

What is the “World,” and How Has it Influenced the Church?

Pt. 5 – Associations and Worldliness – 1 Th. 5:22

Introduction: This morning we are going to start by having some feedback from you about this topic we have been on this summer – the world and how it has influenced the church. At the beginning of the series, I gave you three case studies and asked for your feedback. We have addressed one of them, the case of the girl on the worship team with the green and pink mohawk, and this morning I want to hear your thoughts about the woman with the wardrobe in her basement that looked like a Macy’s designer boutique. What do you think about that? Is that “worldly” or legitimate?

What I want to talk to you about this morning is associations. Last week we talked about deficient standards for determining worldliness, the standards of *tradition* and *personal preference*. There are many things “out there” that we are uncomfortable with, or they aren’t a part of our particular tradition, so we often think they are worldly, but there really isn’t any scriptural justification for the label. So we need to be cautious in that way. But let’s think this morning about this matter of associations.

The verse we are looking at is 1 Th. 5:22 which says, in the NAS / ESV, “Abstain from every *form* of evil.” The KJV puts it a little more interestingly, “Abstain from all *appearance* of evil.” In my opinion, the NIV has it the best when it says, “Reject every *kind* of evil.” In a moment we’ll talk about the best way to interpret this verse, but for now I want us to think back to when this verse came up several weeks ago when we were discussing the pink and green mohawk. Someone made the point that the mohawk was worldly because it was *associated* with the punk movement. And then very close on the heels of that statement, someone quoted this verse, “*abstain from every appearance of evil.*” So let’s analyze this line of thinking for a moment and see if it is legitimate.

The punk movement is observably anti-authority, anti-social, anti-establishment, radically individualistic and counter-cultural. It is generally anti-capitalism and often is associated with neo-nazism. There is a reason you don't see the punk look in the business or professional world. So it is definitely a marginal sub-culture with a defiant ethos.

Now whether you agree with my assessment of this movement isn't really important, but it is defensible. Everything I just said about is verifiable and I can get you the references if you are interested. But the larger point is that this pastor, knowing what that look was associated with, did not want someone with it up front, in a position of leadership in the church. Now, I don't know if he quoted this verse (*"abstain from every appearance of evil"*) to the girl in the interest of giving her a Bible reason for his decision, but in my opinion, he was justified in his decision even though the Bible doesn't address hairstyles and colors.

There are lots of things in our culture that the Bible doesn't explicitly mention, yet they are clearly manifestations of the world system that is controlled by Satan and opposed to God. As I looked back on the years I have been involved in ministry, I recalled two situations where I invoked the same line of reasoning. The first was with a group of teenagers at a Christian Camp. I couldn't go with them, so I had another lady in the youth ministry accompany them, and when they got there, the most popular place of the camp was the hot tub. At any time of the day or night, you could go there and there would be half a dozen or so teen guys and girls in the hot tub. She assessed the situation and decided that that wasn't an appropriate activity for Christian teenagers. In her estimation, and I agreed with her, it was just a little too worldly. There was an immoral, party atmosphere that was associated with a bunch of nearly naked guys and girls in a hot tub. So we said "no," we don't want our teens involved in that, even though hot tubs are not mentioned in the Bible. There was an association there we were distancing ourselves from.

The other time I had this come up was when there was a particular look popular with teen girls that involved lots of white face powder, with really heavy mascara and deep blues and purples for eye shadow. Sometimes it involved black or brilliant red lipstick. I thought it was a strange look when I first started seeing it, but it wasn't until I read an article in the NY Times that described it that I was willing to label it as a "worldly" look. The reporter was interviewing the make-up artist that had developed it, and the originator said that what he was trying to recreate with the look was the face of a woman who had been sexually assaulted. The pale face that is a sign of being in shock, the black and purple bruises, the bloody lips – it was a look that was completely inconsistent with what a follower of Christ would want to portray. Now, our daughters weren't old enough to be wearing makeup, so it wasn't an issue in our household, but it was an issue in the Christian School that I sat on the board of. So I spoke about it with the girls in the youth group as well as with the board of the Christian School. So here again, we have a situation not directly mentioned in the Bible, yet I was willing to label it as being worldly. It had an association I wanted to be distanced from.

Well, once we start doing this as followers of Christ, we need a verse or a principle to justify it, don't we? So let's talk about how we are to interpret this verse since this is THE verse most often used in situations like this. The way this verse is often interpreted is that if there is an activity that can be perceived in any way as being sinful, the Christian shouldn't participate in that activity – "avoid the appearance (not the act, but the appearance) of evil." You should literally never do anything that can be construed as being sinful. For instance, you should never drink root beer from a brown bottle because someone watching you might think you were drinking a bottle of beer. See, the emphasis is on the "appearance" of evil – not whether or not the activity is actually wrong.

I was at a Youth Pastor's conference one time, and the speaker was talking about protecting your testimony in light of your involvement with the girls in the youth group. That is a tremendously important concept. So he made the point, "Don't ever, ever, ever, under any circumstances, ever, ever, be alone with one of the girls in your youth group." And then he gave this illustration. The entire youth group is gathered at the church ready to leave for camp, but Suzy is late. When you finally decide the bus has to leave, you stay behind at the church to wait for her. She gets there about 30 minutes later, so you throw her luggage in the back seat along with yours, and the two of you take off for camp, 6 hours away. Five hours into the trip, you have an accident. So here you are, in another state, with an underage girl in your car, and hers and your luggage in the back seat. And here is his statement, almost word for word. "What if the State Police think you are having an affair with Suzy and the two of you have run off with each other? What if the local media report the story as 'Youth Pastor and teen parishioner in accident, 250 miles from home'? and then the story casually mentions that you both have your luggage with you." And then he pulled out this verse, "*abstain from every appearance of evil.*" Now, I agree with the overall point he was making, but I disagree strongly with the verse he pulled out to defend his point.

But this is typically how this verse is used in the context of worldliness. If what you are doing can in any way be construed to be sinful or worldly, you shouldn't do it. But is that what Paul is saying in this verse? Absolutely not – and here is another shameless plug for the Basic Bible Interpretation class. Let's look at this passage and see if we can discover its meaning. The thought starts three verses earlier in verse 19.

¹⁹ Do not quench the Spirit; ²⁰ do not despise prophetic utterances. ²¹ But examine everything *carefully*; hold fast to that which is good; ²² abstain from every form of evil.

What is Paul talking about in these verses? Christian conduct? No. Manifestations of the world? No. He is talking about how the early church ascertained

truth. 1 Cor. 14 is almost a parallel passage to these verses, and it describes how the early church services were conducted. This was before the days of pew Bibles. In fact, this was before the day of completed Bibles. And in verse 26 Paul says,

When you assemble, each one has a psalm, has a teaching, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification.²⁷ If anyone speaks in a tongue, *it should be* by two or at the most three, and *each* in turn, and let one interpret;²⁸ but if there is no interpreter, let him keep silent in the church; and let him speak to himself and to God.²⁹ And let two or three prophets speak (cf. 1 Th. 5:20 – “*do not despise prophetic utterances*”), and let the others pass judgment (1 Th. 5:21 says, “*examine everything carefully*”).³⁰ But if a revelation is made to another who is seated, let the first keep silent.³¹ For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all may be exhorted;³² and the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets;³³ for God is not *a God* of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints.³⁴ Let the women keep silent in the churches; for they are not permitted to speak, but let them subject themselves, just as the Law also says.³⁵ And if they desire to learn anything, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is improper for a woman to speak in church.

So 1 Th. 5 is all about the process to determine the validity of a prophetic utterance and has nothing to do with determining worldliness. So we can't use it to justify these kinds of decisions that deal with associations. So how do we justify them? To answer this, we need to look at two verses. The first is 1 Pt. 2:12, and the second is Mt. 6:19. The 1 Pt. passage is succinct and to the point, the Mt. passage is deeper and a little more philosophical. But in 1 Pt. 2:12 we read,

Keep your behavior excellent (*and remember the difference between the excellent and the defensible*) among the Gentiles, so that in the thing in which they slander you as evildoers, they may on account of your good deeds, as they observe *them*, glorify God in the day of visitation.

Now let's look at Mt. 6:19.

¹⁹ "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. ²⁰ "But lay up for yourselves treasures in

heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal; ²¹ for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

Note the contrast between treasures in heaven and treasures in the world (“earth” – v. 19). Note also how temporal worldly treasures are: they wear out and they can be stolen. On the other hand, heavenly treasures last forever and are safe. But what really got my attention in this passage was verse 21 which tells us that our treasures are a manifestation of our heart. We could put it this way. What is **important** to us is a manifestation of our heart. What we invest **time** and **money** in is a manifestation of our heart. “Where your heart is, that is where your treasure will be.”

How many of you have heard me say that worldliness is a condition of the heart? How many of you have heard me say that as such, worldliness isn’t cured by external systems? The way you deal with worldliness is to deal with the heart. So what does that extensive wardrobe say about that woman’s heart? What does the desire to be associated with the punk movement say about that girl’s heart? When a teen drops out of church to work every weekend, what does that say about his heart? What does he treasure in that situation? When a guy can’t go to church all summer because his summer softball league plays every Sunday at 1:00, what does that say about his heart? What is he treasuring in that situation? In my estimation, each one of these illustrations is a manifestation of worldliness.

Conclusion: So to sum up all I’ve said this morning, there are lots of activities we legitimately don’t engage in because of the close association the activity has with the world system, but our biblical defense is not “abstain from the appearance of evil,” it is “your behavior is a manifestation of your heart.” As followers of Christ, our heart is to be set on things above, not on things here on earth.

So when your teenage son comes up to you and says, “Hey Dad, I want to get my ear lobes plugged and a snake tattooed across my throat,” what are you going to say to him?

That’s worldly! Christians don’t do that kind of stuff.

The Bible says to abstain from the appearance of evil, and plugged ears are evil.

Ear plugs and tattoos are associated with rebellion and witchcraft.

What was the thought process that brought you to this conclusion?

What is your objective in getting your ears plugged? What is it that you are after?

What message will your plugged ears convey to your peers?

Do you think this decision will have an overall positive or negative impact on your testimony as a Christian?

Do you see the difference in the two types of responses? One set of responses is pure allegation, the other is all questions, which is a much more productive way of influencing thought. And furthermore, the questions are designed to expose the heart, which is where worldliness is manifested as well as cured.

Two people can be involved in the same activity, and for one of them, it is an expression of worldliness, and for the other one, it won't!

Address the arts. Are they worldly?

Address the concept of the similarities between worldliness and the idols of the heart.

Address the idea that many times in this matter of worldliness, many times the decision about what was worldly was based on good motives. The people took seriously the command not to love the world. The struggle was with how to implement that commitment. The problem was the implementation of the principle, not the principle itself.

and then in the next week we'll consider three indicators of worldliness. In other words, how does one know if he is worldly, if he has bought into the world system, if he is thinking according to the ways of the world? At some point we'll think about strategies, or solutions to worldliness. This is where we'll get into the internal vs the external. We may even get into the legitimacy of standards, or rules of conduct

Father of three daughters, wife had died, oldest daughter was in my youth group and I was trying to get him to send her to summer camp for two weeks. I was over \$200.00 back then, which was quite expensive. He said he couldn't afford it, which I understood. One month later, my wife and I were bringing her home after a youth meeting, and when we dropped her off, it looked like no one was at home. She had to go around back to get in, and when I offered to go with her, she told me not to because they had just gotten their dog home from a specialized obedience school to train it as a guard dog, and since it wouldn't recognize me, it wouldn't be safe for me to go back there. I later found out it had cost the man over \$500.00 for this dog class.