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Written by Pastor Avery – 2nd April 2020

Worldliness - Its cause and cure

I was once asked by Church Officers of a Reformed Evangelical Church, “Do you believe that there is such a thing as worldly Christians?” I’m sure my brothers meant ‘is it possible?’ and the answer sadly is that it is not only possible but prevalent.

So what is worldliness? It is being carnally minded and ‘conformed to this world’, (Rom 8 & 12 v2), that is thinking, acting, living like the world. James in ch. 4 v4 calls it ‘friendship with the world’ which is enmity with God, coveting unconverted men’s esteem, desiring to be popular and fit in with them (Ps. 1 v1). In 1 John 2 v15-17 it tells us it is the love of the world or the things in the world. Now that does not mean appreciating the world that God has created, but ‘lusting’ after it as John explains in verse 16, ‘for all that is in the world- the lust of the flesh’, (appetite for pleasures, indulging the sensual), ‘lust of the eyes’ (coveting and delighting in the vain things of the world), ‘and the pride of life’ (craving for glory, fame and respect of the world - men pleasers).

Now this is not a new phenomenon. C. H. Spurgeon warns against it in his day, when he said “I believe that one reason why the Church of God at this present time has so little influence over the world is because the world has so much influence over the church”. Things have not got much better since Spurgeon’s day but continued to decline. Spurgeon warned that the church was on the ‘downgrade’. I think many today have reached rock bottom and many others are not far behind. Today we don’t even think there is a problem, in fact we are proud to be culture confirming, we even strive to be like the world to win the world. Mark Dever said, “But imagine this Church: it is huge and is still numerically growing. People like it; the music is good; whole extended families can be found within its membership; the people are welcoming; there are many things exciting programs and the people are quickly enlisted into its support. And yet, the church, in trying to look like the world in order to win the world, has done a better job than it may have intended.” (Nine Marks of a Healthy Church by M. Dever).

Mark recognises that there is a problem but cannot see that what he commends (trying to look like the world) is in fact the root of the problem. We have become the enemies of God (1 John 2 v16) at enmity with God over how we are living, worshipping and serving because we are men pleasers acting as if we love the world and the things of the world.

Spurgeon said, “Put your finger on any prosperous page in the Church’s history and I will find a little marginal note reading thus, “In this age men could readily see where the church began and the world ended. Never were there good times when Church and the world were joined in marriage with one another. The more the Church is distinct from the world in her acts and in her maxims, the more true is her testimony for Christ and the more potent is her witness against sin.””

We have to stop being men pleasers and start living to be glorifying to God. Jesus said “No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other.” (Matt 6 v24). We have to decide whom we will love and serve, our Lord and Saviour or men; and what we will live for, treasure in this world or Heaven.

What can we do to get back to what we should be? Here are three steps to recovery:-

First, we need to recognise we have a problem.

Look at the churches in Revelation chapters 2 & 3. Note, for the most part, these churches didn't recognise themselves as the Lord saw them, because they didn't think they had a problem; Ephesus didn't think they had lost their first love, Pergamos didn't see their compromise, Thyatira had learnt to accept their gross immorality, Sardis thought they had a name and Laodicea thought that they were rich. Why? because they had become used to the poor state they were living in, it had become the norm, they even found ways to justify it, even to applaud it and thinking that it was the right way to live. If only they had asked themselves, 'how does my God see me, what does He think of what we are doing?' God who is Holy, pure and will not tolerate worldliness and sin, who expects His people to live for Him and His glory, a jealous God who will not share our love, loyalty, devotion with any, jealous over His name, honour, glory, sovereignty and rule.

Do we care what our God wants of us or are we driven by what we want (it's my life, my time, I'll dress how I want, worship in the way that I find pleasing, etc)? Do we evangelise in God's prescribed way, the way He will be pleased to bless and use to save souls, or have we become 'men pleasers' (seeker sensitive) only concerned about what we think men want? Do we love the world and the things of the world, even though we are told they make us at enmity with God or do we love God with 'all' our heart, soul, mind and strength?

Secondly, we need to return to our God.

In Malachi 3 v10 we are told of God's complaint against His people. They have neglected Him and His house and look after their own interests instead. They didn't care that they had impoverished the work of God, been unfaithful to Him and ignored His Word. God didn't need their tithes and besides, think what they could do with it. What was God's advice to them? Bring back their tithes and give over to Him what was rightfully His, then He would pour out a blessing upon them.

Similarly in Nehemiah ch. 1 we find that God had cast off His people because they had become worldly and carnal, living like the pagans, worshipping like them, so that they would fit in with them, therefore God had given them over into the hands of the pagans. Now look at them, after many years in captivity, they have lost all their identity and influence, they are totally marginalised and ignored and integrated into the life of a pagan world. What could be done? Nehemiah knew what to do. First he turned to His God in deep repentance for himself and the people. Then he placed before God the promise that He had made to the people before through Moses, 'If they would return to Me and keep My commandments and do them, though some of you were cast out to the farthest part of the heavens, yet I

will gather them from there and bring them to the place which I have chosen as a dwelling for My Name.'

The key is that they must return, stop what they are doing come back to God, keep His Word (live by it) and give to God what is rightfully His.

The question for us is are we prepared to do this? I fear for many Christians and churches that it's almost too late, they are so given over to the world that they no longer understand what it is to be a Christian. But we must not lose hope. Nehemiah could have, were not some of the people 'cast out to the farthest part of the heavens'? No, rather we must return to our God, to love Him before all others, to keep His commandments and do them and give back to Him what is rightfully His - glory, honour, respect, reverence, obedience, devotion and dedication.

Thirdly, we need to be what we should be.

What should we be? Look at Romans ch. 12. You cannot read passages like this without being struck by the difference between what we should be and what we are. For many Christians today the comparison is not just stark, it is almost non-existent. We must remember that we all answer to Him for the way that we live, our love for Him and our faithfulness to His Word. So what should we be? We must stop living down to the level of others and start living up to the level God can reasonably expect of us, His blood bought children. Romans 12 continues to tell us what our reasonable service is. First, we should daily be a living sacrifice to God, offering up our whole life and being to Him, holding nothing back and taking nothing back. But we cannot offer up just anything to Him, it must be 'holy', free from the pollutants of sin and this sinful world. It must be 'acceptable' to Him, not what we think to be acceptable, but what He finds acceptable and tells us is acceptable in His Word. Secondly, we must not be conformed to this world. We must not be what the world wants us to be, conforming to their likes, desires, beliefs or behaviour. But we must be transformed by the renewing of our minds after our Saviour's, think with His thoughts, thinking biblically, godly, holy, spiritually and proving what is the good and acceptable and perfect will of God'. Thirdly, we must think soberly, humbly, submitting to God's will, not doing what we think is best. How can we know what God wants or what is best unless God has told us? We should use the new life that God has redeemed for us with His precious blood for Him and His church (v4-6), loving God before all (v9), loving one another and our neighbours, seeking to be what God wants us to be for them (v10-20) and overcoming evil with good, not using the world's methods but all that God finds good.

So, are we living sacrifices for our God or are we still conformed to this world and what do we want to be when the Lord comes again, living sacrifices for Him, or friends of the world?