

Surrounded But Free

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It is all around us. It is not invisible; on the contrary, it is highly visible. Sometimes it is subtle, its pressures deceptive. At other times it is bold and brazen. It asserts itself everywhere, even in our homes. Sometimes it intrudes itself into the Church, seeking to corrupt its members.

It sets up its systems and programs. It establishes its own institutions and seeks to dominate existing ones. It reinforces its appeal by addressing itself to a combination of human needs, desires and emotions. Its objective is to make self-gratification supreme, and it uses people and things to promote that end.

What is it? The Bible calls it *the world*. It is not the physical earth with its natural resources, forces and beauties. It is the human system of priorities and patterns of behavior that make up mankind's self-centered life and lifestyles. It is society in rebellion against the true and living God.

Believers know that we live in a world that is set on pleasing itself. The crowd surges against us as it pursues a goal that is the direct opposite of the goal that believers are pursuing. The moral momentum of its willful and selfish pride is like the current of a river as it pushes against the soul.

Its programs for self-gratification are appealing. They who love pleasure rather than God have devised some very enticing attractions.

Pleasure itself is not wrong. God has made a beautiful world and He wants us to enjoy it with Him. In both creation and redemption God aims not only at His own glory and pleasure but also at our greatest good and happiness.

What is wrong is the *love* of pleasure and the *love* of the world. When people set their hearts on pleasure and misuse the world that God has created for them, they sin. To use a good thing for a selfish end is to abuse it. The world is habitually devising evil things. It is also perverting good things by using them selfishly. God wants us to love life and live it to the full for the greatest good to Him, to others, and to ourselves; but it is sin to put its joys and pleasures ahead of God and to seek them in ways that are displeasing to Him.

The world will continue to cause problems for believers. We cannot completely remove ourselves from the world as long as we are alive, even if we try to live like hermits.

The Lord Jesus understands our situation very well, for He spent years in a worldly environment. He mingled with all classes of people, yet He remained "separate from sinners" (Hebrews 7:26). He was surrounded by the world, but He kept Himself free from it. He did not pray that we would be removed out of the world, but that we would be kept from its evil—particularly "the evil one" behind it all (John 17:15, 16).

Jesus Christ "gave Himself for our sins, that He might deliver us from this present evil age [world]" (Galatians 1:4). He took us out of the world and took the world out of us. He filled us with the Holy Spirit, and sent us back into the world—at least our personal part of the world—as salt and light in society. *Complete separation—full preparation—total penetration.*

So the Bible commands us: "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 John 2:15).

God and the selfish world system are totally opposed to each other. If our face is toward one, our back is toward the other.

It is a question of allegiance. A change of heart will result in a change of allegiance. And fellowship. We can imagine the sadness in the heart of Paul when he wrote, "Demas has forsaken me, having loved this present world" (2 Timothy 4:10).

The best defense against the appeal of the world is a mind that is set on spiritual things. The set of one's mind will direct the flow of one's emotions and the course of one's behavior. Thus we are told, "Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth" (Colossians 3:2).

The heart and the mind of the true believer are totally incompatible with the heart and mind of this self-centered present age. Our motives are the opposite of its motives. For that reason so is the direction of our choosing, thinking and living.

A Christian in this world is a godly person living in an ungodly society, a loyal soldier in rebel-occupied territory. We love our enemies personally, while being constantly aware of totally opposite allegiances.

Because our spiritual direction and moral momentum are contrary to the world's, we believers are in continual conflict with it. Our lives are a reproof of it; we are an annoying reminder of its wrongness and wrong-headedness. Though we show love, endeavor to be congenial and helpful toward unbelievers, and carefully avoid a Pharisaical attitude, our consistent Christian living keeps reminding the world of the fallacy of its claim that its lifestyle is all right because "everybody is doing it."

This challenges the world and makes it uncomfortable. There is an uneasy feeling that this challenge is the challenge of truth and that Jesus Christ truly is humanity's only hope. This increases the self-doubt of worldlings and forces them to decide whether to accept the truth or to continue to oppose the witness of believers just as darkness opposes light.

So Jesus tells us, "If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you" (John 15:18, 19).

We are not to be paranoid or develop a "persecution complex." We are to penetrate society as the "salt of the earth," love people, and remember that this is our Father's world. At the same time we must recognize that the majority do not really want our Father's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. They want *their* will to be done instead, and people who obey, support and promote the will of God are annoyances and obstacles.

Because we have nothing in common with this world's selfishness and no fellowship with the practices that are set up to promote its carnal ends, we are commanded to separate ourselves from it.

2 Corinthians 6:14 - 18 is very clear and definite. Verse 17 says, "Come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, and I will receive you."

James 4:4 is very strong: "Adulterers and adulteresses! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God."

Also, Romans 12:2 urges us not to be conformed to this world, but to be transformed by the renewing of our mind. This is not a call to become anti-social. Believers are not a reclusive subculture. We are a distinct and dynamic counterculture whose godly lives challenge the idolatries and immoralities of this age.

All of these Biblical injunctions are logical. They say, in effect, "Follow the route that leads to your goal; if you love Jesus Christ, then get off the bus loaded with people going the wrong way!"

"But my friends are all doing it." You might be already hooked!

"But they won't understand." They will if they get some clear signals from you as to where your loyalties are.

They might "think it strange that you do not run with them in the same flood of dissipation, speaking evil of you" (1 Peter 4:4), but they will never accuse you of confusing or deceiving them.

It is assuring to know that this present ungodly world system cannot of itself harm the Christian. We can be surrounded by its worst pressures, yet be free from its power. This is because believers are dead to the world. We are in the world, but not of the world (John 17:14). Paul's testimony is our testimony: "But God forbid that I should glory, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world has been crucified to me and I to the world" (Galatians 6:14).

Jesus assured us, "Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). So long as Christ lives in the heart, the world cannot get control of it. Our Lord will not lead us in ways that do not please Him or to frequent places where He is not glorified.

With Christ in control, our concern is not, "What pleases me?" or, "What pleases the crowd?", but "What pleases my Lord!"

"For whatever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith" (1 John 5:4).