

## “In the World, But Not of the World” Part 1

How do we reflect a Christ-like love for people in the world, a God-glorifying enjoyment of God's good gifts, and yet remain spiritually unpolluted by the world? The Church's response has historically reflected two extremes. One response is to retreat from the world. Segregate from the world and maintain an ostensible incorruptibility by a strategy of separation. Another opposite response is to morally conform to the very culture we are called to transform.

The Scriptures call for a third option, neither retreat from nor capitulate to the world. John, in his letter of 1 John, gives insight into this tension of living in the world, but not conforming to it. He writes with the conviction of an elderly pastor when he says, *“Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him”* (1 John 2:15). He then spiritually analyzes with clarity the heart of worldliness. *“For everything in the world—the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes, and the boasting of what he has and does—comes not from the Father, but from the world”* (1 John 2:16).

John describes worldliness in three categories, *“the cravings of sinful life,” “the lust of the eyes,”* and *“the boasting of what he has and does.”* John employs the same Greek word for the first two categories of "cravings" and "lust." The word literally means an “over-desire.” The desires of the flesh are not inherently evil. God created us to enjoy His creative gifts. *“For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving”* (1 Timothy 4:4). Worldliness takes hold of our souls when our significance and security are defined by the things of the world; when we “over-desire” the good gifts God intended for us to use to enjoy Him and His creation and instead use them to glorify ourselves.

Consider each of these three categories. First, John refers to the *“cravings”* or *“over-desires”* of the flesh. Food, drink, sex, and pleasure are God's good gifts. The Bible declares, *“So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God”* (1 Cor. 10:31). So, the question must be asked if “we eat to live” or “live to eat?” Do our recreations and pleasure pursuits equip us to faithfully and fruitfully live for God or are they nihilistic entertainment whose sole purpose is self-gratification?

Secondly, John describes worldliness as the *“cravings”* or *“over-desires”* of the eyes. What we see is a reflection of our souls. For example, what do we see and embrace as beautiful? Beauty is good. It is a gift from God and an attribute of God. Christians should see and appreciate beauty. Yet in a culture that defines beauty in outward, superficial terms, we must cultivate a spiritual vision of beauty. Remember what God said through the prophet Samuel when he was choosing the King to replace the tall, handsome King Saul. *“The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart”* (1 Sam. 16:7). These words spoken 3,000 years ago ring with contemporary clarity. We live in a celebrity culture where “image is everything” which obsessively craves beautiful bodies and celebrates shallow souls. We live in an illusionary “Photoshop” world where even the beautiful need a “little work.”

God, in His Word, is intentional in the order of the three categories of worldliness. They are interrelated in an ascending order. The seed of “over-desires” breeds the *“boasting of what we have and do.”* Subtly, slowly but surely, we can begin to build our sense of significance, security, and success in the things of the world, rather than in Christ. We may go through the spiritual motions of the Christian life, but our heart is in the world.

How do we live in the world, but not be conformed to it? First, enjoy the things of this world. They are gifts from God. Secondly, we must pray that God would give us an increasing love for the people in this world and use us to be His “salt” and “light” in this world and the individual lives of our neighbors. We do well to remember that *“the world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever”* (1 John 2:17).

Great Peace in the Lord,

Eddie