

Friendship With the World

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 21 February 2021

Preacher: Colin Dow

[0 : 0 0] Worldliness is a word very much going out of fashion in the church. Over the years, many words which once were common have gone out of fashion.

So you'll struggle to hear words like teletext and automobile ever being used today, far less words like nincompoop or gibberish.

Well, worldliness is one such word which has gone out of fashion in the church. Worldliness is a distinctively Christian word. I've never heard it used in any other setting.

When I was growing up as a young Christian, it was worldly for a Christian to go to the theatre or to a dance. It was worldly for a Christian girl to wear trousers or for a Christian boy to wear his hair long.

As I look back, I wonder whether the problem was that we had our definitions of worldliness all wrong, even if our motives were right.

[1 : 0 1] This evening, I want us to consider together whether, according to James, the brother of our Lord, it is right for the world, worldliness, to go out of fashion in the church, or whether, in fact, we need both to retain it, but also to define worldliness the way that James defines it.

Well, from these verses, James 4, verses 4 through 6, following on from his discussions on wisdom, we now move on to his discussions on worldliness. And the two, of course, are connected, are they not?

Wisdom from below, that foolishness which leads to fights and quarrels, is by definition worldly. Wisdom from above, that wisdom which leads to peace and unity, is by definition heavenly.

Well, let me suggest two things this evening. First of all, we have a problem with worldliness. And secondly, God has an answer to our worldliness.

At the end, judge for yourself whether the word worldly has had its day and should be replaced by something else.

[2 : 2 1] First of all, then, we have a problem with worldliness. We have a problem with worldliness. James begins his discussion about worldliness by stating, You adulterous people, do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity against God?

Therefore, whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. Well, being the Lord's brother, he learned from the best. Remember, James is speaking here to Christians in the church, not non-Christians outside the church.

And he's telling them in no uncertain terms that they've got a problem with worldliness. It's all too easy for us in the church to throw accusations out toward the world.

But James' primary interest in ours also must be in the conduct of God's people. He's telling us that the Christian church in every age has a problem with worldliness.

But what is worldliness? Well, as we work our way through the verses, we uncover many of its aspects. In the first instance, in the beginning of verse 4, James describes it as spiritual adultery.

- [3 : 40] Spiritual adultery. Immediately, James' readers, the majority of whom were Jewish and very familiar with the Old Testament, were thinking of a lady called Gomer.
- We spoke about her this morning. Gomer was the wife of the prophet Hosea. He lavished his love upon her. She bore three children to him. But despite it all, she committed adultery with other men.
- How like the church of Jesus Christ in every age. We're so deeply loved in the cross and resurrection of our Lord. God has lavished his love upon us.
- But despite it all, we set our love upon others. In Hosea's day, people were committing spiritual adultery by worshipping both the God of Israel and the gods of the surrounding nations.
- In the days of James and in our day, Christians commit spiritual adultery by being more in love with the world than we are in love with Jesus. Worldliness is spiritual adultery when we love anything else, whatever that anything should be, more than God.
- [4 : 56] Worldliness is spiritual adultery when we love anything else, whatever that anything else should be, more than God.
- It may be our reputations. It may be our freedoms. It may be our comforts. But it doesn't have an awful lot to do with theatres, dancing, trousers and long hair.
- But in the second instance, from the second part of verse 4, James describes worldliness as spiritual enmity.
- He writes, And again, those to whom James was writing knew their Old Testaments.
- They would have readily understood the imagery. Throughout their history, the people of Israel were constantly at war with their enemies. We could choose a hundred million examples of this, but think of Nehemiah and his enemies, Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite, and Geshem the Arab.
- [6 : 15] From the very beginning of Nehemiah's God-given project to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, these three enemies conspired against him, mocking him, undermining him, and threatening him.
- And it's almost like James is challenging us here in verse 4. He's saying to us, Whose side are you on? Nehemiah's or the three ugly sisters?
- That's the question. Whose side are you on? God has so loved us that he gave his one and only son for us. But are we on his side?
- In the days of Nehemiah, God's people committed spiritual enmity by siding with Jerusalem's enemies, Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem.
- In the days of James and in our day, Christians commit spiritual enmity by siding with the world more than we do with Jesus. And so worldliness is spiritual enmity when we side with anything else, whatever that anything else might be, more than God.
- [7 : 34] It may be our prosperity. It may be our pleasures. It may be our careers. But it's not theatres. And it's not dancing.
- And it's not long hair. And it's not trousers. One example of this may be how we side with the world in its definitions.
- In its definitions. The world defines love as one thing. The word of God defines love as something else.
- Who is right? The word of God or the world? The world defines sin as one thing.
- The word of God defines sin as something else. Who is right? Who do we side with? God or the world? James says, you want to side with the world?

[8 : 32] Well, that's fine, but it makes you an enemy of God. It makes you a Sanballat, a Tobiah, a Geshem. According to James, worldliness is both spiritual adultery and spiritual enmity.

Jerry Bridges, in his remarkable book, *Respectable Sins*, which you can pick up in the church library when we get back there, which is hopefully quite soon, defines worldliness in this way.

Worldliness is being attached to, engrossed in, or preoccupied with the things of this temporal life. worldliness is being attached to, engrossed in, or preoccupied with the things of this temporal life.

And these things may not be sinful in and of themselves. Things like qualifications and careers and comforts. But according to Bridges, it is the high value we set upon them.

The high value we set upon them. Because if anything is more important to us than Jesus, anything, then we're acting in a worldly fashion.

[9 : 48] Or if we choose to side with anything else other than Jesus, then we're acting in a worldly way. Roger Ellsworth, one of the commentators on the book of James, he defines the world in this way.

He says, the world is life that is lived as if this present world were all that there is. It is life that is lived without regard to God.

It is life that is lived according to the values, desires, and aspirations of this temporal realm. He then proceeds fascinatingly to define worldliness.

And I think this is the best definition of any definition I've read. Worldliness is thinking like the world, talking like the world, and acting like the world.

Thinking like the world, talking like the world, and acting like the world. And again, these things may not be sinful in themselves. Which of us does not aspire to qualifications, and to careers, and to comforts?

[10 : 59] But according to Ellsworth, these are aspirations of the temporal realm. If they become more important to us than Jesus, then we're committing spiritual adultery.

Or if we choose to side with them against Jesus, we're committing spiritual enmity. I wonder, is this a problem for us in today's Christian church?

Do we think like the world? Do we talk like the world? Do we act like the world? Are we attached to, engrossed in, or preoccupied with the things of this temporal life?

Let's take a couple of challenging examples from our own setting that have got nothing to do with theatres or dancing. First, how do we perceive leadership in the church?

How do we perceive leadership in the church? Is it about status or service? Is it about how we control others?

[12 : 08] Or is it about how we encourage and equip others to be faithful to Christ and fruitful for Christ? Second, on what basis do we make judgments about one another?

On what basis do we make judgments about one another? Do we judge purely by appearance? Or are we looking deeper? Are we always making judgments about others with a view to them conforming to our stereotype of what a Christian should and should not look like?

With a view to them, or are we judging them and helping them along with a view to them becoming more humble and holy in Christ?

You know, I'm not accusing us of anything. I'm accusing myself as much as anyone else. Perhaps as we drag ourselves away from a previous generation to a previous generation's addiction to defining worldliness in terms of things which really weren't very difficult to avoid, things like theatres and dancing and hairstyles and trousers, we're being drawn to an altogether more radical and challenging view of worldliness.

It is thinking like the world, it is talking like the world, it's acting like the world. It is being engrossed in, preoccupied with the things of this temporal life.

[13 : 41] It is spiritual adultery and spiritual enmity. Listen very carefully to what I'm going to say here. Worldliness is not about what we watch on the television after the 9pm watershed.

It's about what we watch on the telly before the 9pm watershed. Our constant imbibing of the message that this present world is all there is.

Therefore, make sure you make enough of its money and its pleasures and its comforts. It's for us as individual Christians to echo the prayer of David in Psalm 139, Search me, O God, and know my heart.

Try me and know my thoughts. See if there be any offensive way in me and lead me in the way everlasting. One thing's for sure. Worldliness, in whatever form it takes, is very dangerous.

It makes us enemies of God, verse 4. However, it's deeply opposed by God, verse 6. Hosea's wife, Gomer, did not come to a good end and neither did Sinballat, Tobiah, or Geshem the Arab.

[14 : 58] God stood against them and they made themselves God's enemies. Do then we have a problem with worldliness in Glasgow City Free Church? You know, I think every church in every place at every time does and so do we.

Furthermore, do we have a problem as individual Christians with worldliness, with thinking like the world, speaking like the world, and acting like the world? Again, I think every Christian in every time and every place does.

Only Jesus Christ, our righteous Lord and perfect Saviour, only of Him could it be said that never once did He commit spiritual adultery or spiritual enmity.

Yes, to use a well-worn phrase, Houston, we have a problem. The problem is our worldliness. We have a problem with worldliness.

But secondly, God has an answer to our worldliness. God has an answer to our worldliness.

[16 : 10] Well, if by now you're offended, that's actually quite a good sign. We all get defensive when God, through His Word, exposes our sinful hearts. To go back to a previous image James used, when we look in the mirror of God's Word, we're offended when we realize that perhaps we're not as pretty or as handsome as we thought we were.

And so I wouldn't be at all surprised if there's some among us who are deeply offensive at being told that we all have a problem with worldliness. Well, the answer is not to walk away from the mirror of God's Word and forget all about it.

The answer is to do something about it, to be a doer of the Word, not merely a listener. And as we work our way through this passage, we realize that God has an answer to our worldliness.

It's his answer. It's not our answer. It's his answer. Because our default answer as Christians would be to define worldliness in terms of making rules which are easy to obey.

Rules like, didn't I go to the cinema? Make sure you cut your hair. Girls don't wear trousers and don't dance ever.

[17 : 21] And as long as we keep these external rules, it's easy to keep our consciences quiet. But that's our answer. That's the application of the law of the Pharisees, not God's, the application of the gospel of grace.

And in fact, our answer, the application of the law, is just another example of worldliness. It makes our guilt before God even greater.

What then is God's answer to our problem of spiritual adultery and spiritual enmity, of placing a higher value upon the things of this world than we place on him, of siding with the world rather than siding with him?

Well, according to James, God's answer to the problem of our worldliness is twofold. First, his indwelling spirit, and secondly, the grace of God. They're both gospel solutions, the indwelling spirit and the grace of God.

First of all, the indwelling spirit. The indwelling spirit. Unlike his contemporary Paul, James does not present really a coherent doctrine of the Holy Spirit in his book.

[18 : 34] However, in verse five, he does use the doctrine of the indwelling Holy Spirit of God to point to how God has an answer to our sin of worldliness. He writes, James, here, summarizing the whole teaching of the Old Testament and of Jesus, the so-called scripture, points to the indwelling Holy Spirit.

The ESV has chosen to refer to the spirit in lower case, referring to the spirit of a man, but I want to suggest that it's far more superior to refer to the spirit, capital S, as referring to the Holy Spirit of God.

James tells us, God has made his Holy Spirit to dwell in us, a spirit over which he yearns jealously.

God the Holy Spirit is jealous for the entire devotion of the Christian whom he dwells. He is jealous that we love him more than we love anything else and that we side with him more than we side with anyone else.

Imagine a situation like this. A man marries a woman. She loves him. She cares for him. She feeds him. She bears his children but then he brings another lover into the house in addition to his wife.

[20 : 20] Now she has to share her bed, not just with her husband, but also with his lover. This is what we do to the Holy Spirit when we think like the world, when we talk like the world, and when we act like the world.

we bring another lover into our hearts, the hearts in which the Holy Spirit already dwells. That's how serious our worldliness is and how grievous it is to God.

But it's also the answer to our spiritual adultery and our spiritual enmity. God the Holy Spirit dwells in us. Our marriage bed is already full.

Our heart's got no space for any other. He's the spirit of wisdom who brings that wisdom from above into our lives, that wisdom which is pure and peaceable and sincere.

He's the spirit of power who empowers us to put into practice that wisdom from above. Think about it. Reflect upon it.

[21 : 23] The presence of the Holy Spirit, God himself, in our hearts, puts everything else in life into perspective. Jenny Bridges talks of worldliness as placing a higher value on temporal things, the things of this world, than we do on God.

And James is calling upon us as Christians and as a church to recognize that there is no deeper privilege and no higher value than to have the Holy Spirit dwelling within us.

God's God's love. It puts the good things in our lives, the things we're so preoccupied with, the things we so often idolize, into their proper place. It renews our dedication to always being on God's side.

worldliness. We can talk about the Spirit's power as He helps us to subdue our worldly tendencies. We can talk about the Spirit's ministry in pointing us to Jesus, in granting us repentance and strengthening us to walk in goodness of life.

But at its most basic level, I want all of us, if we have recognized that we have a problem with worldliness, and we all do, to understand this.

[22 : 43] The Holy Spirit of God, the blessed third person of the Holy Trinity, who so filled the life of Christ and raised Him from the dead, He lives in you.

The problem with worldliness is that it blinds us to the glorious significance of Christ. It lulls us into forgetting that the glorious Holy Spirit of Christ's power dwells within us.

So even now, pray that God would wake you up from the lulling sleep of your worldliness. God will open your eyes to the greatest of all privileges, that Christ the hope of glory by His Holy Spirit dwells in you.

in you. Realign your priorities around He whom you love the most, Jesus Christ Himself. Realign your priorities around He whom you love the most, Jesus Christ Himself.

The indwelling Spirit, God's first solution. God's second solution, the grace of God. The grace of God. God. In verse 6, James quoting Proverbs 3, 34 writes, but He gives more grace.

[24 : 05] Therefore it says, God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. God opposes the proud to those who, to use Roger Elworth's definition, live life without regard to God.

God opposes them. But to those who recognize that they need help, God gives more grace. They recognize that they're struggling in their battle against spiritual adultery.

They're being tempted by the things of this temporal world, its careers, its comforts, its qualifications. They want to love God and they want to be faithful to God, but the temptations are strong.

It's to them God gives more grace. The grace to love Him more than anything else in this world. Or they recognize that they're struggling in their battle against spiritual enmity.

They're wrestling with the counter-cultural teaching of the Word of God with regard to issues like love and money and gender and sex and relationships. They want to side with God, but under pressure from an ever increasing relaxation of standards in society, the temptations to compromise are strong.

[25 : 21] They want to do the right thing, but they lack the strength. It's to them God gives grace, the grace to all side with Him against everything else.

The hymn says, He giveth more grace when the burdens grow greater, but also He giveth more grace when temptations are sharper.

Subduing our worldliness will not be achieved by retreating away from the world into ivory-towered monasteries or by turning our backs on normal family life and the working life of the average British taxpayer.

Subduing our worldliness will be achieved as we actively and intentionally allow the grace of God to fill and strengthen us more completely in and through our normal family and working lives.

Lord, give me the grace to always put you first in my life today.

[26 : 35] Not my desire for control, not my comforts, not my pleasures, but you. Not my money, not my relationships, not my ambitions, but you.

Perhaps one of the reasons the word worldliness has fallen out of fashion in the modern church is because we've just plain given up the fight against it. Perhaps today you're at an important juncture in your life.

You're on the point of leaving school or university. You're thinking of perhaps a career change or a new relationship or you're perhaps even approaching retirement.

And you're looking for guidance as to your next step in life. Let me tell you that James can't give it to you and won't give it to you. He won't tell you whether you should pursue career A or career B.

But what he will give you is something far more profound and important. It's got nothing to do with theatres and dancing and long hair and trousers. he's saying always put Jesus first.

[27 : 54] To love him with all the passion a wife loves her husband and to side with them even if that means the world will always be against you.

It means to place a higher value upon the Holy Spirit whom God has placed within your heart than in all the careers, in all the qualifications, and in all the comforts of this world.

It means to daily rely and commit yourself to the grace of God which according to James in verse six is always more. He giveth more grace. You know the strange thing is experience teaches that when you seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness which is what James is talking about here.

God will add all these other things to you as well. Careers, comforts, and qualifications. But it's Jesus. It's always Jesus who must come first.

Anything else is worldliness. helpful. Amen. Purdue Mississippi Touchs throat.