

Sing to the LORD!

Rev. David VanBrugge

Psalter 250

Scripture: Psalm 98

Psalter 395

Sermon Text: Psalm 98:1

Psalter 264

Psalter 261

In Colossians 3, Paul admonishes the Colossians, “If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above.” He then goes on to give practical instruction concerning putting sins to death, pursuing right communication, being loving with each other; and then he tells them to teach and admonish each other in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs. What is the connection between the resurrection and singing? Why do we sing together as we worship the risen Lord on Sunday? This question will be answered as we study our text, the first eight words of Psalm 98: “Oh, sing to the LORD a new song!”

Why Christians Must Sing

In some other religions, the leaders may chant or sing. But have you ever wondered why Christians sing together? Because Christians must sing. Maybe you are thinking this is a strange first thought, especially if you are one of those who prefer listening over singing. When you read or hear about singing in church, you think that it is a good principle for those who can, but you exempt yourself because you think you cannot.

But, dear friends, as we turn to God's Word, we read, "Sing to the LORD." This is not just an encouragement for you to do something for better health or more emotional worship; it is not optional, it is required. It is a command.

Sing to Respond

In a sense, singing is always a response to something. Songs describe our thoughts and attitudes, our reactions, our fears, our joys. This is true in church and outside of church. Many times songs are responding to events, people, pets, places, and political positions. But Psalm 98 says to sing "to the Lord." Respond to the Lord "for he has done marvelous things. His right hand and his holy arm hath gotten him the victory."

That singing is a response is very apparent in the first time singing is mentioned in the Bible. Already in Genesis 4, we read of Jubal, the father of those who played the harp and the flute. But the first time we read of people singing is in Exodus 15. By then, Israel had been in Egypt for years, God had sent Moses and Aaron to confront Pharaoh and lead the people out, the Lord had dried up the Red Sea for the Israelites, and He had drowned the army of the Egyptians. After all this, we read, "And Israel saw that great work which the LORD did upon the Egyptians: and the people feared the LORD, and believed the LORD, and his servant Moses. *Then* sang Moses and the children of Israel this song unto the LORD, saying... I will sing to the LORD... The LORD is my strength and song, and he is become my salvation."

When you sing, "The Lord our God is good," is it a response to God? When you hear of the resurrection of Christ, and all its implications, what is your response? Is it to "sing of my Redeemer, and His wondrous love to me"?

Sing to Teach and Learn

Every teacher understands the power of song to teach memorization to children. When we first learn the alphabet, we learn the alphabet song.

The most important thing we can teach is found here in Psalm 98: “Sing to the LORD a new song, for *He has done* marvelous things.” This needs to be taught to the next generation: “Let children thus learn from history’s light, To hope in our God and walk in his sight...” (Psalter 213:3). We teach things about God when we sing songs.

This was done in the Old Testament. Barak and Deborah were judges God used to subdue their enemies. In order that the people would learn that God was still active and still used people, they sang in Judges 5:3: “Hear, O ye kings; give ear, O ye princes; I, even I, will sing unto the LORD...” And then, as part of their song, they detailed history. Their song narrates the events about the fight, and about Jael and Sisera. The chapter concludes with the impact of that song: “So the land had rest for forty years” (Judg. 5:31). Singing has impact.

If we reflect on how singing teaches, we can quickly see that what we listen to matters. Some very elderly people cannot remember their spouse and children, but they can still remember the songs of their childhood. What will your children be singing when they get old?

Sing to Witness

The marvelous things God has done are not to be kept just for you and me. They are so marvelous others need to hear them as well. Singing of them is one way to witness.

That’s one of the great things about Handel’s *Messiah* being performed every Christmas. You may have seen the online video that was popular a couple of years ago. There were scores of Christmas shoppers in a Macy’s store: people going about their seasonal busyness, thinking only

about what they were doing. All of a sudden, they stopped as a flashmob broke out in song: “Hallelujah—For the Lord God omnipotent reigneth.” Only God knows how many unbelievers heard their first line of Scripture that day in a very memorable way.

Further, because witnessing is about the truth that people need to know, think about, and ask about, we need to be careful what we sing. That is why our songs in church should not be about products or events or a country or platitudes or even ourselves, but the Lord. Our songs are to witness of His goodness, His truth, and His justice. Habakkuk was the prophet burdened with how the people continually departed from covenant life. But he sings, “O LORD, revive thy work in the midst of the years.... Although the fig tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labour of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls: Yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will joy in the God of my salvation” (Hab. 3:17–19). What a witness in a dark period of history—a witness to truth, judgment, and hope.

Sing to Remember and Revive

There are times in life when we forget things. During a test, we might forget what we studied. During a trial, we might forget our blessings. In both these situations, as well as others, it may help to sing. Singing reminds us of things we already knew and experienced but somehow forgot. Our brain can retrieve this information and help us. If we were to keep forgetting, there would be negative consequences. So we sing to remember as well as revive hearts.

David did this with the people of Israel. The ark had just been brought back to Jerusalem, and it was a time of rejoicing. He appointed some Levites to commemorate and David gave them this song: “Give thanks unto the

LORD,... Sing unto him, sing psalms unto him, talk ye of all his wondrous works.... Remember his marvellous works that he hath done, his wonders, and the judgments of his mouth” (1 Chron. 16:8–15).

If you need to remember God’s love, sing about it! If you need to remember God’s control, sing about it! If you need to remember God’s faithfulness, sing about it! Remembering brings joy and comfort. Remembering brings resolve. Remembering revives, and inspires our own hearts and that of the congregation. That is why some of the psalms, though they are still God-centered, are directed to believers: “Hope in the Lord ye waiting saints, and He will well provide” (Psalter 362:1).

Sing to Rejoice in God’s Work

This may seem like overlap with the first reason to sing—to respond. But responding is often in relation to events and truths. Rejoicing is more personal; it is about a personal relationship with God.

We can sing because God sings. We rejoice and sing because God has revealed in Zephaniah 3:14–17: “Sing, O daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel; be glad and rejoice with all the heart.... The LORD hath taken away thy judgments.... The LORD thy God in the midst of thee is mighty; he will save, he will rejoice over thee with joy; he will rest in his love; he will joy over thee with singing.” This must be why we sing. It is why Old Testament saints sang: to rejoice in God’s work. Hannah came to the tabernacle in Shiloh to ask the Lord for a son. She received a promise and then a child. But when she returned to the tabernacle to dedicate Samuel, her song did not focus on the tabernacle or her son, but her relationship with the LORD: “My heart rejoiceth in the LORD, mine horn is exalted in the LORD.... There is none holy as the LORD: for there is none beside thee” (1 Sam. 2:1–2).

Do you sing to rejoice in who God is and in what He has done for you? When you sing, is it your heart's response to God? Luther once said that "music is a fair and lovely gift of God which has often wakened and moved me to the joy of preaching.... Next after theology, I give to music the highest place and the greatest honor.... My heart bubbles up and overflows in response to music, even in dark times."¹ And not because it helped him focus on his own strength, but because he was reminded that "A Mighty Fortress is Our God."

We must sing in order to praise God—our strength, our song, our salvation. Why do you sing? Or maybe, why don't you sing? What are your favorite songs? Are they rejoicing in God? What songs on your I-pod do you sing along to? Who do you want to sing about?

There are many reasons to sing, but the central reason is because of the Lord and His marvelous deeds. We sing to respond, to witness, to remember, to revive, to rejoice in God. There is a place for singing and music in other aspects of life that we might not consider explicitly religious, but it becomes a matter of balance and priority.

What Christians Must Sing

There are many things to sing about, but Psalm 98 helps us focus on three of them. When we go back to verse 1, we read, "Sing to the LORD a new song." Does "a new song" mean we should not sing songs from the past? Of course not. Think of it this way: when you are first converted, you sing a new song. If God retuned your heart, put a new tune in your heart, there will be a new song in your mouth. You may even throw out some of your old music or delete albums from your device.

1. Quoted in Roland Herbert Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1978), 352.

But it also has the implication of being a recent song—you cannot say, I sang about that when God first saved me. It needs to be recent. Sing to the Lord now. Keep singing. Psalm 98 tells us we should keep singing about three things.

New songs of salvation to our God

This appears most clearly in verses 1–3: “He has done marvelous things.” What is the most extraordinary thing God has ever done? What has He done, not in a human way, but with His own right hand, His holy arm of strength? He has sent Christ into the world and into the lives of people! He has conquered Satan and death and the grave. He has revealed that so clearly. “The LORD has made known his salvation.... all the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God.”

If we look at those verses again, we notice two other words: righteousness and mercy. Verse 2 says, “His righteousness hath he openly shewed.” It is Christ’s righteousness that brings salvation to people. Further, verse 3 says, “He hath remembered his mercy and his truth toward the house of Israel.” It is the mercy, the goodness of the Father, and His covenant faithfulness that allows that salvation to come to people.

That must be our song. It was Mary’s song: “My soul doth magnify the Lord, And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour. For he hath regarded the low estate of his handmaiden.... For he that is mighty hath done to me great things; and holy is his name” (Luke 1:46ff).

We must sing of this revelation of Christ. We must sing also of how God makes it known: He still delivers from sin and its penalty, its power, and its presence. He still delivers from death through the promise of resurrection and eternal life. God still delivers from Satan through Jesus Christ—not just for the church or people

of the past, but also for you and me. That is how singing becomes personal: “O God, whene’er I cried to Thee, Thou heardest me and didst deliver.” We must be able to sing songs of salvation.

New Songs of Obedience to our King

This appears particularly in verse 6, although the three-verse section of verses 4–6 all show it. How?

Notice that the first words of verse 4, as well as the first words of the second phrase in verse 6, are “Make a joyful noise before the Lord, the King.” That phrase in the original highlights a military action. “Make a noise that signals action is coming.”

When men and women announce their candidacy for presidency, these are always to a cheering and shouting crowd. What would people think if there were no expressions of joy? How will we welcome our King? Loud hosannas must be lifted up. The King is worthy of our greatest praise. That is one of the reasons the list of instruments is used in verses 5–6: harp, voice, trumpet, cornet. As Charles Spurgeon wrote, “Let every form of exultation be used, every kind of music pressed into the service till the accumulated praise causes the skies to echo the joyful tumult. There is no fear of our being too hearty in magnifying the God of our salvation, only we must take care that the song comes from the heart, otherwise the music is nothing but a noise in His ears, whether it be caused by human throats, or organ pipes, or far-resounding trumpets. Loud let our hearts ring out the honours of our conquering Saviour; with all our might let us extol the Lord who has vanquished all our enemies, and led our captivity captive.”²

2. Charles Spurgeon, *Treasury of David* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977), 2:212.

Even though our best efforts fall short of the riches of the King of all the earth, we must make a joyful noise before Him as obedient subjects. Colossians 3:16 tells us how singing can help with obedience: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord. And whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him.”

When we believe that the King deserves obedience, we will make noise signaling actions that tell that the King is coming, and the people are to be ready. And we can do this through song: songs of obedience, songs of surrender. Have you ever really sung, “God is King forever, let the nations tremble, Throned above the cherubim, by all the earth adored; He is great in Zion, high above all peoples; Praise Him with fear, for Holy is the Lord”?

New Songs of Judgment to our Judge

This is clearly stated in verse 9: “for he cometh to judge the earth: with righteousness shall he judge the world, and the people with equity.” Why is judgment a reason to sing?

After one particular warning the people of their idolatry and coming judgment and an offer of forgiveness, Isaiah concluded with these words: “Sing, O ye heavens; for the LORD hath done it: shout, ye lower parts of the earth: break forth into singing, ye mountains, O forest, and every tree therein” (Isa. 44:23).

Psalms 98 also references nature in relation to judgment. We know God created the sea, the rivers, the trees, and the hills. But why will they be joyful together about the Judge of the earth? Consider Romans 8:19, 22: “For the earnest expectation of the creature waiteth for the manifestation of the sons of God.... Because the creature

itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption.... For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now.”

Even the creation is longing for the day when Christ will come back. It claps its hands, it rejoices when it considers that His people will be redeemed. Isaiah concludes that description of singing mountains and trees with: “for the LORD hath redeemed Jacob, and glorified himself in Israel.” This gives new meaning to how Isaac Watts used Psalm 98 for his “Joy to the World”: “Joy to the world! the Saviour reigns; Let men their songs employ; While fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains; Repeat the sounding joy.” It’s not about Christ’s birth but His return. That will bring final redemption.

Are you able to sing about judgment? God will come as a Judge who is righteous and equitable. To those who do not fear Him, His judgment will not be of redemption but of condemnation. There will be no new song. No one can sing in hell; there will only be wailing and gnashing of teeth.

Satan cannot sing because ultimately the righteous God will judge and redeem His people, for His Son’s sake. Their song will be, “Thou art worthy, O LORD, to receive glory and honour and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created” (Rev. 4:11).

The singing of Christian martyrs who were going to their deaths in the arena alerted the Roman Empire to the depth and reality of their conversion and allegiance to God. Their singing was a powerful response and witness. But the content was not about them or Rome either. This particular song was not yet written, but it can easily be imagined that those martyrs, surrounded by hostile crowds and hungry lions, were singing:

In Christ alone my hope is found;
He is my light, my strength, my song;
This cornerstone, this solid ground,
Firm through the fiercest drought and storm....
No pow'r of hell, no scheme of man,
Can ever pluck me from His hand;
Till He returns or calls me home—
Here in the pow'r of Christ I'll stand.³

We must sing songs of judgment and redemption. What do you sing? Even if you say you like Christian music, are you sure it is about the salvation through Christ, obedience to the King, and the coming Judge?

While we have much reason for singing from Psalm 98, there is one more question to consider: How should we sing? The psalms also help us understand that.

How We Must Sing

Singing is simply using the voice as a musical instrument. And as we have already seen, every Christian ought to sing to the best of his or her ability. Psalm 98 helps us to understand how practically we can improve on this.

Sing with Intention

Look once more at verse 4: “Make a joyful noise unto the LORD, all the earth: make a loud noise, and rejoice, and sing praise.” Notice three things: the noise must be made (this is no time for silent singing); this is true for all the earth, every tongue; and “make a loud noise, and rejoice, and sing praise.” This can be interpreted as burst forth, and sing, and play. Be intentional and do not hold back. Let it burst out of you.

3. Stuart Townend and Keith Getty, “In Christ Alone,” 2001. Taken from www.gettymusic.com.

The act of singing must be intentional. We need more singing in our days and in our homes. Sing with your personal devotions and with your family; in your cars, sing instead of listening to talk radio.

Choose songs with intention. This is true in the worship service: the opening song of a service is a response to the opportunity for worship; the song before the sermon prepares our minds for the message; the song after the sermon is a response to the Word. But you can be equally intentional about what you sing with your family, in your car, or when you are alone doing devotions.

Sing with Enthusiasm

Notice the adjectives that are used in verse 4: a joyful noise, a loud noise. Our singing must be with energy.

Sometimes that means with a loud noise; there is a place for the trumpet and the shofar in rejoicing. Sometimes that means with a soft noise; there is a place for the harp in meditation. But both loud and soft singing will be with enthusiasm because both are done meaningfully. Our singing can match the words and the music because we are enthusiastic about its message. Reflective words will be reflective singing. Joyful praise will be joyful singing. Sing to the praise of God with others around you.

John Wesley told his people: “Sing with courage. Beware of singing as if you were half asleep; but lift up your voice with strength. Be no more afraid of your voice now, nor more ashamed of its being heard, than when you sang the songs of Satan.”⁴ We should not mutter hallelujahs. Rejoice loudly before our God. It is not good when we express more enthusiasm in singing “Happy Birthday”

4. Originally in John Wesley, *Select Hymns: with Tunes Annexed* (1761). Taken from <http://exploringchurchhistory.com/john-wesley-hymns-directions-singing/>

to a friend than when singing psalms and praises to our Lord.

Sing with Understanding

Understand what you are doing. Have a positive attitude to singing because it is a response to the Lord and His marvelous things. Singing is a confession, a witness, a personal rejoicing.

We can sing with understanding when we sing alone, but we can also sing with understanding when we sing as a congregation. Singing in church is not like a spectator singing the national anthem at an event; it is an act of worship and is to be done with all of your heart, soul, mind, and strength. We unite as the body of Christ. We follow the tempo and rhythm given. We do not sing for others but with others.

Thus singing is a spiritual activity. What and how you sing reflects your heart. We need to ask ourselves, Do I understand what I am singing? Am I singing reflectively? Do I believe this? Know this? Feel this? Singing is not to please the pastor or your parents. Singing is not a lesser part of worship. Singing is spiritual worship of our God. You can only really sing if you know salvation, obedience, and redemption.

Singing with understanding here is preparation for the day when the greatest choir ever, “which no man can number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues, stand before the throne, and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands; and cry with a loud voice, saying, Salvation to our God which sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb.... Blessing, and glory, and wisdom, and thanksgiving, and honour, and power, and might, be unto our God for ever and ever. Amen” (Rev. 7:9–12).

Lessons from an Impenitent Thief

Rev. Maarten Kuivenhoven

Psalter 185:5–9

Scripture: Luke 23:26–43

Psalter 420:1, 2, 6

Sermon Text: Luke 23:39–43

Psalter 265

Psalter 4

And one of the malefactors which were hanged railed on him, saying, If thou be Christ, save thyself and us. But the other answering rebuked him, saying, Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation? And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss. And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom. And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise.

—Luke 23:39–43

Beloved, we have before us a very solemn record of the death of Christ and of two thieves. This compelling narrative highlights the heights of God's sovereignty through the condemnation of the one thief and the salvation of the other thief as they hang on either side of Christ. It also highlights the heights of man's responsibility in the gospel. We love to hear the gripping account of the thief on the cross who was saved at the last moment; we are attracted to his story because his life ends well. His life ends in eternal bliss. But perhaps we too quickly ignore the other thief, crucified on the other side of Jesus. Why is that? His life gives us a grim reminder of the opposite side of the coin of eternal destiny;

it offers a horrifying glimpse into the heart of a man who has salvation staring him in the face and yet blatantly rejects it. With God's help, we wish to focus on the lessons we can learn from this impenitent thief.

His Blasphemous Challenge

Let's briefly set up the context of this narrative by following the progression of the events as they lead to the crucifixion of Christ. Throughout his gospel, Luke contrasts two men: two sons (ch. 15); two men praying (ch. 18); two rich men (ch. 18–19); and now, in verse 23:32, we are introduced to two malefactors—evil men, criminals. “And there were also two others, malefactors, led with him [Jesus] to be put to death.” They were both crucified, one on either side of Jesus, verse 33 tells us: “And when they were come to the place, which is called Calvary, there they crucified him, and the malefactors, one on the right hand, and the other on the left.”

Two items from this part of the context are worthy of note. The first is that this setting is permeated with death. The very name of the place of crucifixion shows us that this is a place of death: it was called Calvary, from the Greek word “cranium” which we could translate “skull.” It is a place that reminds of the grave consequences of sin. It is a place of darkness and of profound justice, where criminals were executed for their deeds. The second thing to notice is that, in these details that Luke gives us, prophecy is being directly fulfilled. Isaiah prophesied that this would take place, “And he was numbered with the transgressors; and he bare the sin of many” (Isa. 53:12). These are details that we need to keep in mind as we narrow our focus on the impenitent thief.

The crowds gather around Christ and begin to mock and taunt Him in fulfillment of Psalm 22:7–8: “All they that see me laugh me to scorn: they shoot out the lip, they

shake the head, saying, He trusted on the Lord that he would deliver him: let him deliver him, seeing he delighted in him.” Then, as the focus shifts from the crowds at the foot of the cross, we hear a lone voice, an angry voice, a desperate voice, echoing the emptiness of a soul without God: “If thou be Christ, save thyself and us.” It is the voice of the impenitent thief as he picks up the sad refrain of the crowd around him.

He issues a blasphemous challenge to Jesus as they both face death. In verse 39, we read these words, “And one of the malefactors which were hanged railed on him.” The word “railed” literally means blasphemed. It means that this malefactor spoke irreverently or impiously about God. When he blasphemed Jesus, he blasphemed God.

His words revealed his *doubt and self-imposed blindness*. “If thou be Christ.” He is really a practical atheist. He does not really believe that Christ is the anointed One, the Messiah; he does not believe that Christ was sent from God for the salvation of sinners. Never for a moment did he think that Christ could really save him. This is not the doubting of a faint and weak faith. This doubt demonstrates the unwillingness of his heart. He is willingly suppressing the truth in unrighteousness of what he is witnessing. “If thou be the Christ” was doubt that led to self-imposed blindness and hardness of heart.

His challenge also reveals his *mockery and hardness of heart*. “Save thyself.” He joins the crowd in what Luke tells us is mockery. The crowds were shouting this very same thing: “He saved others; let him save himself, if he be Christ, the chosen of God.” The soldiers mock him: “If thou be the king of the Jews, save thyself.” The thief joins in this mockery. The end approaches and he thinks he has nothing to lose by mocking Christ and the claims that He has made. He unflinchingly challenges Him, making an open mockery of the Kingship and power of

Christ. It reveals his impenitent heart. He cries out for Christ to save Himself, but if Christ was to save Himself, there would be no salvation. Here was a direct challenge to Christ to end His mission of salvation. The Savior was hanging beside him and the man was unwilling to bow under Christ's sovereign claims.

It further revealed his *utter selfishness and desperation*. "Save thyself and us." Notice that the thief changes the refrain somewhat. The crowds at the foot of the cross were not in the straits that this thief is now in—he stands at death's door. He is in desperate straits and so he cries out, "If thou be the Christ, save thyself and us." He taunts Christ but does not believe Him. He thinks that in order to be rescued from the cross, Christ first needs to come down. He does not trust in Christ for salvation from sin but simply from the consequences of sin. He wants to escape death but on his own terms. In his desperation, he tries to escape. Ultimately, the cross and Christ on that cross was a stumbling block to this thief. He thought he could be rescued by Christ coming off the cross, but he missed the point that rescue came from Christ dying on that cross for sinners.

What do we learn then from this thief? Let's move through what he reveals about himself and find the invaluable spiritual lessons.

First, salvation is never on our own terms. Salvation is not simply an escape from the consequences of sin. This cheapens grace and minimizes the death of Christ on the cross. Salvation is from sin and its consequences. If salvation were simply salvation from the consequences of sin, then we could go on sinning and simply ask for forgiveness. God forbid. Salvation comes on God's terms—through the cross of Christ—and we say with Paul, "For

the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God” (1 Cor. 1:18).

Second, we must not wait until the moment of death to repent and believe the gospel. This man waited in his hardness of heart and he had no one but himself to blame for it. Certainly, the prospect of death and the impossibility of salvation after death should move us to seek God in repentance and faith. If you are unsaved, you should never despise the day of salvation. You have more than this thief; you have heard the gospel, perhaps even all of your life. If there is no excuse for the thief, there will be no excuse for you.

Third, impenitent sinners desperately need the grace of God to soften them in order to see their hearts of hardness and the beauty and glory of Christ as the Savior of sinners. This thief was near death, and yet he continued to be hard-hearted and impenitent. The sight of the dying Savior did not move him. His own prospect of eternal death and torment did not move him. But here we also see God’s sovereignty displayed in salvation: “Therefore hath he mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth” (2 Cor. 9:18). This is never an excuse, though, to sit back and say that your fate is sealed anyway. This truth ought to spur you on in repentance and faith, lest you fall under the same condemnation of the thief.

Fourth, for believers, this thief teaches us this lesson: we must never fall into complacency and be content with a lukewarm Christianity. This impenitent thief ought to spur us on to keep short accounts of sin with God and to live utterly dependent on His grace. His hardness of heart ought to cultivate in us a sensitive conscience and heart against sin and towards God. It should also spark in us profound gratitude for the grace of God which redeemed

us, because we know that outside of grace we are like this blaspheming thief.

His Worthy Condemnation

He makes this blasphemous charge, but how is this charge answered? It is not answered by Christ, but it is answered by the other thief on the cross. In his words, we see how this blasphemy is met with the severest condemnation, confirming the thief's death sentence. His condemnation is heightened by five factors.

First of all, his condemnation is heightened by his companion's rebuke. In Matthew and Mark, we read that both thieves were blaspheming and railing on Christ, but now one thief falls silent. He is grasped from the grip of eternal and spiritual death and ushered sovereignly and graciously into eternal life by Christ Himself. But he testifies as he hangs there in judgment for the crimes he committed, and his heart is opened to the reality of who Christ is. He speaks of what he has learned in these moments. As he speaks, he heightens the condemnation of the impenitent thief. Listen to what he says in verse 40: "Dost thou not fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation?" If the impenitent thief was ever wondering why he was hanging on the cross, he does not have to wonder any longer, does he? He is under the same condemnation as the penitent thief and the same condemnation as Christ—they are all counted as worthy of death. You would expect this rebuke to cut through to the soul of the impenitent thief, but it does not.

These words are a powerful warning to the impenitent thief and they are a powerful warning to impenitent sinners. If your condemnation has been pointed out before and you continue to ignore it, I warn you that it will only heighten your condemnation before the bar of God's justice. Every stab of the conscience that you have suppressed

will heighten your condemnation. Young people, every warning from your parents will heighten your condemnation. When your faithful friends and fellow sinners have rebuked you because of the condemnation you are in, what have you done with that rebuke? If you are elderly, well advanced in years and without grace, you surely have heard your condemnation as a sinner before God sounded from the pulpit. Will it heighten your condemnation or will it prod you to repentance and faith?

Second, his condemnation is heightened because the penitent thief highlights that the impenitent thief is living without the fear of God. That was the key difference between them: “Dost thou not fear God?” Perhaps the impenitent thief had a fear of death, but that fear of death lacked the fear of God. He did not want to think about standing before the judgment seat of God. He remained hardened to the very end. It’s like the interview I watched of Christopher Hitchens, a renowned atheist. As he was diagnosed with Stage IV esophageal cancer, he was interviewed and asked if he would change his mind about rejecting God. He responded that death did not alarm him and if there was something beyond death, he was always up for a surprise. I’m sure it was not a pleasant surprise. He demonstrated a lack of the fear of God.

That’s the question I ask of you. Do you not fear God, seeing we are in the same condemnation? Sin levels the playing field, and its wages are death. Death is inevitable, but what happens after remains unwritten for you. Do you not fear the God of infinite justice, who will and must punish sin? Do you not fear God, who spared not His own Son? Do you not fear God, wanting to know more of Him because of who He is? Do you not want to live for God, seeking His will because He is utterly worthy and glorious and lovely? Do you not fear Christ, who went to such lengths for the salvation of sinners? The word here

for fear is the word *phobos*, and it means to be terrified, frightened, put to flight. Here on the cross, the terrible, consuming fire of God's justice and holiness was on display. The awesome and heart-consuming love of God was on display in the death of Christ. That is what the penitent thief was convinced of as he saw Christ hanging there, but the impenitent thief ignored it. That is what the cross proclaims to us as well—God's infinite holiness and justice and love met together in the death of His Son to pay the price for sin. And as the penitent thief saw this price had to be paid by himself, he knew he couldn't. His fear of God drove him to Christ, but the impenitent thief lacked this fear and it drove him to his ruin. Here is one more attempt to warn and rebuke: "Do you not fear God?"

The impenitent thief's condemnation is heightened even more by his own crimes and crucifixion. There was nothing vicarious or substitutionary about his crucifixion. He was crucified at the place of the skull—Calvary. Again in the other thief's words we see this heightened condemnation. In verse 41, we read, "And we indeed justly; for we received the due reward of our deeds." The penitent thief is saying, "We are worthy of our punishment and condemnation." But the impenitent thief thought that Christ owed him something yet. There was still an element of self-justification when he cried out, "If thou be the Christ, save thyself and us." We do not read that he owned his condemnation. Nor do we read that he acknowledged the justness of what he was now undergoing.

If you remain unrepentant and in your sin, it will only serve to heighten your condemnation. There is no way that you can lessen or mitigate your sin in any way. It stands as a dark blemish on your account and can only be removed by submitting to the mercy of Christ. Don't let your crimes and punishment heighten your condemnation. You cannot reason it away and say that there is

nothing after death, “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad” (2 Cor. 5:10). Will your crimes be covered in the blood and righteousness of Christ or will they heighten your condemnation?

The penitent thief highlights another thing that only serves to heighten the condemnation of the impenitent thief: the innocence of Jesus. “But this man hath done nothing amiss” (v. 41). The innocence of Jesus testifies powerfully of His perfection. Here is the Lamb of God without blemish. He has done nothing out of place; He was chosen from among His fellow men to be the One without spot and blemish to be offered to God. And yet the thief remains impassable. The innocent Savior that he rejects will only heighten his condemnation.

What help is the innocence of Christ when you are close to death? Your life depends on the innocence and perfection of Christ. He is tempted in all points, yet without sin. He has done nothing amiss, and yet was counted as a transgressor, made to be sin so that you might be made the righteousness of God in Him. It is His blood, the blood of a lamb without blemish that redeems from sin. If this good news does not melt the hardest heart, I don’t know what it will take to soften your soul. For this thief, he did not care nor see the innocence and perfection of the Lamb of God. What about you?

Finally, there is one more thing that heightens the condemnation of the impenitent thief: his companion’s salvation. They were both in the same condemnation. They had committed similar crimes. They were both crucified. They both hung on either side of Jesus. They both saw Christ. They both faced death. And yet they faced it so differently at the very end. The penitent thief was broken for his sin; he saw in Christ what he needed. He

threw his entire being on Christ and pleaded for Christ to simply remember him. He knew he needed more than just the rescue from the cross. He needed rescue from himself and from the wrath of God against sin. He was saved. Salvation in all its glorious possibility shone before the impenitent thief—not only from the person of Christ, but also from the salvation of his former partner in crime. And yet we don't read that this changed his mind at all. There are only his last words of blasphemy and his silence as a memorial.

What a solemn lesson for us! We can see Christ and hear so much about Him, and yet remain so hard. You can even see the effects of grace in others, in your friends, in your family members, and yet remain so hard. The glorious possibility of salvation speaks to you and testifies to you. You cannot deny it and yet you suppress it. You say, "I don't want it" in different ways. You use the excuse that you're too far gone, but the penitent thief wasn't. You use the excuse, "I'm too near death"—and yet this impenitent thief wasn't too near death for the grace of God to take hold of him. If at the end of the day, you remain hard and unrepentant, you only have yourself to blame. It's not that God was lacking in showing the possibility and power of salvation. Will the conversion of others heighten your condemnation? Will you have rejected the power that you saw so evidently at work in others as insufficient for you? Bow before Christ tonight and kiss Him in faith lest your condemnation be made the worse. Learn the lessons from this impenitent thief! Take them to heart and turn to the Lord for salvation. Amen.

Using, Not Abusing the World

Dr. Joel R. Beeke

Read 1 Timothy 4:1–8; 1 John 2:15–17

One of the most fascinating sights on earth is a butterfly emerging from its chrysalis. In the process of metamorphosis, the caterpillar attaches itself to a stable object and forms a shell around itself. For a time, this chrysalis protects the worm while it develops its wings. Yet, once it has become a butterfly, it must break out of this shell, dry and expand its wings, and fly away. In some ways, the butterfly and its chrysalis illustrate the relationship of Christians to the world. God has provided a place for us in the world to protect us and meet our needs for a time as we change and grow in beauty. And yet, like butterflies, we must not cling to this world but be prepared to fly on to glory. Thus we must learn to use the world rightly, for it is but the chrysalis of the new creation.

My theme is, “Using, Not Abusing the World.”¹ So I begin by answering the question, “What do I mean by the world?” In the Bible, sometimes *world* means humanity in general, but we are not talking about using people. The New Testament also speaks of *world* as the sinful, corrupt system of beliefs, values, relationships, and activities of

1. This sermon is an expanded version of an address I gave for the Reformed Families Conference at the Creation Museum on June 12, 2015.

fallen mankind, but again, I am not, first and foremost, using the word in this way. When I speak of using but not abusing the world, I am referring to the resources and objects around us, such as apple trees and horses, iron and copper in the earth, and the cars and computers formed by man out of them. Psalm 24:1 says, “The earth is the LORD’s, and the fulness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein. For he hath founded it upon the seas, and established it upon the floods.”

It is fitting for us to address this topic, because how we relate to the world springs directly from the doctrine of creation. On the one hand, creation tells us that *the world came from God*. It is His creation and therefore it is fundamentally good. Genesis 1 opens and closes with these statements: “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.... And God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, it was very good.” Between those verses is the account of the creation of mankind in God’s image, with the delegated authority to rule over, use, and enjoy God’s world.

On the other hand, the doctrine of creation teaches us that *the world is not God*. Therefore we should not worship creation or confuse God with His creatures or visible images of them. That is precisely the horrible error that mankind has fallen into, as Paul explains in Romans 1. By rejecting the glory of God shining in His creation (Ps. 19:1), we have enslaved ourselves to His creatures by making idols of them. The very world God created good has become evil to us, not because it is evil, but because we twist it and elevate it and set our hearts upon it to be our God. That is what we mean by worldliness. We must resist and overcome this abuse in order to participate in the new creation in Christ.

As fallen human beings we live in tension regarding our proper relationship to the world. To explore what it

means to use the world as God’s gift but not abuse it as if it were God, we will consider each side of the tension: using the world, based on 1 Timothy 4:1–8, and not abusing the world, based on 1 John 2:15–17. Thus, my theme is “Using, Not Abusing the World” which I will address in two thoughts:

1. Use the world as God’s good gift (1 Timothy 4)
2. Do not abuse the world as if it were God (1 John 2)

Use the World as God’s Good Gift

The apostle Paul warns that we must guard against denying the goodness of God’s creation, and against legalistic or ascetic prohibitions that oppose enjoying God’s world. He went so far as to say that legalism and asceticism are from Satan. He wrote in 1 Timothy 4:1–5,

Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils; speaking lies in hypocrisy; having their conscience seared with a hot iron; forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from meats, which God hath created to be received with thanksgiving of them which believe and know the truth. For every creature of God is good, and nothing to be refused, if it be received with thanksgiving: for it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer.

Though people who promote legalistic rules may seem very spiritual and scrupulous, Paul says their consciences are actually profoundly damaged, “seared with a hot iron,” so that they are insensitive to right and wrong. Their teachings are the “doctrines of devils.” It is diabolical to forbid people to enjoy the sweet intimacy of marriage or the savory taste of ham or beef because “every creature of God is good.” Our Reformed heritage encourages us to acknowledge and rejoice in the beauty and goodness

of God's world. When we gaze upon towering mountains, listen to singing birds, and taste bread spread with butter and strawberry jam, we truly can confess, "The LORD is good to all: and his tender mercies are over all his works" (Ps. 145:9).

A stunning truth revealed in the Garden of Eden is that God not only created the world to meet our needs but also to give us pleasure. The Lord God did not feed Adam and Eve with dry crusts of bread but surrounded them with luscious fruit, beautiful trees, sparkling rivers, and land containing gold and gemstones (Gen. 2:8–15). So Paul declares that the living God "giveth us richly all things to enjoy" (1 Tim. 6:17).

John Calvin (1509–1564) said, "God provided food... not only to provide for necessity but also for delight and good cheer."² He then asked whether God would make flowers so beautiful and fragrant if He did not intend us to enjoy them with our eyes and noses. God also invented the diversity of colors. And God made some materials more precious and beautiful than others, such as gold, silver, ivory, and marble. Pierre Viret (1511–1571), a friend of Calvin, wrote, "God has not only provided in these things for the necessities of mankind, but also for their desires and pleasures, and has desired to join together an excellent beauty with profit and usefulness."³

So, if you are a believer, how are we to use the world as God's good gift? Let me give you three ways:

2. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 3.10.2.

3. Pierre Viret, *Instruction Chretienne* (1564), cited by Douglas F. Kelly, *Systematic Theology, Volume One, The God Who Is: The Holy Trinity* (Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus Publications, 2008), 332.

Use the World with a Heart of Gratitude

Paul's words to Timothy give us practical directions on how we are to use this beautiful, profitable, pleasurable world. In 1 Timothy 4:4 Paul says, "For every creature of God is good, and nothing to be refused, if it be received with thanksgiving." If we view the world as God's creation, then every good thing is a gift from heaven above (James 1:17). So we should always look beyond the gift to the Giver. Calvin said, "All things were created for us that we might recognize the Author and give thanks for his kindness toward us."⁴ I am not speaking of a superficial "thank you" that we say to be polite and then go off to focus on the gift and ignore the person who gave it. That would fill the mind with various things but stupefy that heart towards God.

Gratitude deems the Giver to be a greater treasure than the gift. We must not use God to get more of what we want; we must use the world to get more of God. Every glimpse of majesty we see in the starry galaxies will then make us say, "O LORD our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth!" (Ps. 8:1). Every drop of honey or maple syrup that we taste will then make us think, "God is so good!"

Psalms 148 calls upon every part of the world to praise the Lord because He made it. The psalmist provides us with a catalog of God's creation: the heights of heaven and the hosts of angels dwelling in them; the sun, moon, stars, and clouds above us in the firmament; sea monsters in ocean depths or the fire, hail, snow, vapors, and storms that sweep over the dry land; mountains and hills, fruit trees and cedars; wild beasts and cattle, creeping things and flying birds; kings, generals, and judges of the earth; young men and maidens, old men and little children. He says, "Let them praise the name of the LORD: for his name alone is excellent; his glory is above the earth and heaven"

4. Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.10.3.

(v. 13). Creation moves us to praise the Creator because the cause is always greater than the effect. God's glory transcends everything the world can offer us.

Gratitude is love returned for love bestowed. True thankfulness is a childlike response of love to the Father who has so greatly loved us in Jesus Christ. It views all of creation through gospel eyes, seeing the world as the handiwork of the God who "sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins" (1 John 4:10). We respond by saying, "We love him, because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19). In this, as John Owen (1616–1683) explained, God's children have communion with their heavenly Father. They receive His gifts by faith in Christ, and "they make suitable returns unto him."⁵ They use the world with a heart of gratitude.

Use the World with a Mindset of a Pilgrim

We use the world in a way that is holy and pleasing to God when we do so as directed by the truths revealed in Holy Scripture, or as Paul says, as "sanctified by the word of God" (1 Tim. 4:5). We must not use the things of God's creation to break God's commandments. But we must also allow the teachings of the Bible to shape how we think about the world and our activities in it. We have already discussed the doctrine of creation. Without faith in the biblical teaching on God's creation of the world, we cannot think rightly about the world or act rightly towards it.

Another major doctrine of the Word of God that Paul has in mind here is the return of Christ and the end of the age. In verse 1 he refers to "the latter times." In verse 8 he mentions "the life...which is to come." He returns to the theme of using this present world in light of the world to come in chapter 6 (vv. 12, 14–15, and 19). We must always

5. John Owen, *Of Communion with God*, in *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold (1850–1853; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1965), 2:22.

view the things of this world in light of “the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Tim. 6:14).

We must use this world knowing that it is neither our true home nor our lasting treasure (Matt. 6:24–34; Heb. 11:8–10). Calvin said Christ “teaches us to travel as pilgrims in this world.”⁶ We will know how to make “the right use of earthly benefits” if we remember that “the present life is for his people as a pilgrimage on which they are hastening toward the Heavenly Kingdom.”⁷ If you are a student visiting another country, you enjoy your time there but you always have in mind that you will eventually go home. In the world, your goal should not be to accumulate large quantities of possessions. You may use what you need and sample what you like, but you should constantly ask whether this possession or that activity will help you along to heaven, or hinder you. We are not tourists in this world living for pleasure and entertainment, but wanderers banished from paradise and longing to return. Calvin wrote, “For, if heaven is our homeland, what else is the earth but our place of exile?”⁸

The Puritans picked up Calvin’s pilgrimage theme and developed it further. The pilgrim mentality, like a multifaceted diamond, includes at least six facets:

- a biblical outlook for our faith and practice;
- a godly outlook that promotes conscientious living in the childlike fear of God in our duty to God, to family, and to country;
- a churchly outlook that is concerned preeminently with God’s glory and the worship, fellowship,

6. Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.7.3.

7. Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.10.1.

8. Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.9.4.

doctrine, government, and discipline of Christ's church;

- a warfaring outlook, since the church on earth wages war against indwelling sin (for the remains of our old nature lie dormant within us like a volcano that can burn out of control at any time), and against a beckoning, seducing, yet hostile world that does not agree to cease-fires and does not sign peace treaties;
- a methodical outlook that trains the believer to use the spiritual disciplines faithfully and regularly every day; and
- a two-worldly outlook, which enables us to have heaven "in our eye" while we are walking on earth, so that we are willing to deny ourselves anything that would hinder us from running the Christian race with our eyes on Jesus and glory (Heb. 12:1–2).⁹

The same Word of God that teaches us that we are pilgrims also teaches us that all mankind is headed for one of two ultimate destinations. Therefore, a pilgrim mindset is also an evangelistic mindset. We are not to envy the rich and powerful but to pray for their salvation through faith in Jesus Christ (1 Tim. 2:1–5). We are to use the world with one eye on judgment day. This perspective makes us willing to make great sacrifices in this life so that other people will find eternal life. It also reminds us that God will call us to account for how we used the world, and whether we did so in a manner that advanced God's purposes and kingdom.¹⁰

9. Joel R. Beeke and Mark Jones, *A Puritan Theology: Doctrine for Life* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012), 843–58.

10. Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.10.5.

Use the World with an Attitude of Dependence

Paul says that the creatures of God are “sanctified by the word of God *and prayer*” (emphasis added). We thus honor God by receiving our food with thanksgiving. However, that goes far beyond saying grace at meals. The word *prayer* specifically means appealing to someone in power to take action.¹¹ It reminds us that since God is the Creator and Lord of this world, we are dependent upon Him and receive all things by His grace alone. We express this dependence in continual prayer for God to supply the needs of His people.

Praying without ceasing involves humility. To lift up your soul to the Lord daily is to take the posture of one who cannot get by his own strength what he needs and desires. Whereas sinners look to the power, riches, and oppressive schemes of men, God tells us that men are lighter than air on His scales, and we must instead trust in the Lord and pour out our hearts before Him (Ps. 62:8–11).

This dependence teaches us contentment, for it is the exact opposite of the entitlement mentality that says, “I deserve these good things. And I deserve better.” If God created the world, then He has the right to do with it as He pleases. He is the Lord, and we are His servants, created for His glory and for His pleasure. Calvin said that Christians “should know how to bear poverty peaceably and patiently, as well as to bear abundance moderately.”¹²

A heart of gratitude, the mindset of a pilgrim, and an attitude of dependence distinguish a truly Christian use of the world from secular and pagan approaches. In union with Jesus Christ, we know the Creator of the world as our heavenly Father. Do you know Him as your loving and forgiving Father through Christ? He gave you life and

11. See ἐντευξίς and its cognate verb (ἐντυγχάνω) in Acts 25:24; Rom. 8:27, 34; 11:2; 1 Tim. 2:1; 4:5; Heb. 7:25.

12. Calvin, *Institutes*, 3:10.4.

each breath that you take (Acts 17:28). He commands you to turn away from the false gods and idols to which you have given yourself. Just as surely as He raised Christ from the dead, so He will judge the world through Christ in righteousness. How you have used the world will reveal whether you lived for His glory or your own. By God's grace, come to Jesus Christ, and He will teach you to use the world as His own good gift, and for His glory.

Do Not Abuse the World as If It Were God

Although the world was created by God and is good, we have misused and abused the world with our worldliness. John describes worldliness in 1 John 2:15–17: “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. And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever.”

Here John does not use *world* to refer to God's created order, but to man's sinful disorder. John is talking about Satan's kingdom of darkness, which includes all people who are under his rule and living according to the standards of this world. And he is referring to all the “things,” whether ideas and teachings or material possessions and physical experiences, that the world uses to promote its agenda. Calvin wrote, “By the *world* understand everything connected with the present life, apart from the kingdom of God and the hope of eternal life.... In the world are pleasures, delights, and all those allurements by which man is captivated, so as to withdraw himself from God.”¹³

13. John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles*, trans. John Owen (repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 186 (1 John 2:15).

Worldliness is human nature without God. The goal of worldly people is to live horizontally rather than vertically, to move forward rather than to look upward. Worldly people seek material prosperity and despise holiness. They burst with selfish desires and disdain heartfelt supplications. They are controlled by worldly pursuits of this world's trinity of pleasure, profit, and position. Each of us by nature is worldly. As sinners, we belong to this world; it is our natural habitat. We are born with a worldly mind that is "not subject to the law of God, neither can be" (Rom. 8:7). As much as we were tied to our mothers by an umbilical cord, so we were tied to the world from the time of our conception and birth. Our understanding has been darkened (Eph. 4:18) by the guilt of Adam's sin imputed to us and the pollution of his sin passed on to us (Rom. 5:12–21; Ps. 51:5). We are naturally and thoroughly self-seeking and self-indulgent—without regard for God, yes, even prone to hate God!

That doesn't mean we are not masters at masking our worldliness in our outward behavior. John's teaching shows us that worldliness can be very subtle, for it pertains to what we love in our hearts, not just our outward behavior. Worldliness does not always openly reject God. Worldliness can be in men who speak Christian words or even claim to be Christian leaders (1 John 4:1, 5). Worldliness can co-exist with high moral standards and lofty idealism. One can be stained by the world by showing favoritism to the rich, by having a bitterly destructive tongue, by getting into quarrels because you are not getting what you want, or by taking advantage of your employees and workers (see the Epistle of James). A straight-A student who does not go to drinking parties can still be worldly.

Worldliness is not always blatant conformity to popular culture, either. We often tend to think of worldliness as the young woman who shops all the time for the trendiest

clothing, and dates one young man after another looking for someone to make her feel good about herself. Or perhaps we think of a young man who is addicted to the latest technology or to sports trivia. In reality, a monk eating vegetables in a hut with no internet connection can be worldly as he lives by man-made rules for spirituality (Col. 2:20–23).

How then does worldliness display itself? Here are three ways worldliness shows itself, so that you can discern it in yourself and in your children.

We Abuse the World with Selfish Greed

Worldliness is human love not ruled by the love of God. John writes in 1 John 2:15, “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.” The Bible defines worldliness as self-centered love for people and things in the world, in contrast to love that flows first and foremost to God. It is self-love that has put out its own eyes and gone astray.

As a result, John says in verse 16 that worldliness is love degraded into lust, not just sexual lust but greedy desire of any kind. It uses God and people to satisfy our craving for things that please our sensual natures, surrounding ourselves with beautiful and valuable treasures, or boosting our images among friends. Worldliness is exemplified in the recent advertisement featuring a luxury car emblazoned with the words, “Thou shalt covet,” which is a shocking perversion of the tenth commandment.

God created man to enjoy all things in creation by receiving God’s grace, relying on God’s power, obeying God’s will, and pursuing God’s glory. But fallen man has rejected God’s love for us and cast love for God out of his heart. He now loves only himself and the things of God’s creation with a wrongful and idolatrous love. Even if

he affirms the doctrine of creation with his lips, he has rejected its application to his heart. Instead he chooses the world to be his God, and loves it with all his heart. He takes the gift and scorns the Giver.

This form of worldliness often disguises itself as a matter of human *need*. Natural and healthy desires grow into ravenous and roaring lions, demanding satisfaction with the words, “I need it.” The more we feed these monsters, the larger and stronger they grow, until they devour our very souls. John contrasts this with our true need to do the will of God. The meat and bread of our souls is to do the will of the God who made us and calls us to glorify Him.

These two loves are incompatible. Jesus said, “No one 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” (Matt. 6:24a). Love of the world will destroy us. Paul says in 1 Timothy 6:10, “For the love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.” One love must rule our lives: a holy passion for God and the things of God. But since the fall of man, our souls have been pulled as by hook and line to abuse the world.

We Abuse the World with a Mindset of Materialism

Worldliness values physical appearance more than the image of God in a person’s soul. The lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life conspire to make us crave things for the body. Often this is a yearning for beautiful, expensive, and pleasant things. We live in a world that schools our children to value possessions and outward appearances. Our children will covet a good-looking girlfriend or boyfriend, expensive cars, in-style clothes, new technology, and many other material things. Our daughters compete to be the most attractive. Our boys want

to be the strongest or most successful in sports, school, or work. Ironically, this preoccupation with the physical and the material may be turned upside down into a sinful abuse of our bodies through religious asceticism, cutting oneself, or eating disorders.

Worldliness involves a preoccupation with temporal things instead of the eternal kingdom of God. John says, “And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever” (1 John 2:17). Few things distract our children from serving God as much as neglecting the spiritual and eternal. Our children often view life through the lens of the present. They have trouble learning lessons from the past, and they fail to see that their decisions and choices will have consequences in the future. Instant gratification rules their ethics and becomes their all. This lack of perspective greatly harms our children. When we and our children only think in terms of the temporal, the earthly, and the fleshly, it is no wonder that the things of the world appear so important. If this life were the only life we all lived for, surely we’d all want to make the most of it (Eccl. 2:24).

But this world’s pleasures are temporary. Calvin said, “What is most precious in the world and deemed especially desirable, is nothing but a shadowy phantom.”¹⁴ The world is our passage, not our portion. God has marked the day of our death on His calendar. What will you gain if you gain the whole world, but lose your own soul? As Spurgeon bluntly put it, you will end up with nothing but a coffin on your back and grave dust in your mouth. But eternal glory awaits the child of God. As believers, we understand that we are only renters here; our real home is in heaven.

14. Calvin, *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles*, 188 (1 John 2:17).

We Abuse the World with a Spirit of Pride

Worldliness feeds the pride of life. Pride is a dreadful sin. Other sins flee from God, but pride turns on God, attacks Him, and seeks to usurp His throne. That is the character of pride from our fall in Adam until our dying breath. As George Swinnock (c. 1627–1673) said, “Pride is the shirt of the soul, put on first and put off last.”

Pride comes in all varieties, forms, and shapes. Jonathan Edwards said that pride is like an onion—if you peel off one layer, there is always another layer underneath. Oh, the depth and tragedy of our heart’s pride! No wonder then that of the seven things Proverbs 6:16–19 says God hates, four of them are connected to pride.

Pride is not always easy to identify. Our children can be prideful with good grades, and they can be prideful with bad grades. They can be prideful when they are complimented by their parents, and prideful when their parents rebuke them. Children can take pride in the amount of material possessions they have, and they can be prideful about the things they don’t have. Pride can be present when our children sin willingly, and pride can be present when our children attempt to do what’s good. Man’s very nature and essence rests in a prideful estimation of himself. We need to teach our children to be God-centered, which will enable them to be others-centered (Rom. 12:1–16).

Worldly pride wants to please sinful man and not God. This is part of what John means when he says, “If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him.” We naturally seek to please those whom we love. Christ says in John 5:42, “But I know you, that ye have not the love of God in you.” How was that demonstrated? In verse 44, Jesus explains, “How can ye believe, which receive honour one of another, and seek not the honour that cometh from God only?” Men with worldly pride live for the smiles of men rather than the smile of God.

Our children, from their youngest years, will hear the message of people-pleasing preached to them by the world. They will be pressured to be cool, attractive, or fashionable in the eyes of others, such as the boy down the street, or a boss at a part-time job, or a college professor. The world will seek to squeeze our children into its mold by demanding that they please people regardless of how corrupt or deceived those people may be. Worldliness then is the hollow shell of our love for people and things minus the love of God. It is the sad, empty, and blasphemous love of the world.

Overcoming Worldliness

Our nation has fallen into gross abuse of the world. Rather than cultivating a heart of gratitude, America has a heart of greed. Covetousness and the sense of entitlement prevail. The pursuit of happiness has degenerated into the pursuit of pleasure and affluence. Instead of the mindset of pilgrims on the road to heaven, Americans often have a mindset of materialism in which happiness is defined by dollar signs and possessions. Whereas the doctrine of creation instills a spirit of dependence exhibited in prayer, our nation has lifted itself up in pride and people-pleasing.

But thanks be to God, Jesus Christ still saves sinners. Jesus Christ says in John 15:19, “If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you.” Rejection of worldliness requires more than just head knowledge of biblical doctrine; it requires a new heart via the Holy Spirit. When the love of God enters our lives through the gospel and dwells within us (1 John 4:7–12), we may overcome the world through faith in Christ (1 John 5:4–5). But the warnings in the New Testament against worldliness remind us that we

must constantly watch and fight against the world as long as we live in it.

I conclude with some specific directions on how to help your family fight worldliness:

First, *encourage your children with God's promises in the gospel*. Sometimes we are overwhelmed by the command to stand against the world. But Scripture tells us that greater is Christ who is within us than he who is in the world. Remember the promise of Christ in John 16:33, "These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world."

Remind your children to focus on Christ's redeeming death on the cross. Teach them that God tells us to deny worldly lusts and live righteously by pointing us to the Savior who gave Himself to redeem and purify His people (Titus 2:12, 14). There is more power in the blood of Christ than in all the temptations of Satan and every wicked person on this planet. Remind your children also of the promise that Christ will come again in glory (Titus 2:13). The world's threats and rewards will seem weak indeed if our children can see them in light of judgment day. Teach your children to seek grace to follow Christ and, if they do, help them to see themselves as citizens of a heavenly realm and as pilgrims who are only passing through this world.

Second, *teach your children how to practice self-denial*. Denying ungodliness and worldly lusts means denying ourselves and putting our sinful desires to death by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:13). The world tells us to say, "Me, me, me" in gratifying our desires and passions. The way to combat the pride of worldliness is to help our children live in self-denial. One of the best places to begin is in the home. Help them see the importance of cheerfully serving their brothers and sisters. Give them jobs around the house and encourage them to serve in their church and community.

Third, *rid your homes of needless temptations*. John said us that part of worldliness is the lust of the eyes. What are you allowing to enter the eyes and ears of your child's soul? It is tragic to hear of parents who allow their children to watch inappropriate movies, read lewd and materialistic magazines or blogs, buy music that exploits women, or download evil pictures or text on their cell phones. Guard your children's access to electronic devices. Review the books and music they choose. Most of all, talk to them about these things. Use family worship to talk about the lust of the eyes—what it is, how to fight it, how to practice purity, and why sex is a joyful part of marriage.

Fourth, *fill your children's minds and hearts with what is good and true*. Limiting our children's access to electronic media or clothing is not enough to guard them from worldliness, for the world is in their hearts. We must therefore do everything we can to see Colossians 3:16 fulfilled in our homes, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord." Instead of providing entertainment that makes them passive consumers, do things together as a family to make them active friends to one another.

Fifth, *train them to see that no created thing is neutral ground*. All things exist for God's glory and are only properly used out of love for God. Though the objects are not inherently sinful, the uncleanness within us will make all things unclean unless we wash them in the blood of Christ, use them according to His Word, and devote them for His praise. There is no area of your children's life over which Christ does not claim Lordship. Material possessions, personal relationships, families, school work, work, spare time, entertainment are all tools the devil can use to

conquer our children with worldliness. Teach your children how to use everything humbly and in gratitude to God.

Sixth, *be a model for your children in fighting against the world*. Don't just teach these things to your children; do them yourself. Titus 2:7–8 says, "In all things shewing thyself a pattern of good works: in doctrine shewing uncorruptness, gravity, sincerity, sound speech, that cannot be condemned; that he that is of the contrary part may be ashamed, having no evil thing to say of you." If modeling righteousness is the responsibility of the minister in the church, how much more must fathers and mothers be "a pattern of good works" for their children? Many children struggle with worldliness because dad and mom have ceased to struggle with it. Many parents live as people-pleasers, regard outward appearances as more important than internal appearance, love material things, live with a temporal outlook on life, and feed on pride. How then can they expect their children to do otherwise?

The Dutch preacher Willem Teellinck (1579–1629) compared the world to a monster with sharp horns that it uses to attack people. One of those horns, he said, is "wrong yet celebrated and very distinguished role models."¹⁵ The church's defense against this horn is the "examples of pious and godly persons in every age" who "lived undefiled by the world."¹⁶ Which will you be: a horn by which the world pierces your children, or an example of godliness for them to follow?

Seventh, *pray for God to give your family kingdom grace*. As we have seen, worldliness is not simply external; it is an issue of the heart. As such, we cannot merely regulate our children's outward behavior. To successfully beat back worldliness, our children need new hearts. So pray

15. Willem Teellinck, *The Path of True Godliness*, trans. Annemie Godbehere, ed. Joel Beeke (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 65.

16. Teellinck, *The Path of True Godliness*, 94.

earnestly for your children that they will come to embrace the gospel through faith and to trust in Jesus Christ as their only hope of beating back worldliness. Without prayer and the work of the Holy Spirit, everything we do for our children will ultimately fail. However, through believing prayer we overcome. Although the Heidelberg Catechism says, “our mortal enemies, the devil, the world, and our own flesh, cease not to assault us,” it also assures us that the Lord will “preserve and strengthen us by the power of [His] Holy Spirit, that we may not be overcome in this spiritual warfare, but constantly and strenuously may resist our foes till at last we obtain a complete victory.”¹⁷

May God give us grace to live in the tension of using but not abusing the world. May we never fail to acknowledge God’s overflowing goodness to us in providing us with the necessities and pleasures of creation. May we learn to depend upon Him for all our needs, constantly praying for His blessings and praising Him for His mercies. May we ever live in such a way that we recognize that there is more evil in the smallest sin than there is in the greatest affliction and that there is more good in the smallest good work than there is in the greatest prosperity.

May we make good use of everything God gives us to help us on our journey to the eternal city, never forgetting that the hundred-dollar bills of this world are not worth the pennies of heaven. Let us also remember the lesson of the muck-rake in part two of *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. Bunyan wrote that Christiana was taken into a room where a man held a tool for raking the dirt. Another person stood by him, offering him a beautiful, heavenly crown in exchange for the muck-rake. But the man never looked up at the crown above his head and paid no attention to the

17. Heidelberg Catechism (LD 52, Q. 127), *The Reformation Heritage KJV Study Bible* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2014), 2006.

offer. Instead, he kept looking down, giving all his attention to gathering up grass, sticks, and dirt. Bunyan said that this man was “a man of this world.”¹⁸ May God grant that through our words, example, training, and prayers, our families may look up from the dirt and sticks of this world to see the glory of God in Christ and gladly trade the muck-rake for a crown.

18. John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1895; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1977), 233.