

Worldliness 1 John 2:15-17

When my parents were growing up, most evangelical Christians did not participate in certain behaviors they understood to be “worldly.” Things like playing cards, movie theater attendance, dancing, smoking, drinking, gambling, wearing makeup, playing sports on Sunday, and the like were all considered to be worldly. Some professing Christians did such things, but many evangelicals back in the 1940s and 50s would have thought of such behaviors as unsuitable for serious Christians. Those things were worldly.

Things have changed a lot since my parents’ generation. Today there are few evangelicals who even discuss or consider whether their behavior is worldly. It does not seem like many Christians are very concerned about whether they are worldly. Some Christians boast about how they feel free to indulge in what in previous years would have been considered worldly.

The passage of 1 John that we’ll be studying today gives us a clear definition for worldliness. As we study it, we might find that our assumptions about what worldliness is may not be very accurate. We must allow Scripture to define its own terms. John here tells us pretty plainly what worldliness is and why we must avoid worldliness.

Worldliness is one of those sins of the spirit that is quite common among believers. But worldliness is a dangerous if not deadly sin. If we love the world and the things of the world, we are in serious trouble. So let’s see how John describes the sin of worldliness.

- I. What worldliness is—let’s define the concept.
 - A. .15 Worldliness is loving the world and the things in it.
 1. What does John mean by “world”? He could be talking about:
 - a) the created universe or the earth (3:17; 4:17; John 1:10);
 - b) the world of human persons; all the people of the world (John 3:16; 1 John 2:2); and

- c) an evil organized earthly system controlled by the power of Satan aligned against God and his kingdom (4:3–5; 5:19; John 16:11). Not the world as God made it, but the things of the world that have been corrupted under Satanic control.¹ That’s John’s meaning—don’t love this evil, anti-God, corrupt, fallen world.
2. The word *love* here means attachment, intimate fellowship, and loyal devotion.²

We should have no affection for the evil system of this world, the realm of darkness that is hostile to the light of God.
 3. “things of this world” – all the things associated with or aligned with this evil, ungodly world system. When the evil people of this world love something, it’s a good indication that we should not love it. I.e., in the moral realm.
 4. This statement is a command (μὴ ἀγαπᾶτε) prohibiting action in progress. Some of John’s readers indeed loved the world.³ So he’s telling them to stop.

App: This command still pertains to us today—“Stop loving the world.” We should have no attachment, intimate fellowship with or devotion to the evil earthly system. We have to be in the world, but we must not love this evil worldly system.

- B. Worldliness is lust and pride. We could summarize a worldly attitude by describing it as the craving and boasting so common among those who do not love God.
 1. .16 “all that is in the world” amounts to “the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life.” Worldliness is marked by lust, desire, or craving.
 2. Where else in the Bible do we find someone tempted by these three worldly desires?

¹Daniel L. Akin, vol. 38, 1, 2, 3 *John*, electronic ed., Logos Library System; The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001, c2001), 108.

²Simon J. Kistemaker and William Hendriksen, vol. 14, *New Testament Commentary : Exposition of James and the Epistles of John*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1953-2001), 270.

³Simon J. Kistemaker and William Hendriksen, , 271.

Genesis 3:6 *And when the woman saw that the tree [was] good for food, and that it [was] pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make [one] wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat.*

Also, in the temptation of Christ (Matt 4), Satan appealed to Jesus along these same lines—natural desires and pride.

3. Note how John describes “all that is in the world”

a) Lust of the flesh

(1) The word “lust” means “strong desire or craving.” As used here, it’s an evil desire, a craving to indulge one’s sinful appetites.

(2) The “flesh” here refers to fallen human nature, the evil desires that reside in the human heart. Unsaved people are “in the flesh,” not “in the Spirit.” The lusts of the flesh would be the natural human appetites not under the control of the Spirit; human appetites given over to “vile affections” (Rom 1:26)

Matthew 5:28 *... whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.*

Rom 1:24 *Wherefore God also gave them up to uncleanness through the lusts of their own hearts, to dishonour their own bodies between themselves:*

(3) A worldly person’s main concern is pleasing himself by fulfilling all his bodily appetites. He indulges his evil desires.

(4) Paul defines the “works of the flesh”

Galatians 5:19–21 *Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, 20 idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, 21 envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told you in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.*

- (5) So lust of the flesh would include any way in which people fulfill human desires sinfully. Life for a worldly person is all about the satisfaction of their fleshly desires and appetites.

Does society today encourage us to indulge our lusts or to control them? The culture today tells us, “If it feels good, do it.” Don’t restrict or suppress your inner appetites; live out your authentic self by indulging in your basest desires/feelings.

That’s the lust of the flesh, and it’s a major part of worldliness; that’s what worldly people do—they indulge their sinful appetites and feelings.

b) Lust of the eyes

- (1) This phrase focuses attention on desires that are related to one’s surroundings, what one is able to see. One who fulfills the lust of the eyes focuses on external appearances.
- (2) Genesis 3:6 mentioned that the forbidden tree was “pleasing to the eyes” Likewise, Satan showed Jesus all the kingdoms of the earth.
- (3) So “lust of the eyes” is roughly synonymous with greed, materialism, and/or a craving for what one can see. It’s being captivated by the external appearances without concern for inner qualities.

How do people today fulfill the lust of the eyes? Materialism/covetousness—the attempt to accumulate things, valuing material goods; basing choices on appearances alone.

c) Pride (*αλαζονεία*) of life

- (1) One translation has it “boasting of what [one] has and does.”
- (2) It refers to “the arrogance produced by material possessions” or perhaps “the pride of one’s lifestyle.”

- (3) John seems to be referring to the temptation to boast about one's wealth, show off one's possessions, or brag of one's social status or lifestyle.
- (4) Perhaps we could put self-righteousness under this category—bragging about how good you are in comparison to others.

Lu 18:11 *The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican.*

- (5) John is warning his audience against a boastful overconfidence in themselves or their possessions.

How do people today demonstrate the pride of life? They strive to be admired; they live a showy and ostentatious lifestyle; they indulge in flashy displays of wealth. They glory in their achievements, social standing, or status symbols. They pursue prestige and power by promoting themselves.

- C. Putting it all together, what is a worldly person? A worldly person is selfish, greedy, and arrogant. A worldly person seeks to fulfill his every human desire. His affections are all centered on this world; he has no love for God or spiritual things (“the love of the Father is not in him,” 2:15). He lives for today and enjoys showing off what he has. In other words, he is a typical unsaved person.

1Th 4:5 *not in the passion of lust, even as [those] who know not God;*

Quote: Worldliness is “To have a heart and mind shaped by the world’s beliefs and values so that we engage in its sinful pleasures and pursue its earthly treasures.”⁴

Quote: Worldliness is *being attached to, engrossed in, or preoccupied with the things of this temporal life.*⁵

⁴ From MACP 2009 “Worldliness and Ecclesiastical Separation,” audio recording.

⁵ Jerry Bridges, *Respectable Sins: Confronting the Sins We Tolerate* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2007), 166.

In the ancient days of my parents' youth, Christians recognized that activities like playing cards, attending the movie theater, dancing, smoking, drinking, gambling, wearing makeup, playing sports on Sunday were marks of the unsaved world. These were the marks of people who indulged in their own sinful desires because they were engrossed in the things the world had to offer. They were true of those who did not know God.

Back then, evangelical Christians typically did not do such things; unbelievers did those things. Perhaps they had a good reason for calling such things "worldly." They were the marks of the unsaved world, and many Xns wanted to stay away from those kinds of activities.

No doubt, things have changed a lot since then, and I don't believe they've changed for the better. The unsaved world is still the same—indulging their sinful appetites, focusing on external appearances, boasting in their achievements, and pursuing material treasures. If we have those same attitudes, we are worldly—we are much like the unsaved world.

II. How to defeat worldliness

We obviously do not want to adopt the world's beliefs and values. We should not want to be engrossed in the temporary things of this world. Our hearts should not be allured by sinful pleasures and earthly treasures. We should not be living or thinking like unsaved people.

How do we avoid worldliness?

A. .15a Don't love the world. "Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world."

Cf. Rom 12:2 "be not conformed to this world."

1. .15b Love of the world is incompatible with love for God. i.e., you can't love both God and the world at the same time.
2. If you love the world, the love of the Father is not in you. It's either one or the other; can't have both at the same time.
3. The world is hostile to the things of God.

Mt 6:24 No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon.

James 4:4 ... 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.

It is impossible to love both God and the world. The love of one cancels out one's desire for the other.

Quote: Because [God's] kingdom is at war with the kingdom of this world, the two will never coexist peacefully. To pledge allegiance to one side is to declare opposition to the other.⁶

So this is a life-or-death matter. We must choose: the world or God.

App: Problem: We may find ourselves torn between attraction to some of the things of this world and loyalty to God. We often want it both ways: we want to enjoy the things of the world and still claim allegiance to God.

That, to me, is almost a perfect definition of a worldly Christian. A worldly Christian is one who claims to know Christ but is also seeking the enjoyment and excitement that the world provides. He wants to be the friend of God *and* the friend of the world. He wants to serve two masters. He has one foot in the world and one foot in the church.

John tells us not to do that. We need to make a clean break with the love of the things of this world. If something is clearly hostile to the things of God, contrary to God's word, then we should by no means love it or find it appealing or attractive. We should love what God loves and hate what God hates. If you love the world, you love what God hates. You don't really love God in that case.

Worldliness is dangerous in that it takes the place of love for God. Instead of finding our greatest joy and satisfaction in the things of God, we find them in the world. John tells us to quit doing that.

⁶Daniel L. Akin, vol. 38, 1, 2, 3 *John*, electronic ed., Logos Library System; The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001, c2001), 109.

- B. .16end Don't love things not "of the Father." (εκ του πατρος)
1. The world is that system set up in opposition to the things of God.
Quote: These lusts and prideful self-centeredness are worldly attitudes, not godly ones. They originate not in the Father but in the world, that is, from the devil—the god of this world.⁷
 2. If we are "of the Father," then lustful craving and selfish boasting should not be part of our lives.
 3. In fact, we ought to be striving to eliminate from our lives all things not "of the Father." If elements of our lives are clearly against God's moral will, we must eliminate them.
- C. .17 Don't love things that are passing away. (ο κοσμος παραγεται)
1. Many things that the world promotes are temporary, superficial, and of little lasting value. They are here today/gone tomorrow.
E.g., most "pop" culture—media, music, art, fashion—most of it is soon forgotten. It's designed to be temporary and quickly replaced by the next new thing.
Illus.: The average human attention span is 8.25 seconds. That's about a 25% decrease since 2000. Humans have shorter attention spans than goldfish (9 seconds).⁸
 2. Fleshly lusts, material possessions, and the things people pride themselves in are all temporary. The world offers nothing that can satisfy the deepest desires of the heart.
 3. Ultimately, such trivial things will be destroyed. In fact, NT authors use the word "passing away" to describe end time events when the heavens and the earth will pass away (cf. 2 Pet 3:10). All those material possessions and all those worldly achievements will come to nothing.
- D. .17end Love the things that "abide forever."

⁷Simon J. Kistemaker and William Hendriksen, vol. 14, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of James and the Epistles of John*, 272.

⁸ Judah Shiller, "Average Human Attention Span By Age: 31 Statistics." <https://www.thetreetop.com/>

1. We should see the contrast here between worldly things and eternal things. While the unsaved world focuses on the passing pleasures of life, the Christian focuses on eternal values and God-honoring behavior. These two are mutually exclusive; you can't indulge in the world and still fulfill **God's will**.

*Mt 7:21 Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but **he that doeth the will of my Father** which is in heaven.*

2. We can enjoy some of these transient pleasures of this world, yet not be devoted to them or love them.

E.g., Packers, media, Internet, recreation, etc. We recognize these things as mere distractions, fun and games, frivolities, and we can enjoy them for what they are. But unlike the world, we don't set our affections on these things. Cf. Col 3:1-3.

3. Our affections should be set on the things of God, eternal things, things that are good, beautiful, and true.

Phil 4:8 *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.*

4. Those who follow the ways of the world will pass away with the world. Destruction and perdition await those who love the world and what it provides.

5. But those who do the will of God "abide forever." Eternal life awaits those who love God and who refuse to adopt the value system of this evil world.

Quote: The things of the world seem to be of great value, but they are worthless when compared to the eternal blessings that come from doing the will of God.⁹

God's will is that we trust in Christ for salvation from sin and that we live in a way the honors him. Doing God's will is being saved and obeying his commandments.

⁹Daniel L. Akin, vol. 38, 1, 2, 3 *John*, electronic ed., Logos Library System; The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001, c2001), 111.

Worldliness is indulging your evil human appetites, coveting material possessions, and boasting about what you have and what you've done. Worldliness is living like a typical unsaved person by valuing passing pleasures and earthly treasures while ignoring eternal values.

The things of this world can be, and often are, very appealing. The old, sinful nature is drawn toward the things of this world. Pride and lust are very common human failures, even among Christians. Paul tells us that flesh lusts against the Spirit and the Spirit against the flesh. We experience a continual battle to avoid loving the world and all its temptations.

We must remember that the things of the world are contrary to the things of God. The world is temporary, passing off the scene, here today—gone tomorrow. So it's foolish to value the things of the world. It's dangerous for us to think that we can love the world and still love God. John says that we can't.

All the world offers is at best temporary and superficial, while obedience to God provides permanent benefits. Loving God and choosing His will is the path to true and lasting fulfillment.

If we find ourselves attracted by the passing pleasures that this world has to offer, we must confess that as sin. We must seek to develop and strengthen our love for God and for the things that God approves. Our affections must be set on heavenly things not worldly things. We must love what God loves and hate what God hates.

1Jo 2:17 *And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever.*