

Worldliness

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Genesis 1:26-31

Tonight I want to talk to you about worldliness. I want to address the problem of worldliness in the church. With that sort of beginning, what sort of sermon do you imagine you'll get? Probably a sermon full of warnings.

Most of the times when we Christians take the word 'worldly' upon our lips, we mean something negative. When we call someone worldly we mean to say they are too attached to the things of this world. Preachers use the word that way. Here is a quote from the great 19th century preacher Charles Spurgeon: "Every worldly Christian hinders the progress of the gospel. It is not over breaking of commandments that I am now speaking of, brethren, but I include [in] 'worldliness' also; a care for carnal things, and a carelessness about spiritual things." Our hymns also warn against the dangers of worldliness: "Hence all worldly treasure! Jesus is my pleasure!" says hymn number 425 in our hymnal. And hymn number 286 chimes in, "Fading are the world's best pleasures, all its boast and pomp and show; solid joys and lasting treasure, none but Zion's children know." And then of course, in the history of the Christian Reformed Church you have the phenomenon of Worldly Amusements. And for the first 60 years of the last century those worldly amusements were card playing, movies and dancing. You were in big trouble if you did those things.

This stream of worldly suspicion has more than a few Bible passages to support it. In Romans 12 Paul says, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." In I Corinthians 2 he says, "We have received, not the Spirit that is from the world, but the Spirit that is from God!" The world can corrupt you, says Paul, it has a different Spirit. The first epistle of John comes right out and says, "Do not love the world or the things in the world. The love of the Father is not in those who love the world." We can laugh at the days when we were worried about being corrupted by watching *The Sound of Music*, but the Bible is serious about worldliness.

And, if we're honest, let's admit that we can feel the danger. As we live in the world, as we watch TV, as we scroll through our phones and navigate the internet, we can sense a power, a corrupting force. Porn that plays on our lust. Consumerism that plays on our greed. Obsession with appearance that plays on our vanity. There are things that prey on our fear. There are things that prey on our prejudice. All that stuff is what the Bible is talking about when it identifies worldliness and all that stuff is real and all that stuff is dangerous.

And yet there is another way to look at the world. Two other ways actually. In his book *Calvinism in the Las Vegas Airport* Rich Mouw talks about giving a talk to a group of Christian leaders about the relationship between Christians and the world. These were pastors and leaders who for whom 'the world' was exclusively a negative concept.

Mouw told the pastors that the Bible actually has three different ways of talking about the world. First the Bible uses the word in a negative sense. This is the 'do not conform to this world' sense of the word that we've been talking about. For these pastors this was the sense they were most used to hearing and the most used to using. The Bible also uses the word in what might be called a neutral sense. Sometimes the Bible talks about the world as a geographic expanse; the world is the inhabited regions of the globe. You see that way of using the world in a passage like Matthew 24 where Jesus talks about the gospel being preached to the whole world; the world as a neutral, geographic word.

The final sense of the word is a deeply positive one. At crucial moments in Scripture, the Bible talks about the world in the most positive sense you can imagine. Like Genesis 1 for instance. At the very beginning of creation God lovingly puts the world together; piece by piece, hill by hill, star by star, plant by plant, bird by bird. Then he finishes it off with human beings. Over the course of his craftsmanship he is so enthusiastic about his work that he says 7 times, "Man! this is good!!!" Or Psalm 8- Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! When I consider your heavens and the works of your fingers...Wow!" Psalm 24, the earth is the Lord's and everything in it...everything! Or consider Jesus' familiar words in John 3:16: "For God so loved the world – the world! – that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have

eternal life.” God loves the world; God loves this world, this busted one, the one with internet porn and pot shops and mindless reality shows. God loves this world enough to send his Son.

Mouw told the leaders this third sense of ‘World’ and they were surprised by it. Many of them, educated, important people in the Christian community, came up to him afterward and said they’d never learned about this positive sense of the word.

I want to say that I think this third sense of the world is the most ultimate sense of the word. Whatever else we say about creation, this word about Creation being good and God loving it ought to be our baseline. I say that because it seems to me that at all the really crucial points in the history of God’s people God tells us that the world is good. It happens here in creation. It happens again in the calling of Abraham when it becomes crystal clear that God’s intent is not to destroy the world, but to save it through this man’s family. It happens again when Jesus is born: God cares enough about the world to walk on it in Jesus. It happens again in the death and resurrection of Jesus: Christ rises from the dead in his body; it is a physical resurrection and it shows that God cares for the physical world and He means to make it all new. Think of it this way: At creation God stands over the world and says, “It’s good!” At Jesus’ birth he adds an “Amen” to that statement. At Easter he adds his “Alleluia.” Yes, there are many passages that warn against the temptations and corruption of the broken world, and those passages are serious, they are real, they deserve full attention. But they are not the heart of the story. The heart of the story is God’s love for a good, but fallen, world.

Understanding this makes all the difference in the world. Think about it: If all you see is the world and its corruptions, if your basic understanding of the world is as a depraved place, how will you interact with it? You will keep your distance, you will avoid. You will hunker down and protect yourself. You will carve out a secure bunker for you and your fellow Christians and you will pray for Jesus to come and rescue you.

But now look at Genesis 1, this passage which so strongly celebrates the world’s goodness. What is our role in this world? Where are we placed? It’s not a standoffish position. We are put in the middle of things. We are given dominion, not so that we can do with creation whatever we want, but so that we can care for it; care for the plants and the animals and the valleys and the hills. We are called to fill the world and subdue it, which means we are called not just to care for the world but to cultivate it, to culture it. We are called to take God’s good creation and enrich it with art and music; architecture and engineering; agriculture and literature. These tasks are central to our being. Engaging with the world is part of what it means to be made in God’s image. If we are not engaged, we are not living the way God created us to live; we are not being the people God made us to be.

And we know this right? We can sense it. We sometimes idealize a day where we can sit around and do absolutely nothing. “O man on Saturday I’m just going to do nothing.” I’m going to be a complete vegetable. But are we really happy when all we do is sit? Not so much. There is something in us that wants to engage: whether its scheduling a dinner with friends, or working a little in the garden, or reading a book, or puttering around in our workshop; the days we feel happiest are the ones where we do the things we love with the people we love. Right? That’s a sign of the truth of Genesis 1: creation is good and we are meant to engage it.

So how do we put all this together in our thinking and in our living? We have these world warning passages and these world affirming passages, they’re all in the Bible, how can we make them fit? I’ve been thinking a lot about this and I think it’s something like this. We should approach this broken world the same way we approach a friend who has suddenly started behaving badly. Say we have a friend who has started drinking too much. The worst thing we can do is treat that other person with contempt. Someone we know starts going through troubles, the worst thing we could do is to cut ourselves off from that person and get together with our friends to complain in snarky tones about that person and her failings. “Can you believe her!? She’s lost it! She’s a mess! I’m done with her. Let’s not have anything to do with her!” That would uncaring and smug.

A good friend would try to stay in contact with her friend. She’d show concern. She would try to be a positive influence on her friend’s behavior. There would be times where being a good influence would include confronting her friend: “I’m really worried about you! You have a problem you need to change!” There are times when being a good influence might even include walking away from your friend’s invitations: “I’m not coming to your party because I’m concerned about how those parties go.” But all the confrontation and even the avoidance would be driven by your concern for your friend. When you see your broken friend, despite all her

faults and hard edges, you look at her and you feel love. God looks at this world and he sees the mess and the trouble, and yet he still loves it. He's still engaging it. He's still determined to make it all new. He's hoping we can do and feel the same.

When I started out in ministry, my first office had a natural view: a little green berm with a few bushes on it and in the middle a spreading tree. That tree flowered beautifully every spring, birds would come and sing in its branches, in the winter snow would picturesquely pile up; it was a view where you could easily see the beauty of God's world.

My second office looked right out on Burton Street right by a stoplight. I was maybe 30 feet away from the masses of humanity who stopped at that light. All stripes of humanity lined up outside my window: Lots of bleary eyed Calvin students, especially at around 7:50 in the morning; a huge line in the turn lane all of them trying to get to their 8 o'clock class at the last possible minute. There were also a few Calvin professors; sensible, tweedy creatures in their Subarus and their mini vans. There were rich folk: I saw cars that are almost as expensive as houses. There were also a fair share of beaters with garbage bags for windows. I saw timid, slightly frightened Raybrook drivers with their seats pushed forward and their hands in the ten-two position. I saw hyper aggressive drivers whipping by at high rates of speed. I saw Latino, Asian, Black, White. I saw people sipping coffee, brushing their hair, jamming donuts into their mouths, putting on makeup, and, of course, fiddling on their phones. I saw people laughing, talking, I sometimes saw them singing. I've seen them fighting, I've seen people kissing, I've seen people looking angry, looking bored, looking as if they're about to cry. In the view out my window was a mess. But I also think the view was beautiful, the view was good. I feel sure that God feels that way too.

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