

The Tragedy of the Worldly Christian

Words sometimes lose their effectiveness over time because we get used to them. We hear them again and again, and the effect they once had no longer jolts us into action. One such word seems to be ‘worldliness.’ Such is the worldly state of so many Christians, that to speak of worldliness in the church really seems to wash over so many of them.

There is such compromise today, that the call to separate and holy sounds almost foreign to many. So, we sometimes need to call something by another name. I believe a true description of a worldly Christian would be ‘a half-hearted adulteress.’

Now, you might object to such strong language, so I must back it up with Scripture. Before I do so, we must define something. What do we mean when we speak about the world? Scripture uses the word in different ways. Sometimes it means the created world, like “*The world is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof*” (**Psalm 24:1**). Sometimes, it means the human race, like “*For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son*” (**John 3:16**). However, the negative, sinful context in which we are examining it is defined for us here:

Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world.

1 John 2:15-16

Here, the world is defined as a belief system in opposition to God. It has Satan as its true author, as seen by how he used these three prongs of attack when tempting Eve, and Job, and the Lord Jesus: the appeal of fleshly, sensual experiences, the appeal of what is attractive and glorious to behold, and the appeal to a desire to be worshipped. But what does he use these as an appeal toward?

Satan uses these core beliefs to draw people away from God as the source of their happiness. He packages these beliefs in different forms: as lies about sexuality, lies about wealth and appearances, lies about status and being fashionable and envied, and lies about power. In all these forms, he appeals to what humans can see, taste, touch, hear, smell or feel to draw them away from God to things in this world as the means of joy, fulfilment and happiness.

Worldliness is a philosophy of happiness. It is essentially the fruit of unbelief. It’s a rejection of faith in the invisible God as the source of all that is visible, and it is a call to enjoy the visible as an end in itself. It’s a call to cut God out of the picture with regard to satisfaction and joy, and turn to what you can experience here and now – God’s gifts, ironically enough, apart from the Giver – as a source of joy. Sometimes the things worldliness uses may be neutral in themselves.

The sin of worldliness is that we use the gifts of God and the pleasures God has provided to enrich ourselves, but we do so apart from God, sometimes in rebellion to God’s prescriptions on how to use those gifts, and without thinking of God. The sin of worldliness is not the seeking of happiness, it is the seeking of happiness apart from God.

That is why **James 4:4** says: “*Ye adulterers and adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? Whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God.*” James says worldliness is adultery, because it is like an unfaithful wife, who uses her husband’s resources to live on, but then seeks pleasure in the arms of another man.

We want to use God for protection, provision, and health, but when we want to be delighted in our hearts, we seek it apart from God. This is the essence of worldliness – seeking pleasure from the things of this world apart from God. We can gain pleasure in many legitimate things in this life, but only as they are enjoyed in God. As Augustine said, “He loves thee too little, who loves anything together with Thee, which he loves not for Thy sake.”

You can see already why I partly defined a worldly Christian as an adulteress, but I also used the word ‘half-hearted.’ Why? Well, **James 4:8** adds: “*Cleanse your hands, ye sinners; and purify your hearts, ye double minded.*” Double-minded. He uses the same phrase back in Chapter 1:

If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him. But let him ask in faith, nothing wavering. For he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed. For let not that man think that he shall receive any thing of the Lord. A double minded man is unstable in all his ways.

James 1:5-8

A Christian who asks God for wisdom but then really looks elsewhere for counsel is double-minded. They are not grounded, certain or focused in their search for wisdom. Well, a worldly Christian is not single-minded in their pursuit of meaning and joy and satisfaction. No, a worldly Christian is trying to get the best of both worlds. They want to have one foot in God’s kingdom, in case that’s the key to joy, and one foot in the world – in case that is. Jesus spoke to a church filled with such people:

I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth.

Revelation 3:15-16

This church had some leaning toward Christ, but some leaning toward their own pursuit of pleasure, the accumulation of goods and luxuries. Their faith was in their own abundance, not in Christ. God says, they are neither on fire for Him, nor are they totally distant from Him. He’d actually prefer either extreme, not this tepid, compromised, in-between mentality. It reminds us of Elijah’s challenge to Israel:

“And Elijah came unto all the people, and said, ‘How long halt ye between two opinions? If the LORD be God, follow Him: but if Baal, then follow him.’”

1 Kings 18:21

This is the mentality of worldly Christian – hovering between two opinions – that joy and satisfaction are in God, or that joy and satisfaction are in the world. And so we say such a person is half-hearted. They lack the courage to go all the way in one direction. They will not commit to being all out for the world, nor will they commit to being all out for God. They lack the integrity to cut their losses one way or the other, and press forward in one direction with all their heart. This makes them half-hearted.

Now the tragedy of a worldly Christian is this: they are like a person betting on both odd and even numbers – their gain equals their loss. They lose as much as they gain, and therefore they never gain. Because they are afraid to go all the way with God or the world, they end up losing altogether.

And here’s the catch – their lukewarm joy only applies to life here on earth. As a believer, they lose eternal rewards. Consider how Paul speaks about the Judgement Seat of Christ:

Every man’s work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man’s work of what sort it is. If any man’s work abide which he hath

built thereupon, he shall receive a reward. If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire.

1 Corinthians 3:13-15

Perhaps no Biblical character better pictures the tragedy of the worldly believer than Lot, Abraham's nephew. As we trace his life, we see the marks of a worldly Christian sadly portrayed for us. The first characteristic of a worldly saint is:

1. They pick the best for themselves, without regarding God

Lot's herdsmen began to squabble with Abram's. It is no great testimony to Lot that he had such contentious, selfish servants. At any rate, Abram, the older, humbly and graciously defers to his young nephew and offers him first pick of the land. Lot surveys the land, and chooses the best for himself. Carefully consider this account:

Then Lot chose him all the plain of Jordan; and Lot journeyed east: and they separated themselves the one from the other. Abram dwelled in the land of Canaan, and Lot dwelled in the cities of the plain, and pitched his tent toward Sodom. But the men of Sodom were wicked and sinners before the LORD exceedingly.

Genesis 13:11

You see, Lot's selecting the best land was not necessarily the bad thing, albeit rather audacious and lacking the magnanimous spirit of his uncle. No, the real problem is where Lot's heart was. It says that Lot pitched his tent *toward* Sodom. He saw the well-watered lands of the Jordan, and he saw the exciting city life of Sodom. He knew of the wickedness in that city and its offensiveness to God, but his tent was pitched toward it. His leaning was towards its pleasures.

Now a pursuit of pleasure in itself is not wrong – God tells us at His right hand are pleasures forevermore. But a pursuit of pleasure stripped of faith in God becomes worldly. Lot sought pleasure without thought to God. If you seek pleasure, and see God as an obstacle rather than the means and the end of your pleasure, you are worldly. If you cannot reconcile the pleasure you are seeking with God's permission in His Word, it becomes selfish and worldly.

This was the beginning of Lot's troubles. How interesting that as soon as Lot has gone, God speaks to His friend, Abram, the man of faith, and immediately tells him of wonderful promises to come. There was no such promise for selfish Lot, who sought his own good apart from God.

2. They end up entangled and ensnared by the world

A few chapters later in Genesis, we see the second mark of a worldly saint. There is a war taking place, and Lot is caught in the thick of it. Why? Because now his tent has strangely moved from being *toward* Sodom, to being *inside* Sodom (**Genesis 14:12**). Compromise is never a flatland: it is always a downward, slippery slope. In the war, Sodom is defeated, and Lot is carried off as one of the prisoners of war.

Lot hoped to get the pleasures of Sodom, but he finds himself bundled up as one of its prisoners – a fitting picture of what happens to the worldly Christian. You start out thinking that you are getting the best of both worlds, but pretty soon you find yourself captive to the world's lust, addictions, problems and perversions. You are, as Paul put it to Timothy, a soldier entangled in the world.

Now, this raises an interesting point. Many today tell us that to be truly effective, Christians must be just like the world. We must use their music to evangelise, speak like them, act like them – ‘be on their level.’ The thinking is: we must be like them, to win them. People who think like this say that Jesus ate with tax-collectors, as if that is an example of being like the world.

But here is the thing. Lot is a perfect example of this theory. He was right there in with them. He was in Sodom, accepted by everyone, among everyone – surely an example of a Christian being in the world, but not of the world, right? Wrong. Lot was so *in* the world that he became *of* the world. And who ends up delivering the prisoners of war? Lot? No – the separated uncle Abram.

Yes, Abram could have been accused of being a separatist, a ‘holier-than-thou,’ so aloof he can’t get in there and evangelise the people of Sodom, or ‘out of touch with the real world’ or maybe even the famous ‘so heavenly minded he’s of no earthly good’ – but Abram was obeying God. He lived separate from the corruptions of the world, and when people needed deliverance – guess who was equipped to do it? He was.

The Christian who is most effective at delivering people out of the world is not the one who tries to be so like them that people no longer understand what the point of the Gospel is; it is the separated saint, living holy, who has the power of God in their life, a pure testimony, and the inner integrity to reach out to people in love and pull them out. We see in contrast that Lot was so earthly minded, he was of no heavenly good.

3. They forfeit real direction and guidance from God

Here’s the third sad effect of a worldly Christian. We’re reminded of the verse we quoted earlier from **James 1**: A man seeking wisdom who is double-minded will not receive anything from God. How does this relate to Lot? Well, **Genesis 18** and **19** relate the well-known story of the destruction of Sodom. Now, who did God inform with regards this plan of His? Lot? No, Lot received word the night before. God told Abram, the man of faith.

What a sad indictment this is of Lot. God does not tell him what He is about to do, though He mercifully sends angels to physically pull him out. Lot had forfeited clear direction from God due to his worldliness. See, clear direction in Scripture is directly related to faith: *“Trust in the Lord with all thine heart, and lean not unto thine own understanding, in all thy ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct thy paths”* (**Proverbs 3:5-6**).

Trust, leaning on God, looking to God – these things bring His shepherding guidance. A worldly Christian seldom looks to God for guidance, for he is following his own nose. God then graciously rescues him from his own destruction, but he forfeits the blessing of staying on God’s appointed path of blessing for him.

4. A worldly Christian loses credibility among all

To say that Lot had no godly testimony is an understatement. Due to his compromise, he had no power to influence those around him. Again, those who claim that being like the world will win them violate a basic, oft-taught Biblical principle – you need a measure of separation from sin in order to remain uncontaminated by it.

When the evil men of Sodom start calling for Lot to bring out the two angels inside his house for their evil purposes, he objects. But listen to their response: *“This one fellow came in to sojourn, and he will needs be a judge: now will we deal worse with thee, than with them”* (**Genesis 19:9**). Basically, they’re saying, ‘This guy claimed he was just passing through, and now he is telling us what is right and wrong!’

How sad when a Christian's testimony is so warped that the world regards them as a harmless fly on the wall that really stands for nothing. The men of Sodom clearly weren't convicted by Lot's life. **2 Peter 2:7** tells us Lot was vexed by their evil, and indeed, we see it in this chapter. But he has lost his credibility. He has even lost his sense of right and wrong – offering his two virgin daughters to this perverse crowd instead of the angels.

When telling his sons-in-law to escape the next day's destruction, listen to the reaction: *"And Lot went out, and spake unto his sons in law, which married his daughters, and said, 'Up, get you out of this place; for the LORD will destroy this city.' But he seemed as one that mocked unto his sons-in-law."* Lot seemed to them like he was joking. They could not reconcile a message of judgement with their father-in-law.

How many of your unsaved relatives and friends would think you were joking if you began to speak about them going to hell? Remember Jesus' words in **Matthew 5:13-14**: *"Ye are the salt of the earth: but if the salt have lost his savour, wherewith shall it be salted? It is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men."*

5. They are torn between two worlds

Lot's sad situation is the state of many a believer. You get so used to the world that you fear the life of faith in God. You know the world is destroying you, and being destroyed, but it's all you know. Listen to Lot's situation:

"And while he lingered, the men laid hold upon his hand, and upon the hand of his wife, and upon the hand of his two daughters; the LORD being merciful unto him: and they brought him forth, and set him without the city."

Genesis 19:16

Lot lingered. He stayed, he dawdled, he hoped God would change His mind. The world was a nice comfortable hot bath for him, that he was reluctant to leave. The angels then instruct him to flee from Sodom into the mountains, and listen to the whimpering cry of a worldly believer:

And Lot said unto them, "Oh, not so, my Lord: Behold now, thy servant hath found grace in thy sight, and thou hast magnified thy mercy, which thou hast shewed unto me in saving my life; and I cannot escape to the mountain, lest some evil take me, and I die: Behold now, this city is near to flee unto, and it is a little one: Oh, let me escape thither, (is it not a little one?) and my soul shall live."

Genesis 19:18-20

Lot says, 'Please, let me go back into another city – it's just a little one, after all.' You can hear it today: Please, God, let me continue with my worldliness in another way, maybe with Christian lyrics, or Christian themes, or Christian people – but don't take away my worldly entertainment or pursuit of pleasure!

Such a person is torn between two worlds, loving one, and knowing it is devoted to destruction, but fearing the life of faith, and unwilling to step out into it. The principle here is the same as the love of money in **Matthew 6:24**: *"No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other."* You cannot have allegiance to a life of sight and a life of faith at the same time.

6. Their family follows their faithlessness

The last tragic part of Lot's story is the same for many worldly believers: the effects on their family. Lot's sons-in-law laughed at his warnings and were destroyed in the destruction. Lot's wife acted out what was in his heart in verse 26: *"But his wife looked back from behind him, and she became a pillar of salt."*

The final disgrace comes when Lot is apparently afraid to go into the very city he pleaded for, and ends up in the mountains. Lot's daughter now makes this remarkable statement of unbelief: *"And the firstborn said unto the younger, Our father is old, and there is not a man in the earth to come in unto us after the manner of all the earth: Come, let us make our father drink wine, and we will lie with him, that we may preserve seed of our father"* (**Genesis 19:18-32**).

Sadly, this sounds like all too many young single Christians who reason that there is no one for them to marry. So they resort to their own means, rather than trusting God in faith. They make their father drunk, commit incest with him, and bear children, Moab and Ammon – whose ancestors end up becoming two of Israel's worst enemies. That's the fruit of faithlessness, and they saw it in their father.

Children often follow the measure of faith they observe in their parents. All Lot's daughters had ever seen was a father committed to pursuing pleasure by the sight of his eyes. He had moral standards, but his life lacked a real, day-to-day trusting walk with God. Lot's life ends in sad disgrace – holed up in a mountain, stripped of all his possessions, bereft of his wife, and with his daughters getting him drunk and oblivious to get children. If there was a clear warning about the emptiness of worldliness, this is it.

"For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?"

Matthew 16:26

The antidote to the worldly Christian is separation and faith. There needs to be separation from the world. **James 1:27** tells us to keep ourselves unspotted from the world. **Romans 12:2** tells us not to be conformed to the world. And **1 John 2:15** tells us not to love the world. We must separate – spiritually, mentally, and yes, sometimes physically.

Then, we need to place our faith in God to provide us with all we need for life and godliness. **Hebrews 11** is a record of people who lived by faith. They did not exchange the better for the worse. They lived on faith because they wanted a better country, a better reward, a better life. Abraham exemplifies a man who lived by faith. Yes, he had some lapses, but the overall pattern of his life was to count the future promises of God as sure as present facts. This made him a man of faith, a holy believer, and a Friend of God.

Which are you? It's not about ability, or strength, or intelligence. It's about what you're trusting in. Trust in the world, reap a bitter harvest. Who wants to be a half-hearted adulteress? Trust in God, and you will never ultimately lose.