

The High Calling

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What in the World Has Gotten in the Church?

By Stan Key

When was the last time you heard a sermon on the dangers of worldliness? When did you last read a book, magazine article, or blog post on the subject? It's strange that a topic mentioned so frequently in the New Testament gets almost *no* attention in the contemporary church. Let me humbly suggest that this omission helps to explain the current state of the American evangelical church. Maybe the real problem is not *what* we are preaching—but what we are *not* preaching!

The sad truth is that the lives of those inside the church today are almost identical to those outside the church. We attend the same schools, aspire for the same jobs, practice the same diversions, enjoy the same entertainment, and get involved in the same political causes. Instead of being a counter-cultural force challenging and even condemning worldly passions, we seem to have adopted the same values and goals. Rather than working to shape public opinion, the church today too often simply reflects it. Like germs, these tendencies are most

dangerous when they are unseen, misunderstood, or dismissed. This issue of *The High Calling* is devoted to the sin we have forgotten: worldliness.



How different things were when I was young! We often heard passionate sermons that warned against the dangers of worldliness. What I *heard* from those messages (whether or not it was what the preachers *said*) was that worldliness could be recognized by certain *behaviors*: skirt lengths, hair styles, jewelry, movies, music, playing cards, and dancing were sure signs that this deadly fungus was among us. I concluded that

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The Ruler of this World

By Watchman Nee (1903–1972)



Watchman Nee ministered in China during the most tumultuous decades of the Communist revolution. As a teacher, author, and church planter, he had a powerful influence throughout China and beyond. Nee was persecuted and imprisoned for his faith and spent the last twenty years of his life in prison.

This article, abridged and slightly edited, is taken from the first chapter of his book *Love Not the World* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1968: 9–20).

Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself. (John 12:31–32)

Our Lord Jesus utters these words at a key point in his ministry. He has entered Jerusalem thronged by enthusiastic crowds. But could his admirers understand what he meant by these words? To most of them, this must have signified a complete reversal of their hopes. They discerned that Jesus was forecasting his death on a cross. But Jesus, with cords of love, was drawing their hearts away from a world under judgment to himself, who though lifted up to die is *by that very act* being lifted up to reign!

“The earth” is the scene of this crisis and its tremendous outcome. “This world” is its point of collision. This is the point I want us to examine, and we will begin by looking at the ideas associated with the important Greek word *kosmos* (world).

In classical Greek, the word *kosmos* originally implied two things: first, a harmonious order or arrangement, and secondly, embellishment or adornment. In the New Testament, the uses of this word fall into three main groups: 1) the material universe, the earth (Mt 13:35; Jn 1:10; Mk 16:15; etc.); 2) the inhabitants of the world (Jn 1:10; 12:19; Heb 11:38; etc.); and 3) the things of this earth, such as material goods, riches, and pleasures (1 Jn 2:15–17; Mt 16:26; Jas 1:27; etc.). Each of these definitions contributes something to the whole picture, but it already is apparent that behind them all is something more. The classical idea of *orderly arrangement* or *organization* helps us to grasp what this is. Behind all that is tangible, we meet something intangible: We meet a planned system.

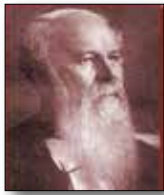
Concerning this system there are two things to be emphasized. First, since the day when Adam opened the door for evil to enter God's creation, *the world order is hostile to God*. This world does not know God (1 Cor 1:21), hates Jesus (Jn 15:18), and cannot receive the Spirit of truth (Jn 14:17). To be friends with this world is to be an enemy of God (Jas 4:4). Our text states clearly that this world is under the judgment of God (Jn 12:31).

Secondly, *there is a mind behind the system*. John writes repeatedly of “the prince of this world” (Jn 12:31; 14:30; 16:11). In his epistle, he describes him as “he that is in the world”

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A Lot to Think About

By J. C. Ryle (1816–1900)



For twenty years Bishop of Liverpool (Church of England), J. C. Ryle was passionate about promoting biblical Christianity. Affectionately known as “the working man’s bishop,” Ryle wrote so that the evangelical faith could be understood and practiced by all. Though not in the Wesleyan tradition, his works continue to be read with great profit. This article, taken from his book *Holiness* (Moscow: Charles Nolan, 2001), is an abridged and slightly edited version of chapter 9, “Lot: A Beacon” (178–194).

The character of Lot is summarized in Scripture in one, poignant statement: “He lingered” (Gn 19:16). The words are solemn and full of food for thought. They ought to sound like a trumpet in the ears of all who make any profession of religion. I trust they will make every reader of this paper think. Who knows but they are the very words your soul requires?

First, let’s consider *who Lot was*. Lot lived in a wicked place (Sodom), but he was not a wicked man. He was a true believer, a real child of God, a righteous man. Peter says that Lot was a “righteous” man who was “greatly distressed by the sensual conduct” of the people where he lived (2 Pt 2:7–8). He was wounded, grieved, pained, and hurt at the sight of sin. Unlike those around him, he did not, over time, become cool and lukewarm about sin.

Second, let’s consider *Lot’s behavior*. Lot knew the awful condition of the city in which he lived. He knew the fearful judgment coming down on all within its walls. The angels had told him plainly, “The Lord has sent us to destroy it” (Gn 19:13). And yet, he lingered. He was slow when he should have been quick, loitering when he should have been hurrying, cold when he should have been hot. It seems almost incredible!

And yet, strange as it may appear at first sight, I fear there are many of the Lord’s people who are very like Lot. There are many real children of God who appear to know far more than they live up to and continue in this state for many years. They love the truth. They like sound preaching and assent to every article of gospel doctrine. But something isn’t right. They believe in heaven, yet seem faintly to long for it. They believe in hell, yet seem little to fear it. They love the Lord Jesus, but the work they do for him is small. They hate the devil, but they often appear to let him come into their lives. They know the time is short, but they live as if it were long. They know they have a race to run, yet they often look like people sitting still. They know the Judge is at the door, and yet they appear to be half asleep. These are people who are always trying to keep up with the world. They are ingenious in discovering reasons for not separating from worldly ways and worldly people. It can all be summed up in one single sentence. They are the brothers and sisters of Lot. *They linger.*

Third, let’s consider the *reasons* that caused Lot to linger. It began when he made a wrong choice in his youth. Uncle Abraham allowed him to choose the land where he would settle, and Lot chose the cities of the plain. His decision was based on sight and not on faith (see Gn 13:1–18). He asked no counsel of God to preserve him from a mistake. He thought of worldly profit and not of his soul. So Lot chose the Jordan valley and “pitched his tent toward Sodom” (Gn 13:12). A short time later, we learn that he was “dwelling in Sodom” (Gn 14:12). Mark well what I am saying. If you would be safe from “lingering,” beware of needless mingling with worldly people. If you want to avoid living a life that is barren and meaningless, then *beware of Lot’s choice!*

Fourth, let’s consider the *fruit* of Lot’s lingering. Many perhaps will say, “Well, after all, Lot was saved; he got to heaven. That’s all I want out of life. If I can just get to heaven, I’ll be content.” If this is what you are thinking, let me show you one or two things from Lot’s story which, perhaps, may cause you to change your mind.



John Martin - Sodom and Gomorrah

For one thing, *Lot did no good among the inhabitants of Sodom*. Though he had lived there for many years, he seems to have had no spiritual impact on the city at all. Not one righteous person could be found in all Sodom, outside the walls of Lot’s home. Not one of his neighbors believed in God. His life carried no weight; his words were not listened to; his testimony drew none to follow him. His salt had lost its savor (see Mt 5:13).

For another thing, *Lot helped none of his family or relatives toward heaven*. Lot seems to have been the only believer in his family! The Scriptures make clear that neither his wife nor his daughters feared God. He kept none of his closest relations from going to hell! But should we be surprised? Family members can see right through a lingering soul. They see the inconsistencies and draw the natural conclusion, “If our father really believed what he claims to believe, he would not act that way.” Lingering parents seldom have godly children. A child always will observe what you do much more than what you say.

Let me share my heart with you. We live in a day when a lingering, Lot-like religion is all around us. Indeed, it’s almost fashionable in many places. Few in the church are single-minded in their devotion to Christ. Few make sacrifices. Few carry the cross. So, in a day like this, I urge you to be “all the more diligent to make your calling and election sure” (2 Pt 1:10). Would you be ready for Christ at his second appearing? Would you enjoy the assurance of your own salvation? Would you be useful in drawing men and women from sin to Christ? Would you help your children and relatives towards heaven? *Then do not linger!* ✠

Vanity Fair

By Derek Thomas



In his classic description of the Christian life, *Pilgrim's Progress*, John Bunyan gives us an unforgettable illustration of worldliness and the danger it poses for all followers of Jesus Christ. In this article taken from *Tabletalk Magazine* (January 1, 2006; slightly edited), Derek Thomas summarizes and applies Bunyan's teaching. Dr. Thomas is senior minister of the First

Presbyterian Church in Columbia, SC, professor of Systematic and Pastoral Theology at Reformed Theological Seminary, and author of numerous books.

For John Bunyan, a Puritan to his fingertips, the Christian life was an experience of conflict and tension with this world. Imprisoned for upwards of twelve years, he experienced firsthand the world's hostility. Cheerful and sanguine by temperament, his portrayal of what believers can expect from this world is both solemn and dark: The path that leads to the Celestial City winds through unavoidable places of considerable, even deadly, danger—places like the town called Vanity with its “lusty Fair.” Here, all the resources of protection and resolution will be needed to prevent contamination and possible destruction.

Christian, in Bunyan's allegory, is both a pilgrim on a journey to heaven and a warrior in conflict with temptations from within (indwelling sin) and without (the world in its opposition to all things godly). It is a principle that Christian is taught early in the journey: that every believer can expect to be both fascinated by and drawn towards the world. He can also expect to be repulsed and attacked when all offers are spurned.

Vanity Fair, described in various dictionaries as the “vain and frivolous way of life especially in large cities,” and the “place or scene of ostentation or empty, idle amusement and frivolity,” represents for Bunyan the world in all its gaudiness: alluring and seductive, offering merchandise of all kinds—some innocent enough in themselves but designed to misdirect the affections away from our love for God and our love for his kingdom. What is Bunyan teaching us here? Several things.

First and foremost, Vanity Fair represents Bunyan's attempt to warn every Christian of the reality of temptation and the need to resist it. Believers can resist temptation in the knowledge that their Savior has done so on their behalf: “The prince of Princes himself, when here, went through this Town to his own Country, and that upon a Fair-day too.” Vanity Fair thus signals the need to “keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted” (Gal 6:1), with the assurance that “we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin” (Heb 4:15).

Then again, Vanity Fair establishes the truth that Christians are citizens of the kingdom of heaven and must therefore sit loose to the attractions of this world, however innocent they may appear to be in themselves. Christian and Faithful (Christian's trusty companion) stood out “like sore thumbs” in Vanity Fair. Not only did they not purchase anything, they refused to be drawn aside and enticed by what it offered, having discovered “solid joys and lasting treasures” elsewhere in communion with Jesus Christ. As citizens of heaven, they adopted the viewpoint that they must not conform to this world (Phil 3:20).

On offer in Vanity Fair are both material things (gold, pearls, precious stones, etc.) as well as honors (titles, preferments—designed to turn one's head). Additionally, Bunyan mentions “the ware of Rome and her merchandise is greatly promoted in the fair”—an allusion to the beguiling nature of Roman Catholic teaching that had suggested (barely a hundred years in Bunyan's past) that indulgences could be purchased so as to make a sinner's journey through purgatory that much quicker.

To all of these, Bunyan's faithful companions say “No!”

Believers are the special targets of the world's hostility. Though “Beelzebub, Apollyon and their Legions” are involved in the allurements of Vanity Fair, they are not center stage here; that will be later in the journey. Here the focus is upon the first of the evil triumvirate of hostility: the world, the flesh, and the devil. Those who refuse to conform to the pattern of this world

can expect to be taunted and ridiculed (Christian and Faithful were bad-mouthed and heckled). As pilgrims who marched to the beat of a different drummer, Christian and Faithful looked (dressed) and spoke differently—something to which the townsfolk took great exception. Consequently, Christian and Faithful are taken, beaten, and incarcerated (something Bunyan, of course, knew only too well).

They are eventually charged with disturbing the peace of the city by their lack of conformity. Bunyan's choice of names here is deliciously instructive: Mr. Hate-Good as the Judge, and jurors who include such characters as Mr. Malice, Mr. Love-lust, Mr. Live-loose, Mr. High-mind, Mr. Cruelty, and Mr. Hate-light! The mockery of the trial that they received is reflective of another: that of their blessed Lord. We must follow in Jesus' footsteps, even to the point of martyrdom if necessary. Courage in the midst of trial is a virtue, and Bunyan's poetry is particularly telling:

*Now Faithful play the Man, speak for thy God.
Fear not the wicked's malice, nor their rod:*

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Exiles in Babylon

By Brian J. Walsh



Campus minister, theology professor, and pastor, Canadian Brian Walsh has written several books on how the gospel interfaces with postmodern culture. This article, abridged and slightly edited, is taken from his provocative book *Subversive Christianity* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2014, 2nd ed.: 17, 24, 29, 119–124).

It seems to me that our experience as Christians today is in many ways not unlike that of the Jews in the sixth-century BC. We live in Babylon. Babylonian definitions of reality, Babylonian patterns of life, Babylonian views of labor and Babylonian economic structures dominate our waking and our sleeping. And, like the exiled Jews, we find it very tempting to think that all of this is normal. This is the way life basically should be. Western materialistic affluence coupled with two-thirds-world poverty is normal. A proliferation of cheap and useless consumer goods is normal. Dedicating one's life to



“Move into the neighborhood . . . put down roots and engender a love and affection for this place—yes, for Babylon.”

U.S. Navy photo by Photographer's Mate 2nd Class Johansen Laurel [Public domain]

economic growth is normal. People living for the weekend is normal. Deficit financing is normal. But as Canadian poet Bruce Cockburn tells us, “the trouble with normal is it always gets worse.”

If our presence in this culture is to be *Christian* we must recognize with Christian insight the profound *abnormality* of it all. This means that we cannot allow our experience of exile to define reality for us. The Christian community is called to be a subversive movement in Western culture. If we do not experience our lives as subversive forces in this culture, then I fear that we will become comfortable in exile, comfortable with Babylonian definitions of reality and with Babylonian gods.

The piety of many Christians today is socially irrelevant, even if privately engaging. Martin Luther King Jr. was getting at the truth when he said that most Christians “are thermometers that register the temperature of majority opinion, not thermostats that transform and regulate the temperature of society.” By

and large Christians are, it seems, culture *followers* and not culture *formers*.

The reason for this catastrophic state of affairs is, I submit, the *enculturation* of the church. As a community of believers and as individuals we have been thoroughly sucked in to our secular culture, mostly against our best intentions. Our consciousness, our imagination, our vision has been captured by idolatrous perceptions and ways of life. And what is so intriguing about this phenomenon is that we were not taken after a long drawn-out fight. No, it happened in our sleep. You see, while we were fighting with each other about evolution, the infallibility of the Bible, spiritual gifts, and other hotly debated issues, we were falling into a deeper and deeper sleep in relation to the cultural captivity of our very consciousness. We simply bought into the materialistic, prestige-oriented, secular values of our age without ever noticing that that is what was going on. At present, the church is virtually in a coma, asleep to her own cultural entrapment.

We find ourselves, I think, somewhere at the interface of Psalm 137 and Jeremiah 29; the interface of sorrow and hope. What do you do in Babylon? Psalm 137 tells us we should sit down and weep. The psalmist sings the blues in Babylon with a pathos that is palpable.

*By the rivers of Babylon—
there we sat down and there
we wept
when we remembered Zion.
On the willows there,
we hung up our harps.
For there our tormentors
asked for mirth, saying,
“Sing us one of the songs
of Zion!” (Ps 137:1–3)*

How about a little Israelite folk tune? How about a little cultural diversity here? How about a little entertainment? But “How [can] we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?” asks the psalmist (Ps 137:4). He refuses to cover up his deep grief by singing worship choruses that are happy, sentimental, and emotionally manipulative. To deny his homesickness would amount to devastating forgetfulness. No, the only song that can be on his lips in captivity will be the hard edge, bent and broken dissonance of the blues.

The prophet Jeremiah, though no stranger to the blues, offers another path of response for what we should do in Babylon:

Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there and do not decrease. (Jeremiah 29:5–6)

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The Happy Poor

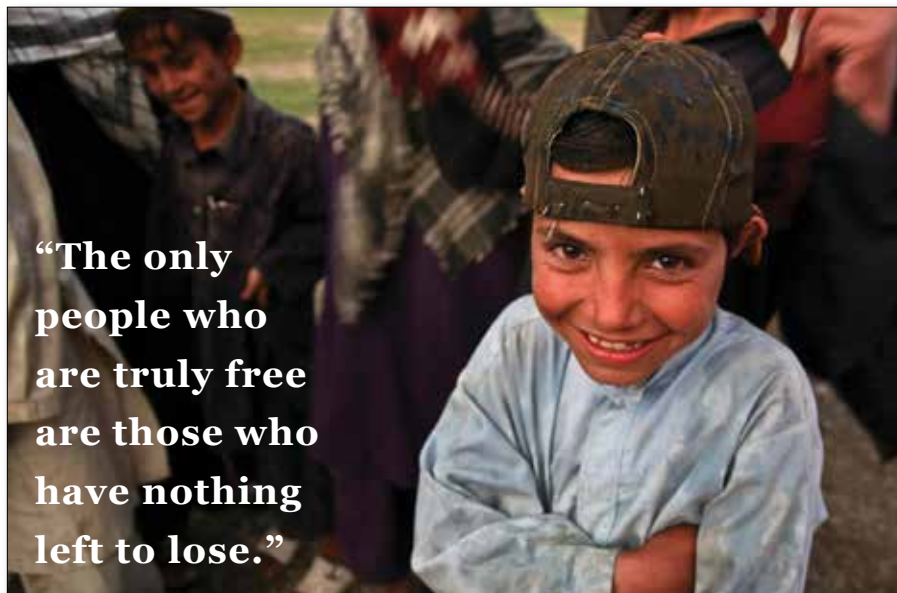
By Jacques Philippe



One of the most infallible indicators that worldliness is present is when we find ourselves controlled by our desire for the things that this world offers. Jacques Philippe shows us that victory and freedom come ultimately only to those who allow God's grace to work in their hearts so that they are freed from these destructive appetites. Writing from a French Catholic tradition, Philippe's writings explore the interior life. This article is taken from Philippe's book *Interior Freedom* (New York: Scepter, 2002: 130–33).

The world seeks freedom in the accumulation of possessions and power. It forgets that the only people who are truly free are those who have nothing left to lose. Despoiled of everything, detached from everything, they are “free from all men” (1 Cor 9:19) and all things. It can be truly said that their death is already behind them, because all their “treasure” is now in God and in him alone. The people who are supremely free desire nothing and are afraid of nothing. All the good that matters to them is already guaranteed them by God. They have nothing to lose and nothing to defend. These are the “poor in spirit” of the Beatitudes, detached, humble, merciful, meek, peacemakers.

There is a parable expressing this truth in Solzhenitsyn's book *The First Circle*, which is set in the era of Stalin's dictatorship. A highly placed party official needs the services of a “zek,” who is a scientist, for a project he has been put in charge of and on which he is risking his career. He presents all possible arguments to persuade this imprisoned scientist to collaborate.



“The only people who are truly free are those who have nothing left to lose.”

Solzhenitsyn shows perceptively how the really free man in this exchange is not the powerful official but the prisoner, because he has nothing left to lose. He is ready to go back to Siberia if necessary. Even in those terrible conditions, one can still be a man.

Gulags and concentrations camps were one of the greatest traumas of the twentieth century, yet they provided abundant cases of people who found true freedom behind bars. In her book *Interrupted Life*, Etty Hillesum, imprisoned in the camp at Westerbork, reflects:

The barbed wire is more a question of attitude. “Us behind barbed wire?” an indestructible old gentleman once said with a melancholy wave of his hand. “They are the ones who live behind barbed wire”—and he pointed to the tall villas that stand like sentries on the other side of the fence.

At the center of the gospel stand the Beatitudes. The first one sums up all the others: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 5:3). I hope I have helped you to understand this astonishing statement by Jesus and begin to put it into practice.

Spiritual poverty, utter dependence on God and his mercy, is the condition for interior freedom. We don't know what events will mark the third millennium, but one thing is certain: Those who have learned to discover and expand the inalienable space of freedom that God placed in their hearts by making them his children will never be caught off guard. ✦

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discerning those who were true Christians from those who were not was a very easy thing to do: we don't smoke, or drink, or chew; and we don't run with those who do!

Whenever worldliness becomes a matter of litmus-test behaviors, the results are always tragic. Such a posture produces either Pharisees and hypocrites or those who give up entirely and leave the faith. The apostle John puts the issue of worldliness on a much more solid foundation. Rather than telling his flock to avoid certain behaviors, he warns them about their inner motivation! “Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him” (1 Jn 2:15). Worldliness is defined not so much by what we *do* as by what we *love*! The heart of the matter is the matter of the heart.

In preparing this edition of *The High Calling*, I had to search long and hard to find contemporary treatments of the sin of

worldliness. Sermons are rare and books on the subject do not seem to make it to the bestseller list. I was most troubled to discover that in our own church tradition (evangelical, Wesleyan, holiness), there is an appalling dearth of resources on the subject! Strange, isn't it? We think we can call people to holiness of heart and life without addressing what is perhaps the single greatest sin that stands in the way. Thus, the articles included in this edition represent a wide range of voices (Puritan, Reformed, Baptist, Roman Catholic), where I was able to find an articulate exposition of the danger of worldliness. Frankly, from where I sit, anyone today who has the courage to take on this issue should be considered a friend and an ally. Though I certainly have no desire to see the ugly legalism of a previous generation return, I do want to call the people of God once again to rediscover the toxic nature of the sin that is threatening to destroy us. ✦

The Great Problem Today

By David Platt



Currently serving as the pastor-teacher at McLean Bible Church near Washington DC, David Platt is also a best-selling author whose passion is to make disciples of all nations. This article is a transcript of a sermon preached on October 7, 2012, when he pastored Brook Hills Baptist Church in Birmingham, AL. The text has been abridged and slightly edited.

We live in a day where you cannot tell where the world ends and the church begins. Charles Spurgeon said in his day words that, I believe, apply to our day as well: “I believe that one reason why the church of God at this present moment has so little influence over the world is because the world has so much influence over the church.” Yes, the great problem today is not persecution from the world, as many want to claim. No, the great problem is seduction by the world!

Study after study shows that our lifestyles as professing Christians look just like the world around us. We are just as materialistic, just as sexually immoral, and just as self-centered as the world. In parenting, the priorities of professing Christian parents for their kids look virtually identical to the priorities of non-Christian parents. We cart our kids all over town in the exact same way that non-Christian parents do, teaching our kids to be good at the things this world says are most important: sports and entertainment.

We look just like the world! We love this world. And yet the Bible commands us, “Do not love the world or the things of the world” (1 Jn 2:15). The church should look different—very different—than the world. Our schedules should look different, our spending, our marriages, our parenting, our purity, our possessions, etc.

John goes on to say, “If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him” (1 Jn 2:15). And this is the key. Worldliness is not ultimately a matter of external behaviors: avoid this, do that, change this. No. Worldliness is a problem in our hearts. Listen to what he says next: “For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and the pride of life . . . [these are things inside of us and they are] not from the Father but from the world” (1 Jn 2:16). Then he concludes by saying, “The world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever” (1 Jn 2:17).

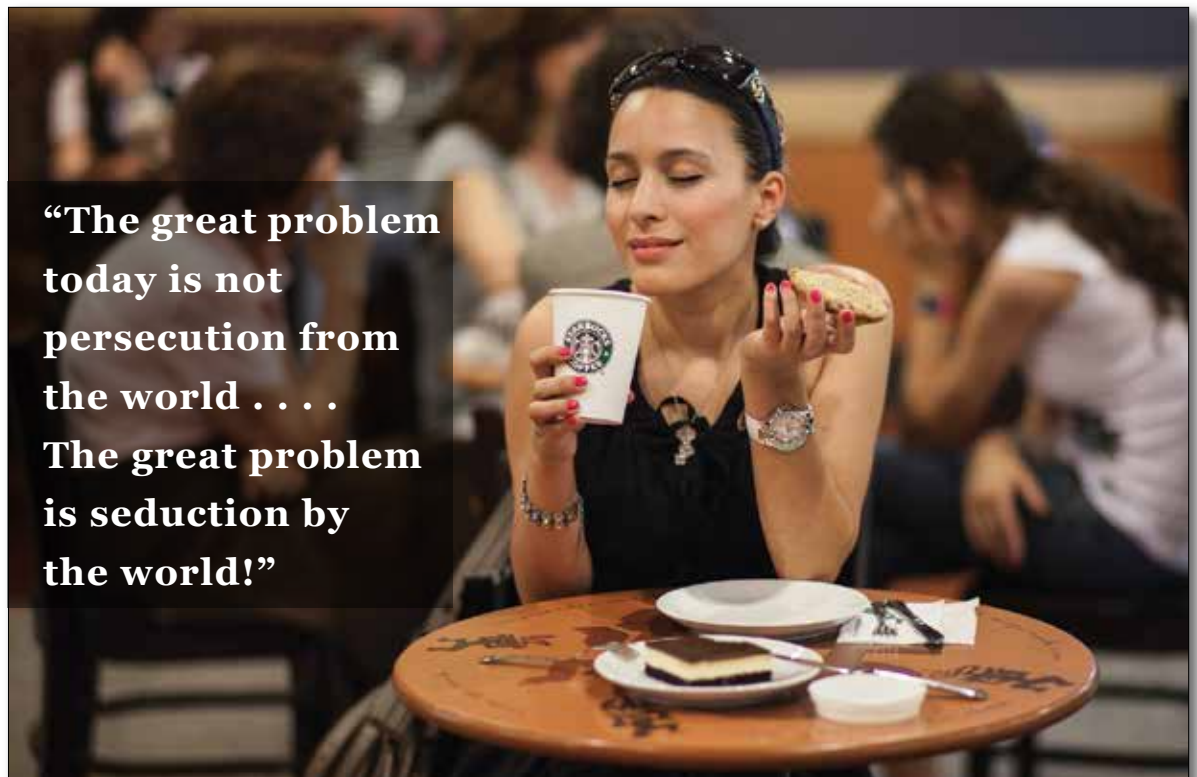
Very clearly, love for the world and love for God cannot coexist. Here’s the way this works. Love for the world pushes out love for God. The more we love the things, pleasures, possessions, and pursuits of this world, the less we will love God. The more

we nibble at the table of this world, the more our hearts will be numb toward the love of God. Do we wonder why we don’t have a deeper hunger for God in our day? Isn’t it surely because our stomachs are full with the pleasures and possessions that we have partaken at the table of this world?

And it works the other way, as well. Love for God pushes out love for the world. The more we love God, the more delight we have in him and the more we commune with him, the less we will love this world. The more we look to God as the sole source of our satisfaction and our security, the less we will look to this world for satisfaction and security.

The call to turn away from this world is not a call to a drab, dull, dreary life. No. In fact, it’s just the opposite. C. S. Lewis said it well:

We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered to us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant



by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased. (The Weight of Glory)

Everyone must choose. When it comes to this world, neutrality is not an option. There is no straddling the fence. Either we can love the world and the things of this world, or we can love God and the things of God. There is pleasure in him that far outweighs all the temporary thrills that this world can offer.

I want to invite you to search your hearts, to ask God to show you where you desire what the world desires, where you are living like the world lives. And where the Spirit brings conviction of sin, I want to call you to repentance. ✠

In the World, But Not of It

By Billy Graham (1918–2018)



Billy Graham preached the gospel to more people in person than anyone in history and was on Gallup's list of most admired men and women 61 times. Yet he was not afraid to tackle issues that were unpopular or controversial. This article is a slightly edited abridgement of one of his "classic sermons" that was published in *Decision Magazine* (February 2018).

At a meeting of church leaders in Seattle, one man commented that if the church is to make its greatest impact on our generation, it must become more worldly-minded. While in one sense that may bear some truth, in the biblical sense it is false.

The New Testament gives us at least three meanings of the word *world*. First, the Bible speaks of the created world: "God made the world and everything in it" (Acts 17:24). Second, it speaks of the inhabitants of the world, whom God loves and for whom Christ died (see Jn 3:16). Third, the word speaks of the world system, which is headed by Satan and based upon self, greed, and pride. This is the world that God warns about, and it is this world system and philosophy that Christians are to shun and remain free from.

The warnings are clear: "Do not be conformed to this world" (Rom 12:2). "Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God" (Jas 4:4). Speaking of his disciples, Jesus said, "They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world" (Jn 17:14–16). The Bible also teaches that the Christian will face opposition in the world: "If the world hates you, you know that it hated me before it hated you" (Jn 15:18). "All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution" (2 Tm 3:12).

In this complex generation in which we live, it is not easy for the Christian to distinguish between that which is spiritual and that which is worldly. In the Bible, Satan is called an "angel of light" (2 Cor 11:14). He is a great imitator and it is not always easy to distinguish between Satan's world and the realm where God reigns. Jesus said that if it were possible, Satan would deceive even the elect (see Mt 24:24).

This world has its own entertainment and diversions that so permeate the atmosphere that it makes the way of the cross seem antiquated and irrelevant. In much of the entertainment media fostered by this world, the name of God is profaned, sex is glamorized, and Christian moral standards are laughed at.

The Bible teaches that worldliness is a force, a spirit, an atmosphere that is in opposition to all that is godly. Its goal is selfish pleasure, material success, and the pride of life. The

world's inhabitants are either under the influence of this world with its cunning, deception, and spell; or they are in Christ and under the direction of the Spirit of God. There is no neutral ground. The lines are clearly drawn.

Paul wrote to the Ephesians, reminding them of the time when they "walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience" (Eph 2:2). The words "course of this world" carry the meaning of current or flow. Its eddies are deep and treacherous. They are stirred and troubled by Satan and intended to trap and ensnare those who would walk godly in Christ Jesus.

However, the Christian is not left defenseless in this conflict. God provides the power to give us victory over Satan. Paul said, "We are more than conquerors through him who loved us" (Rom 8:37). We will never overcome by mere human effort. We will never overcome by our deeds of righteousness. We will never overcome by mere social concern or by identifying ourselves with various social revolutions. The Bible says, "They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony" (Rv 12:11).



We are involved in spiritual conflict. This is a battle between the forces of God and forces of Satan, and we are asked to choose sides. The Bible instructs Christians to make a clean break with all the evils of the world and that we be separated from them. "Come out from among them, and be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean" (2 Cor 6:17).

Christians are like the Gulf Stream, which is in the ocean and yet not part of it. This mysterious current defies the mighty Atlantic Ocean. Its color is different, being a deeper blue. Its temperature is different, being warmer. Its direction is different, being from south to north. So we as Christians are in the world. We come in contact with the world and yet we retain our distinctive kingdom character and refuse to let the world press us into its mold.

The primary responsibility of the Christian is to proclaim the Good News of the gospel—that God loves the world, has redeemed it through the cross of our Savior and seeks to save it. Then, after men and women have come to Christ, they go back into the world to live for Christ as a witness to the world; they become salt and light (see Mt 5:13–14), and they have their sociological and political influence upon the world. We are not to hold the world in contempt. We are to love those for whom Christ died, pray for them, witness to them, and help in all worthwhile social projects that we can. But we are not to be conformed to the world. We are to be in the world, but not of it.

A Scarecrow in a Cucumber Field

By David F. Wells



Professor of Systematic Theology at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, David Wells has written numerous books that explore how evangelical theology should engage contemporary culture. This article is taken from the third chapter of *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994: 35–59). It is abridged and slightly edited.

The Bible often uses the term *world* (Greek, *kosmos*) to refer to fallen humanity, alienated from God and his truth. The word signifies not so much a sociological but a theological reality. This may explain why worldliness is so frequently being missed, or misjudged, in the evangelical church today: it takes theological sense to recognize it, and that is precisely what has disappeared from the church. That is why the propriety of marketing Christian faith, or adapting it to the culture, or hitching it up to cultural trends is seldom questioned; and that is why these kinds of things are usually discussed simply under the rubric of methodology, as if theological principles and issues of truth were not at stake.

The “world” is what fallen humanity uses as a substitute for God. It encompasses the cognitive horizons of the fallen, their appetites, their priorities, their behavior, what they really *want* and what they will do to get it. It is the sole preoccupation of those who are fallen—those one-dimensional earth-dwellers for whom there are no considerations in life more important than eating, drinking, possessing, and being merry. The “world” is the way in which our collective life is organized around the self in substitution for God. It is life characterized by self-righteousness, self-centeredness, self-satisfaction, self-aggrandizement, and self-promotion, with a corresponding distaste for the self-denial proper to union with Christ.

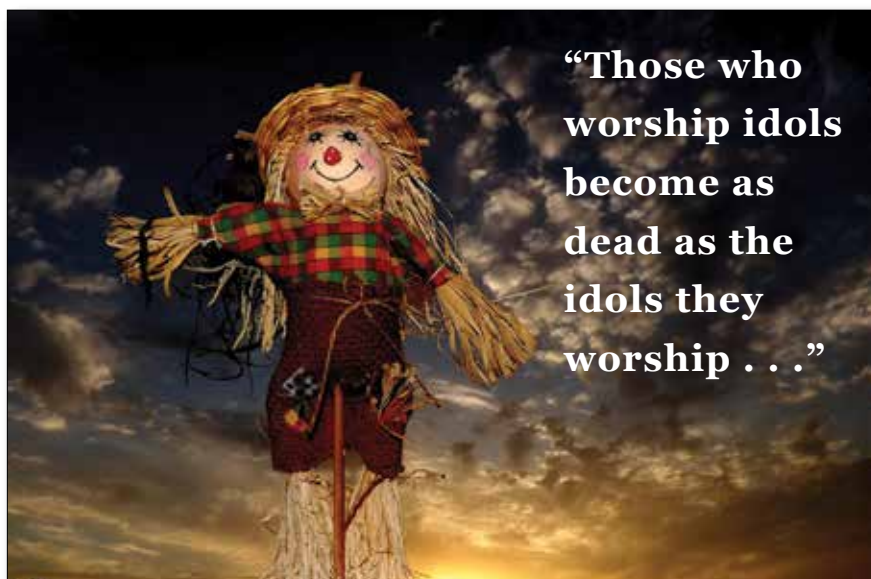
There is a clear line, then, between those who belong to Christ and those who do not, a line separating two very different ways of viewing self and world. John tells us that we can easily see how sharply the two spiritual realms are differentiated. The church belongs to Christ (1 Jn 3:7–10); the world belongs to Satan (1 Jn 5:19), its “prince” (Jn 12:31; 14:30; 16:11). All that is of Christ endures forever; all that is of the world is transient, fading (1 Jn 2:17), and under God’s judgment (1 Jn 4:17). Love for God, therefore, is utterly incompatible with love of the world (1 Jn 2:15).

Thus the church carries within itself a discernibly different view of life from what passes as normal and normative in society. The church is defined by a knowledge that creates—or should create—an unbridgeable chasm between its own moral and

spiritual values and those of the society. Christians are called to be exiles from the world (1 Pt 1:1; Heb 11:13). They are aliens to the world’s darkness (1 Pt 2:11) as they seek another city, “whose builder and maker is God” (Heb 11:10).

There is a connection between worldliness and idolatry. After writing about the dangers of worldliness, John concludes his first epistle by saying, “Little children, keep yourselves from idols” (1 Jn 5:21). Note it well that this closing admonition is addressed to Christians. Idolatry, ancient and modern alike, consists in trusting some substitute for God to serve some uniquely divine function. These substitutes need not be supernatural; money, power, expertise, the location of the planets on the astrological charts, and a belief in Progress are among the most popular idols of our time. We have used both psychological and physical selves idolatrously—although we have increasingly begun to turn more to our bodies than our psyches. One quite predictable turn in this regard is a revival of the worship of sexuality.

Why do people choose the substitute over God himself? Probably the most important reason is that it obviates



accountability to God. We can meet idols on our own terms because they are our own creations. They are safe, predictable, and controllable: they are, in Jeremiah’s colorful language, “scarecrows in a cucumber field” (10:5). They offer nothing like the threat of a God who thunders from Sinai and whose providence in this world so often appears to be incomprehensible and dangerous.

But the fruit of replacing God with the self—

whatever form it takes—can become very bitter. The irony is that those who worship idols become as dead as the idols they worship, and those who inflame themselves in worship of them are consumed by the fires of divine judgment. Imagining themselves to have perceived great spiritual reality, they are in fact incurably blind.

By this point it should be clear that worldliness is not simply an innocent cultural escapade, still less a matter merely of inconsequential breaches in behavior or the breaking of trivial rules of the church or the expected practices of piety. Worldliness is a *religious* matter. The world, as the New Testament authors speak of it, is an alternative to God. It offers itself as an alternative center of allegiance. It provides counterfeit meaning. It is the means used by Satan in his warfare with God. To be part of that “world” is to be part of the Satanic hostility to God. That is why worldliness is so often idolatrous and why the biblical sanctions against it are so stringent. “Do you not know,” asks James, “that friendship with

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(1 Jn 4:4) and matches against him the Spirit of truth who indwells believers. “The whole world,” John says, “lies in the power of the evil one” (1 Jn 5:19).

There is, then, an ordered system, “the world,” which is governed from behind the scenes by a ruler, Satan. Scripture thus gives depth to our understanding of the world around us. Indeed, unless we look at the unseen powers *behind* the material things, we readily may be deceived.

This consideration may help us to understand better the passage in 1 Peter 3:3-4:

Do not let your adorning [kosmos] be external—the braiding of hair and the putting on of gold jewelry or the clothing you wear—but let your adorning be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God’s sight is very precious.

The apostle is saying that, in the background behind these matters of wearing apparel and jewelry and make-up, there is an organized power at work. Do not let that power grip you.

What, we have to ask ourselves, motivates us when we fix our hair and choose our clothing? It may be altogether innocent, aiming to gain an effect that is aesthetically pleasing. There may be nothing intrinsically wrong in doing this; but do you see what we are touching here? We are touching that system behind the things seen, a system that is controlled by God’s enemy. So let us be wary.

Before the Fall of man, the world existed only in the sense of the earth, the people of the earth, and the things on the earth. As yet there was no *kosmos*, no “world,” in the sense of a constituted order. With the Fall, however, Satan brought on to this earth the order which he himself had conceived, and with that began the world system of which we are speaking. Originally, our physical earth had no connection with “the world” in this sense of a satanic system. But Satan took

“In the background behind these matters of wearing apparel and jewelry and make-up, there is an organized power at work.”



advantage of man’s sin and brought to the earth an organized system that he himself had established. From that point of time, this earth was in “the world,” and man was in “the world.”

So we may say that before the Fall there was an earth; after the Fall there was a “world”; at the Lord’s return, there will be a Kingdom. Just as the world belongs to Satan, so the Kingdom belongs to our Lord Jesus. Moreover, it is this Kingdom that will displace the world. This will happen when “the kingdom of this world becomes the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ and he shall reign forever and ever” (Rv 11:15).

Have you ever felt the power of the world as much as today? Have you ever heard so much talk about money? Have you ever thought so much about food and clothing? Wherever you go, even among Christians, the things of the world are the topics of conversation. The world has advanced to the very door of the Church and is seeking to draw even the saints of God into its grasp. Never have we needed to know the power of the Cross of Christ to deliver us as we do at the present time. It is not merely against sin that the saints of God need to be on their guard, but against the ruler of this world. When we are faced with alternatives and a choice of ways confronts us, the question is not: Is this good or evil? Is this helpful or hurtful? No, the question we must ask ourselves is this: Is it of this world, or of God? ✦

One Part of Finishing Well

By Charlie Fiskeaux, Special Assistant to the President for Development

As Christ-followers, we are all on a journey that one day will close this chapter of earthly existence and open into an eternal reality that is beyond our current ability even to imagine. For sure, “eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him. But God has revealed them to us through His Spirit” (1 Cor 2:9-10 NKJV). Accompanying this future change in addresses is a common desire to finish well our earthly existence.

In this life, we all accumulate things: houses, land, furniture, investments, vehicles, collections of various kinds, etc. When the Lord calls us to our eternal home, we will leave all of this “stuff” behind. Where will it go? To whom? For what purpose?

The colloquial question is, “what’re you going to do with what you got when you get done with it?” As a citizen of the eternal kingdom, will you leave a portion of your earthly goods to charitable ministries, such as the Francis Asbury Society, to advance our Lord’s kingdom here on earth? During this life, our Lord challenges us to “lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal” (Mt 6:20). At the time of moving to our eternal home, we have an opportunity to give one last time to the work of his kingdom in this earthly realm. Is the Lord’s kingdom work included in your final act of giving? If not, we encourage you to consider a charitable estate gift in your last will and testament. ✦

The Biggest Lie in the History of Christianity

By Matthew Kelly



Speaker, author, and business consultant Matthew Kelly's books have been published in more than 25 languages, have appeared on the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *USA Today* best seller lists, and have sold more than 30 million copies. As a Roman Catholic, his perspective has a different flavor than our readers may be familiar with, but one would be hard-pressed to find a more clarion call to

holiness than in his most recent book, *The Biggest Lie in the History of Christianity* (North Palm Beach: Eucalyptus Media Group, 2018). This article is an abridged summary of several chapters (28–41, 51–52).

From the beginning, there has been no shortage of lies about Jesus, his followers, and Christianity in general. Today is no different. Lies are always swirling around Christianity. Yes, it's true that non-Christians have been lying about us from the very beginning of Christianity. These lies have stopped millions, possibly billions, of people from discovering the joy and genius of our faith.

But we also need to acknowledge and confront the uncomfortable truth that as Christians we lie to each other, to other people, and to ourselves with disturbing regularity. It is this fact—that we lie to ourselves—that is of particular importance here. I want to set the stage so that together we can explore the biggest lie in the history of Christianity. Amazingly, it is not a lie that non-Christians tell about Christians; it's a lie we tell ourselves. This is the lie: Holiness is not possible.

The great majority of modern Christians don't actually believe holiness is possible. Sure, we believe it is possible for our grandmothers or some medieval saint—just not for us. We don't believe holiness is possible for us. This is one of the greatest tragedies of every Christian era.

Search your heart. Do you believe holiness is possible for you? Most Christians don't believe that it is.

No doubt there is a complex series of psychological reasons and excuses that cause us to accept and believe this lie. This lie is diabolical in its subtlety. There is evil genius in its effectiveness. To paralyze and neutralize almost every generation of Christians with a single idea is a brilliant feat. Diabolical and evil, but brilliant nonetheless.

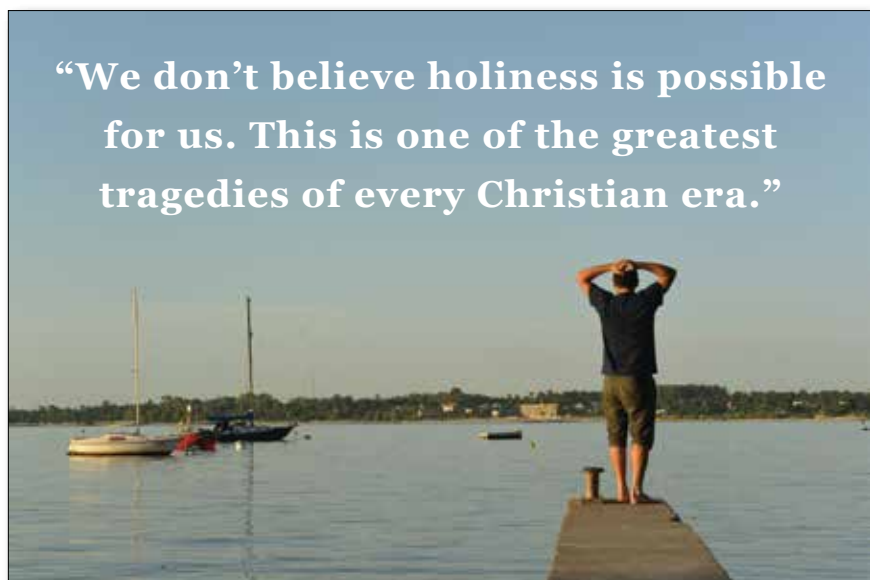
It is astounding that just one lie can neutralize the majority of Christians. That's right, neutralize. This lie takes us out of the game and turns us into mere spectators in the epic story of Christianity that continues to unfold in every generation. This one lie is largely, if not primarily, responsible for ushering in

the post-Christian modern era throughout Western civilization. It may be the devil's greatest triumph in modern history. This is the holocaust of Christian spirituality.

In a thousand ways every day we tell ourselves and each other that holiness is not possible. We don't use that language, but the fact that the word *holiness* has disappeared from our dialogue is proof that we consider it either irrelevant or unattainable. When is the last time you heard someone speak about holiness?

Paul was abundantly clear in 1 Thessalonians 4:3 that the very will of God is our holiness. God wants us to live holy lives, grow in character and virtue, and become the-best-version-of-ourselves. But we are too busy with a hundred other things. We don't have time to think about holiness. The very idea of it is cast aside by many as a quest for an impossible perfection.

No, this is for real. But how?



Suppose we are having coffee together and I say to you, "Can you go out tomorrow and create just one Holy Moment?" Not a holy life or even a holy day. Not a holy hour or even a holy fifteen minutes—just one single Holy Moment. You will probably ask, "What is a Holy Moment?"

"A Holy Moment is a moment when you open yourself to God. You make yourself available to him. You set aside what you feel like doing in that

moment, and you set aside self-interest, and for one moment you simply do what you prayerfully believe God is calling you to do in that moment. That is a Holy Moment."

"I think I've got it," you say, "but tell me one more time—what is a Holy Moment?"

"Very good," I reply. "A Holy Moment is a moment when you are being the person God created you to be, and you are doing what you believe God is calling you to do in that moment. It is an instance where you set aside self-interest, personal desire, and what you feel like doing or would rather be doing, and embrace what you believe will bring the most good to the most people in that moment."

"OK, I've got it," you confirm, and so I ask again, "Can you go out tomorrow, collaborate with God in this way, and create one Holy Moment?" Sure you can. It's not overwhelming. It's not confusing. It doesn't require a massive intellect, a doctorate in theology, or even a rare grasp of theology. It is accessible, achievable, and immensely practical.

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Now, what we have just discussed proves that holiness is possible for you. If you can collaborate with God and create just one single Holy Moment, that alone proves that holiness is possible for you. And beyond that, it is replicable. You don't need to read another book to learn how to collaborate with God and create the second Holy Moment. The fact that you can cooperate with God to create one Holy Moment proves that holiness is possible for you, and it provides the blueprint for thousands of Holy Moments. If you can create just one Holy Moment next Monday, you can create two on Tuesday and four on Wednesday, eight on Thursday, and so on. There is no limit to the number of Holy Moments you can create.

One more thing: It is important to note that we need God's grace to create Holy Moments. We can't do this alone. This is not a self-empowerment thing. Holy Moments are created with God's grace. The good news is that God is generous with grace and will never deny you the grace you need to create Holy Moments. It is never God's grace that is lacking, but rather our willingness to cooperate with his grace. We need God's amazing grace. We need it badly and we need it now. The world needs changing, and this single idea of Holy Moments can change the world.

A Scarecrow in a Cucumber Field continued from page 8

the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God" (Jas 4:4).

Today, evangelicalism reverberates with worldliness. In first impressions, this worldliness does not appear ugly at all. Quite the opposite. It maintains a warm and friendly countenance, parading itself as successful entrepreneurship, organizational wizardry, and a package of slick public relations insights that are essential to the facilitation of the evangelical business. Now, there is nothing wrong with these things per se. The problem lies in the current evangelical inability to see how these things carry within them values that are hostile to Christian faith. The problem, furthermore, lies in the unwillingness of evangelicals to forsake the immediate and overwhelming benefits of modernity, even when corrupted values are part and parcel of those benefits. What is plainly missing, then, is *discernment*, and this has much to do with the dislocation of biblical truth from the life of the church today and the dying of its theological soul.

Why do we find it so difficult to discern how to be in the world but not of it? I believe it is because the evangelical world has abandoned theology and is now running on the high octane fuel of modernity. It cannot see as alien the values that it has already taken to heart. It was once one of the hallmarks of evangelicalism that it offered a pronounced cultural critique, but now it is as attentive as anyone else to the pronouncements of the pollster. Today any evangelical who demurs from the cultural consensus almost certainly will be viewed as a rebel, perhaps even a subversive, and almost certainly as irrelevant.

It is because worldliness has the capacity to destroy the very center of Christian faith—its understanding of who God is and how he acts, with all of the consequences that this has for Christian faithfulness—that we are now seeing such a drastic transformation of evangelical faith. This explains what has happened to the church in America. ✠

Can I ask you a raw and unfiltered question? Before now, did you ever believe holiness was possible for you? If your answer is no, I am so excited for what is ahead for you. Holiness is possible for you. This single profound, beautiful truth will change your life forever. So, let's pray together, right now: "Lord, please, I beg you, never let me forget that holiness is possible, and give me the grace and courage to go out into the world and create with you as many Holy Moments as possible. Amen." ✠

**"The world and you must part or
Christ and you will never meet."**

—Thomas Brooks (1608–1680)

Exiles in Babylon continued from page 4

What do you do in exile? Jeremiah's response is straightforward: get on with everyday, normal life. But how can we do that in a foreign land, in such an abnormal situation? How on earth can we find the heart and energy to build houses and plant gardens when we can't even muster up the strength to pick up our harps and sing a couple of the old hymns?

Jeremiah's advice to the exiles is beginning to sound like a counsel of passivity and quietude. But that would miss the political realism, biblical depth, and missional responsibility of his words. He refuses to give easy answers that will evade the devastating reality Judah faces at the end of her history. Exile is for real. There will be no quick resolution, no cheap optimism. Exile is for the long haul and the exilic community must find ways to live their lives in the midst of imperial captivity. This is Jeremiah's political realism and the church needs such open-eyed realism today.

Jeremiah is reminding the exiles of their creational and covenantal calling to be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth—even in Babylon (Gn 1:28). Don't let Babylon define reality for you! Practice your God-given calling in the place of exile where God has sent you. Move into the neighborhood, create places of hospitality and refuge, put down roots and engender a love and affection for this place—yes, for Babylon.

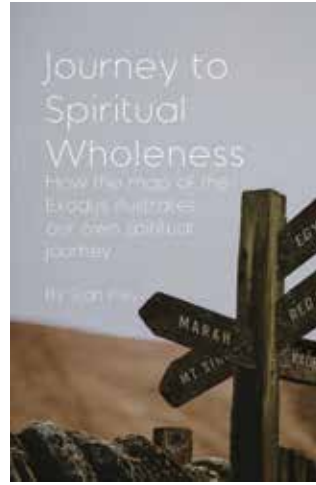
"Seek the shalom of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its shalom you will find your shalom" (Jer 29:7). Israel is called to be a blessing and a light to the nations, including Babylon. As impossible as it might seem in the midst of such a violent and bloodthirsty empire, as counter-intuitive as it sounds in a world of exploitation and oppression, give your lives to the shalom of the empire.

Build houses in a culture of homelessness. Plant gardens in polluted and contested soil. Get married in a culture of sexual consumerism. Make commitments in a world where we want always to keep our options open. Multiply in a world of debt. Have children at the end of history. Seek shalom in a violent world of geo-political conflict and economic disparity. This is Jeremiah's word to the exiles. And this is Jeremiah's subversive word to us. And in this vision we just might see, with Jeremiah, "a future with hope" (Jer 29:11). ✠

*Speak boldly man, the Truth is on thy side;
Die for it, and to Life in triumph ride.*

The description of Faithful's end is one of the most moving in the entire book, for having brutally put Faithful to death and abused his body, Bunyan adds: "Now I saw that there stood behind the multitude a chariot and a couple of horses, waiting for Faithful who (as soon as his adversaries had dispatched him) was taken up into it, and straightway was carried up through the clouds, with sound of trumpet, the nearest way to the Celestial Gate." As the third-century North African theologian Tertullian wrote: "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church." Thus Faithful's death kindled a light in Vanity Fair that would not easily be put out, and a certain man named Hopeful, upon seeing it, openly joined with Christian on his journey. And Bunyan adds, "there were many more of the men in the Fair that would take their time and follow after."

In an age of rampant consumerism, when the deity of fashion demands unswerving allegiance, Bunyan's radical separation from the world's ways is both necessary and instructive as a template for discerning the true nature of radical Christianity. If Christians are to be counter-cultural, saying "No!" to this world and "Yes!" to Jesus will cost the same blood, sweat, and tears as Bunyan describes here. Resisting conformity to this world by stubborn other-worldliness is the only sure way of maintaining a Christ-like discipleship that keeps the goal in focus—assurance of finally entering into the Celestial City at the end of the journey. ✱



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