

What is the “World,” and How Has it Influenced the Church? Pt. 4
Tradition and Personal Preferences – Mt. 15:1-20

Introduction: This morning we are going to be continuing with our series on the world. This summer we have been in the process of answering the question, “What is the world, and how has it influenced the church?” What we have discovered about “the world” so far is that 1) by definition, it is the Satanically organized world system that is opposed to God and His kingdom. 2) It is identified by the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life. 3) It is temporal. 4) It is insidious, and 5) what we saw the last time we were talking about this matter is that worldliness is a matter of the heart. Or we could put it this way, worldliness isn’t cured externally. Having this rigid list of do’s and don’ts doesn’t solve worldliness. The title of the message was, “The weakness of external systems / solutions.”

The way I want to start this morning is to look at another one of our case studies. We had a pretty good discussion about the girl on the worship team that had a pink and green mohawk, but let’s think now about the woman who had a wardrobe in her basement that rivaled any designer boutique in Macy’s. What do you think about that? Based on what we have studied so far, is that a worldly mindset?

This morning we are going to look at a couple more passages that have some bearing on worldliness. The title I have given to this message is, “Tradition and Personal Preferences.” Both of these matters come into play when we get into discussions of worldliness. Whether you want to admit it or not, many times, we label something as “worldly” because of the personal discomfort it causes us, not because the Bible actually labels the activity as a manifestation of the Satanically controlled world system that is opposed to God. For instance, I have a friend that will have nothing to do with

NASCAR – he won't even watch a race on TV. The drinking, and the party atmosphere, and the gambling, and the excessive wealth, and the cultic obsession of the fans with their favorite drivers are all manifestations of "the world."

Let's swing to the opposite end of the cultural pendulum and talk about opera. I had a woman in my first church who was a classically trained singer. She had an amazing voice, and had even performed with the Philadelphia Orchestra. We were having a banquet on time and I asked her if she'd sing a particular piece from an opera I enjoy, and she wouldn't sing it. When I asked her about it, she said that she was really into opera in the 70's, and she was also drunk for most of the 70's. So for her, the entire opera scene – with its glamour, and its cultural eliteness, and its social snobbery and its visible manifestations of wealth – was saturated with worldliness.

The third illustration has to do with a set of drums. I was at a pastor's conference in a large church in NJ, and the speaker was speaking to about 300 of us from all over New England. He was talking about how to insure that we had the power and blessing of God in our ministry. At one point in the day, he walked over to the drum set, pointed to it and said, "Men, if you have a set of drums in your church like this one, you will never have the blessing and power of God on your ministry." He then went on to talk about syncopation, and how percussive cadences are used in demonic rituals to call up demonic powers. And then he talked about the predominance of drums in rock music and his ultimate point was that drums were incompatible with holiness. And he had a Bible verse for it, 2 Cor. 6:14 – 17. *"What fellowship has light with darkness? Or what harmony has Christ with Belial? What agreement has the temple of God with idols? Therefore, come out from among them and be separate, and touch not the unclean thing, and I will be your God and you will be my people."* So from his perspective, if you wanted God's blessing on your ministry, don't have drums in your service!

I like these three illustrations because neither opera nor NASCAR nor drums are mentioned in the Bible. Yet I know three serious followers of Christ who will have nothing to do with any of these activities. This is why we need to talk about tradition and personal preferences.

The first passage we are going to look at is the one I told you to look at about a month ago and give some thought to, and it is in Matt. 15. Turn there with me and let's read some of these 20 verses and see what they tell us.

Then some Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem, saying, ² "Why do Your disciples transgress the **tradition** [*an oral teaching that has been passed down*] of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread [*has nothing to do with hygiene*]." ³ And He answered and said to them, "And why do you yourselves transgress the commandment of God [*note the distinction Jesus is making*] for the sake of your tradition?"

⁹ "But in vain do they worship Me, *teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.*" [*This is a critical concept when we start to talk about tradition and personal preferences.*] ¹⁰ And after He called the multitude to Him, He said to them, "Hear, and understand. ¹¹ "Not what enters into the mouth defiles the man, but what proceeds out of the mouth, this defiles the man." [*This is an excellent reiteration of the last message in this series about the weakness of external systems in combatting worldliness.*']

¹⁵ And Peter answered and said to Him, "Explain the parable to us." ¹⁶ And He said, "Are you still lacking in understanding also? ¹⁷ "Do you not understand that everything that goes into the mouth passes into the stomach, and is eliminated? ¹⁸ "But the things that proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and those defile the man. ¹⁹ "For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders. ²⁰ "These are the things which defile the man; but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile the man."

The first thing I want you to note about this passage is in verses 1 – 3, and it is that tradition is often turned into spirituality, so when the tradition is violated it appears to be

worldly. That is the process. The “precepts of men” (v.9) become the “doctrine” of God (v. 11), with the result that true worship is squelched (v. 9). And then verses 15-20 are a reiteration of a previous message, worldliness is a heart issue.

So please understand that tradition is not a good barometer for worldliness. To make it a little more pointed, let me put it this way. Just because the church you grew up in did things a specific way does not mean that a new way, or a different way, is worldly. And we have excellent illustrations from church history of how this works.

How many of you knew that at one point, pianos were not welcomed in the church because they were worldly instruments? Organs were godly. Organs were used in the music of Bach and Beethoven. Pianos were found in honky-tonk bars and saloons and played shameless rag-time music. There was a time in church history when battles were fought over whether or not to sing gospel songs instead of psalms. D. L. Moody was preaching in Scotland one time, and before he preached his song leader Ira Sankey (who wrote over 1,200 songs) led the service with several rousing songs like “Faith is the Victory,” and “A Shelter in the Time of Storm.” You do understand, don’t you, that those words are not found in the Bible. The concept is there, but the actual words of the song are human in their origin. And as such, what right did they have in the church?

Well, after this service, one elderly parishioner shook Moody’s hand and really took him to task for singing gospel songs instead of Psalms, and he said, “If John Knox could hear what was sung today, he would roll over in his grave.” And speaking of Moody, there was a time when he took a lot of heat for utilizing the newfangled, cutting edge technology called radio! He would broadcast his evangelistic crusades, and there was a segment of Christendom that chastised him for that kind of worldliness. And they even had a verse to support their position. Who is the “prince of the power of the air?” None other than our adversary, Satan. Yet here was Moody, using a worldly medium to proclaim the gospel message.

The bottom line is that there are lots of things we do in the church today that were considered to be worldly 100 years ago. There are lots of things we personally do today as Christians that were thought to be worldly 100 years ago (cf. use of stockings and sleeveless dresses). So there would be a battle in the church over the issue, the church would split with the traditionalists going one way and the “compromisers” going the other. And eventually, guess what would happen to the traditionalists? One of two things = either they would embrace the change, or they would die off and their building would be bought by an antique dealer. That is the danger of using tradition as a barometer for worldliness instead of 1 John 2:15-17 – the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life.

The next passage I want us to look at is Mark 9. In this passage we are going to see another deficient standard for determining worldliness. Starting in verse 38, we read,

³⁸ John said to Him, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in Your name, and we tried to hinder him *because he was not following us.*" ³⁹ But Jesus said, "Do not hinder him, for there is no one who shall perform a miracle in My name, and be able soon afterward to speak evil of Me. ⁴⁰ "For he who is not against us is for us.

Let me give you the Revised Murray Translation of this passage. “John said to Jesus, ‘Jesus, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we told him to stop because he wasn’t doing it like we do it!’” Now keep that in mind and turn with me to Phil. 1:15-18. This is another passage that shows this same dynamic in action.

Some, to be sure, are preaching Christ even from envy and strife, but some also from good will; ¹⁶ the latter *do it* out of love, knowing that I am appointed for the defense of the gospel; ¹⁷ the former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, rather than from pure motives, thinking to cause me distress in my imprisonment. ¹⁸ What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed; and in this I rejoice, yes, and I will rejoice.

In both of these scenarios, we have people involved in some type of spiritual ministry- whether casting out demons or preaching the gospel. But did you note the tension between the groups? There were different methodologies at work, and in the case of the disciples, they thought the other guys were wrong. In Paul's case, he didn't care about the other guys as long as the net result was positive.

So you're probably wondering what this has to do with worldliness, and here's the connection. Consensus is not a good barometer for worldliness. Just because we, and a lot of other people in our tradition do things a certain way, doesn't mean that those who don't do it our way are worldly. Whether we want to admit it or not, we oftentimes elevate our personal preferences to the status of orthodoxy, and look down our noses at those who don't do things the way we do. That's what I mean by consensus. So as we continue to answer the question, "Has the world influenced the church?" we need to be careful to distinguish between tradition, personal preferences, and worldliness.

Conclusion: So what does all this mean for us today? Simply this. When it comes down to dealing with worldliness, the best standard to follow is the written Word of God. The way you were raised is not the standard. What you are comfortable with is not the standard. How Billy Graham feels about the issue is not the standard. How the church has always done it is not the standard. God's Word is the standard. Paul refers to this in 1 Cor. 4:6 where he warns us "not to go beyond what is written." Jesus makes the same point in John 12:48 when He says, "He who rejects Me, and does not receive My sayings, has one who judges him; the word I spoke is what will judge him at the last day." It is the written Word of God that is the ultimate judge, and the best standard.