn't turn the grace of our God into lasciviousness, as those Jude described. (Jude 1:4) Rather, he understands it is the grace of God that brought salvation that also teaches us to deny “ungodliness and worldly lusts” so we can “live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world.” (Titus 2:11) He doesn't gag and bristle when the word “rule” or “standard” is used because he understands it is merely another word for describing fixed rules of conduct or biblical principles that govern his affairs. Yes, he knows there are hypocritical people who abuse these words and others who have good personal standards for all the wrong motives. This, however, does not keep him from diligently seeking to be obedient to the Lord's commands in order that he might fully experience the blessings of God's power on his life. He does not believe separation or governing rules makes him righteous or superior but knows that it is by God's grace and power alone that he is what he is.

On the other hand, the spiritually immature person disregards or takes lightly governing biblical principles for life and godliness. His life is not a shining example of God's power to change lives, but a disappointing example of failure to become what God intended for him to become. Paul addressed such believers whose behavior was “worldly” or still patterned after the lost even though they professed they loved and followed Christ. He tells them, “For ye are yet carnal: for whereas there is among you envying, and strife, and divisions, are ye not carnal, and walk as men?” (1 Corinthians 3:3) Notice the types of behavior that Paul points out as being marks of immaturity and worldliness—envy, anger and divisive contentions. Paul wanted these believers to abandon their old practices of behavior and submit themselves to being governed by God's ways and laws instead.

Spiritually immature people often refuse to submit themselves to any governing laws or go to the opposite extreme and create rules that have little or no Biblical basis. Some obey rules without developing any understanding of their biblical basis. Others derive a sense of righteousness from their self-discipline that is based on their own merit and has nothing whatsoever to do with a supernatural change of heart that is accomplished by the power of God. Peter addressed this problem when converted Jews wanted to impose their traditions upon the newly saved Gentiles. He told them, “Now therefore why tempt ye God, to put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?” (Acts 15:10) Oppressive prohibitions that had nothing to do with godly living or the transformation of heart and character were set aside by the apostles, while simple rules that mattered were clarified and urged upon the new believers. No governing rules or prohibitions *and* excessive rules and prohibitions are both errors that miss the purpose and value of incorporating into our lives beneficial Biblical principles that act as our moral compass.

One of the marks of a true understanding of biblical separation is humility and acknowledgement of one's dependence on the power of the Holy Spirit. One who adopts a host of "rules" for all the wrong motives is marked by self-reliance, anger toward others and self-righteous pride. Governing rules of conduct that do not have their basis in the written Word of God or one's relationship to Christ always produce arrogance and rebellion. On the other hand, rules of conduct that are born out of an intimate relationship and dependence on Christ and love for Him and His Word produce as a natural outcome humility and true godliness.

On what basis, then, do we establish guidelines, standards and rules in our lives and the lives of our children? We certainly can not rely on our own intuition or human reasoning to construct biblical principles for a successful and happy Christian life. The scriptures teach us that our hearts are "desperately wicked" and prone to self-deception, so they are not to be trusted or relied upon. To trust our own heart, God warns, is to be a fool. If our principles are truly going to be biblical and blessed of God, then we must rely upon biblical criteria to make them. We must test everything we do and do not do by the scriptures alone, and then we can expect God's leading and blessing.

### **Separation from unbelievers**

The Bible provides many clear commands as to what a believer is to be separate from, but perhaps none is more crucial to one's spiritual growth and protection than the commands to be separate from unbelievers.

God commands us not to be "unequally yoked together with unbelievers" in 2 Corinthians 6:14. To be yoked together with an unbeliever means to be involved in a binding relationship with him. Such a relationship causes untold hardship for both parties because each one is governed by completely different motives, differing values and beliefs. A believer and unbeliever may be traveling down life's road together at the moment, but they are heading in two opposite directions. Just as an oxen and a donkey bound together by a heavy wooden yoke will have great difficulty working together due to their differences in size and stride, so a believer yoked to an unbeliever in a binding relationship will struggle trying to work together. God gives many reasons for this.

First, He points out the differences between someone who knows and believes God and someone who does not. "...for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness?" The differences between a true believer and an unbeliever are monumental. These two people do not have the most important things in life in common. To get along, the believer will have to set aside his greatest love and most important responsibility in this life—to grow in grace. This will eventually turn into great heartache and great loss at the judgment seat of Christ. "...and what communion hath light with darkness?" One party is blinded to spiritual truths and lives by the world's code of conduct. The other sees right and wrong and will not have a clear conscience while living in sin.

In the following verses Paul goes on to say, “And what concord hath Christ with Belial? or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel? And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols?” Satan and Christ are enemies. Satan hates everything Christ loves, including believers. Can one who is living for Christ and one who is following the paths of Satan live together in harmony? Obviously not! “...for ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.” Because the Holy Spirit dwells in every believer He goes where believers go. A believer in a binding relationship with an unbeliever will have the Holy Spirit leading him in one direction while the unbeliever leads him in the opposite direction. “Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, And will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty.” Choosing close friends who love and serve God and avoiding close or binding relationships with those who are unbelieving is a prerequisite to enjoying a close and intimate father/child relationship with the Lord.

Finally, Paul ends the discussion by saying, “Having therefore these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.” The promise of such a warm and close relationship with our God and Savior ought to spark in us a desire to separate ourselves from anyone and anything that displeases Him.

### **Separation from unrepentant believers**

God’s ways are not our ways, we read in Isaiah 55:8. “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the LORD.” All too often a dear brother or sister in Christ will forsake the Lord and deceive him or herself into believing it won’t matter if he pleases himself and lives in rebellion to the Word of God. He wrongly believes his ways will bring him happiness and fulfillment while obeying God will result in sorrow. Sadly, by the time he realizes the high cost of his foolishness and self-will, it may be too late to prevent years from being needlessly consumed in empty living or prevent irreversible damage and heartache. Jesus warned, “He that loveth his life shall lose it; and he that hateth his life in this world shall keep it unto life eternal. If any man serve me, let him follow me; and where I am, there shall also my servant be: if any man serve me, him will my Father honour.” (John 12:25-26)

A hardened heart is a deadly thing, for it robs a believer of great blessings and keeps him in a state of spiritual blindness. It puts him in great spiritual peril, yet he is like an ox going to slaughter—unaware of what lies ahead. The believer who insists on his own way and foolishly deceives himself into thinking God overlooks rebellion is like Israel wandering in the desert, going nowhere, gaining no spiritual victories or inheritance—just existing and getting by. God tells us their error was rooted in unbelief and an unwillingness to know His ways. “Forty years long was I grieved with this generation, and said, It is a people that do err in their heart, and they have not known my ways:” (Psalm 95:10)

Our way to deal with an unrepentant brother or sister in Christ is often to keep a close friendship with him, even when he has been made it clear that he will not give up his sin and will not repent. We tend to think we can “win” him by staying close to him. God’s way is certainly not our way. While we must certainly love and care for our own no matter what they do or how they err, we are not to remain in close fellowship with them. Paul wrote to believers who wanted to know how they should handle a brother living in open defiance and sin. He said, “I wrote unto you in an epistle not to company with fornicators: Yet not altogether with the fornicators of this world [those who are lost], or with the covetous, or extortioners, or with idolaters; for then must ye needs go out of the world. But now I have written unto you not to keep company, if any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such an one no not to eat.” (1 Cor. 5:9-11)

Paul is *not* saying Christians should not speak to, pray for, or be kind to unbelievers or unrepentant Christians, for we couldn’t live in this world and do so or be a witness to them. What he *is* saying is that we should cease being in fellowship with them. They are not to be our buddies or people we seek to be with. Our loyalty is to be to Christ, not people, and Christ tells us not to make friendships with those who are disloyal to the Word of God.

### **We are a peculiar people**

There always has and always will be two incompatible kinds of people living in this present world—those who are lost and those who are saved, those who believe and those who do not believe God’s Word, those who love the things of God and those who hate the things of God, those who value earthly things and those who value heavenly things. These two groups of people exist, not because one group is better or more worthy than the other but because one group believes the Gospel message and receives it and one group does not believe and rejects it. Those who believe repent of their sinful ways and put their trust in Jesus Christ. In so doing, God not only forgives them but gives them the power to be His own children, grants them a home in Heaven for all of eternity and seals the transaction with the gift of the indwelling Holy Spirit who teaches and enables them to experience a transformation of character. This change will doubtless affect their thoughts, attitudes, words, and actions. It will change what makes them laugh, what makes them cry and what makes them sing. No part of a believer’s life will remain untouched by God’s transforming power as he grows in grace and is transformed by God’s glorious truths.

Why should we separate from worldliness?

- Because God commands it.
- Because it is necessary in order to enjoy a close relationship with Christ.
- Because it is necessary in order to have God’s power and blessing on one’s work and life.
- Because the rewards of doing so are great.
- Because the consequences of friendship with the world are severe.
- Because worldliness will ultimately destroy us.
- Because the contamination of the world will contaminate those we love.

## **What Are We to Be Separated From?**

### **A Christian is to avoid those who hate God**

2 Chronicles 19:2 - And Jehu the son of Hanani the seer went out to meet him, and said to king Jehoshaphat, Shouldest thou help the ungodly, and love them that hate the Lord? therefore is wrath upon thee from before the Lord.

### **A Christian is to avoid those who are angry**

Proverbs 22:24 - Make no friendship with an angry man; and with a furious man thou shalt not go: Lest thou learn his ways, and get a snare to thy soul.

### **A Christian is to avoid those who are foolish**

Proverbs 13:19 - He that walketh with wise men shall be wise: but a companion of fools shall be destroyed.

Proverbs 14:7 - Go from the presence of a foolish man, when thou perceivest not in him the lips of knowledge.

### **A Christian is to avoid those who cause division and strife**

Psalms 26:4 - I have not sat with vain persons, neither will I go in with dissemblers.

Romans 16:17-18 - Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them. For they that are such serve not our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly; and by good words and fair speeches deceive the hearts of the simple.

**A Christian is to avoid those who are froward** (froward means perverse, someone who is directed away from what is right or good, who persists in an error, is self-willed or stubborn.)

Psalm 101:3-4 - I will set no wicked thing before mine eyes: I hate the work of them that turn aside; it shall not cleave to me. A froward heart shall depart from me: I will not know a wicked person.

Proverbs 22:5 - Thorns and snares are in the way of the froward: he that doth keep his soul shall be far from them.

### **A Christian is to avoid those who are evil**

Psalm 26:5 - I have hated the congregation of evil doers; and will not sit with the wicked.

Proverbs 12:26 - The righteous is more excellent than his neighbour: but the way of the wicked seduceth them.

Proverbs 24:1 - Be not thou envious against evil men, neither desire to be with them.

Ephesians 5:6-7 - Let no man deceive you with vain words: for because of these things cometh the wrath of God upon the children of disobedience. Be not ye therefore partakers with them.

Ephesians 5:11 - And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them.

**A Christian is to avoid those who follow the philosophies of the world** which are in opposition to God's commandments

Deuteronomy 12:30 - Take heed to thyself that thou be not snared by following them, after that they be destroyed from before thee; and that thou inquire not after their gods, saying, How did these nations serve their gods? even so will I do likewise.

Jeremiah 10:2 - Thus saith the Lord, Learn not the way of the heathen, and be not dismayed at the signs of heaven; for the heathen are dismayed at them.

Romans 12:2 - And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.

Galatians 5:7-9 - Ye did run well; who did hinder you that ye should not obey the truth? This persuasion cometh not of him that calleth you. A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump.

Colosians 2:8 - Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ.

James 1:27 - Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world.

James 4:4 - Ye adulterers and adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God.

**A Christian is to avoid those who teach any doctrine that distorts the Gospel message**

Exodus 23:32 - Thou shalt make no covenant with them, nor with their gods. They shall not dwell in thy land, lest they make thee sin against me: for if thou serve their gods, it will surely be a snare unto thee.

2 John 1:10 - If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither bid him God speed:

**A Christian is to avoid other Christians who love the world, are scorers, fornicators (involved in illicit sexual activity), covetous, idolatrous, angry, drinks alcohol, or is an extortioner.**

Psalms 1:1-2 - Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful. But his delight is in the law of the Lord; and in his law doth he meditate day and night.

1 Corinthians 5:9 - I wrote unto you in an epistle not to company with fornicators: Yet not altogether with the fornicators of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or with idolaters; for then must ye needs go out of the world. But now I have written unto you not to keep company, if any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such an one no not to eat.

1 Corinthians 15:33 - Be not deceived: evil communications corrupt good manners.

2 Peter 2:18 - For when they speak great swelling words of vanity, they allure through the lusts of the flesh, through much wantonness, those that were clean escaped from them who live in error.

