

The Christian and the World: The Teacher's Take-Away

Everything Jesus taught is worth studying, but it seems to me that we should pay special attention to his teaching (by word and deed) as he neared the end of his earthly life. At this point, he had called his disciples, preached to the people, and performed many amazing miracles. Now everything was coming down to the final act: crucifixion and resurrection.

In his prayer in the Garden of Gesthamene, just before he was arrested, Jesus poured out his heart for his followers, including those who were then his disciples as well as those who would believe and follow him in the future, right down to the present day.

In this prayer, recorded in John 17, Jesus makes clear that the focus of his prayer is on his disciples. "I pray for them. I am not praying for the world," Jesus prayed, "but for those you have given me, for they are yours." (v. 9) Then he prayed, "I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world." (v. 14)

Stop and consider that verse: "They are not *of* the world any more than I am *of* the world." After saying that, what would be the next logical thing for Jesus to pray for? How about something like this, "Therefore, Father, I pray that you will *bring them out from the world*, to be a *separate people* for you." That's Scriptural, isn't it? (See 2 Cor. 6:14-18)

Well, it sounds scriptural, but that's not what Jesus prayed. And here, I think, is the turning point, the key to understanding what Jesus really wanted his disciples to do with their lives.

Right after saying "they are not of the world any more than I am of the world," Jesus made this amazing request: "My prayer is *not that you take them out of the world* but that you protect them from the evil one." Two verses later he prayed, "As you sent me into the world, *I have sent them into the world.*"

What a stunning, revolutionary message! Just two chapters earlier, Jesus had told his followers that they would face opposition and persecution. (Jn. 15:20) He said, “In this world you will have trouble.” (Jn. 16:33) So, in effect, here he is saying, “There’s a burning house – walk right into it.” Don’t walk the other way. Jesus wants his followers, who are not *of* the world, nevertheless to be *in* the world.

That raises three big questions: (1) What does Jesus mean by *world*? (2) What does it mean to be *in* the world? (3) What does it mean to be *of* the world?

What Jesus meant by “world”

When Jesus prayed that his disciples should be in the world but not of the world, he was obviously not talking about the *physical* world, of forests and mountains and oceans. Just being alive on earth means living in the physical world. What Jesus was referring to was the world of *people*, as in “God so loved the *world*.”

So, the *world*, in Jesus’ prayer, is people; humans; men, women and children.

What it means to be “in” the world

What did Jesus mean by praying that his followers should be *in* the world of people? Aren’t we automatically in that world, by being born into it?

Not necessarily. Aside from becoming a hermit, there are several ways to escape being in the world of people. We can become “workaholics,” focusing so intently on our work (or studies, for students) that we have no time to socialize with others or get involved in outside activities.

One of the favorite ways Christians choose is to become totally immersed in church activities and to have the vast majority of friends and acquaintances, except perhaps at work, from Christian circles. Even Bible studies can be an escape from the world. Some churches offer round after round of wonderful Sunday School classes and Bible studies, interspersed with spiritual retreats. Members

can go from one to the next, learning more and more about how to live as a Christian ... without ever venturing from the doors of the church to get involved in real human needs in the community beyond.

How could Christians possibly interpret Jesus' words to be *in* the world to mean that we should *stay away from the world*, not get engaged, withdraw into a narrow, friendly, welcoming world of believers? That's exactly what Jesus does *not* want us to do.

What kind of people does Jesus want us to get involved with? Our next door neighbor, who may play golf or mow the lawn on Sunday mornings and fill a trash barrel with empty beer cans? Yes, of course, but not only those neighbors who live near us in the suburbs. When Jesus was asked by a Pharisee, "Who is my neighbor?" he did not point to another Pharisee or even to a Sadducee or other Jew. He said, in a parable, that even the despised Samaritan, from a different culture, with strange beliefs, was a neighbor. (Lk. 10:25-37)

Jesus himself showed us the way to live in the world, and we also have the example of his first century followers. Jesus did not spend most of his time in the synagogue or with devout Jews. The gospels show him in the marketplace, at the waterfront with commercial fishermen, socializing with tax collectors, standing up to Roman authorities. He even spent time visiting in Samaria, meeting the Samaritans on their own ground. And when he was in the synagogue or the temple in Jerusalem, more often than not he was disputing with the religious leaders, piercing their self-righteous attitudes with a plain sharing of the truth, and calling them hypocrites and worse (like children of the devil).

Jesus did not live in a tight religious cocoon, surrounded by like-minded believers. He lived *in* the world.

The apostles Peter and Paul were also deeply immersed *in* the world but were not *of* it. Peter

was Jewish to the core, both culturally and religiously. He scrupulously followed the Jewish laws of ritual cleanliness. Yet when God spoke to him and told him to spend a few days in the company of Gentiles, his Jewish scruples fell off like falling dominoes.

First he invited emissaries from a Roman centurion into his home. The next morning he invited some of his fellow Jewish believers to join him on a two-day trip with these Romans back to the centurion's home in Caesarea. There he joined a large group of Gentiles, relatives and friends of the centurion's, who had come together to hear him. During this time Peter ate and drank with these Gentiles; he stayed over at least two or three nights with them, and undoubtedly got to know them very well. (Acts 10:1-48)

Peter was *in* their world, but he was not *of* it, as shown by his message to them about believing in Jesus to have their sins forgiven.

The apostle Paul also lived *in* the world without becoming one *of* the world. When he visited the cosmopolitan Greek city of Athens, where the leading citizens loved to stand on soap boxes and discuss the latest philosophical issues, he found that the city was "full of idols." He even found one that many of the Athenians may not have known about – an altar dedicated to "an unknown god."

Although Paul was undoubtedly turned off, maybe even revolted, by the blatant idol worship of the Athenians, nevertheless he joined the public philosophical discussions. When the Athenians brought him to the Areopagus (the high court of Athens) he did not condemn or mock their idols. He complimented the Athenians on being very religious, and used the altar inscribed to an unknown god as a springboard to talk about the God who is known and should be worshiped by all. (Acts 17:16-34)

Thus Paul demonstrated that he was *in* the Greek world but not *of* it. He engaged the Athenians on their own terms, looking carefully into their religious and philosophical world, but he left no

doubt that while *in* their world, he was *of* another world.

First conclusion: One way of disobeying Jesus's will for our lives is to avoid living *in* the world. In other words, to obey Jesus we must live *in* the world of people generally, not stay within the circle of our friends and fellow-believers.

Now, what does it mean to be *of* the world? How can we be *in* the world but not *of* it?

What it means to be "of" the world

Just by listening to the news or glancing at the headlines, we know that people – the people of the world that Jesus was referring to – are occasionally generous and good, but more often corrupt, violent, and dangerous. We see a continuum of conduct in the people of the world, from beneficial community service and works of mercy and kindness, to innocent picnics and sports and entertainment, to thoughtless selfishness, to twisted and degraded lifestyles that intentionally dominate, damage and even destroy other people.

For Christians to be *in* the world, we have to locate ourselves along that continuum, but obviously there's a point where we have to say no, I'm not going there. When Jesus said we should not be *of* the world, he did not mean that we should extract ourselves from relationships with other people or from human activity generally (work, art, music, sports, etc.). He meant that we are to separate ourselves from the sinful motivations and activities of people in the world. If we are basically doing what everybody else does, displaying nothing distinctive in our lives to reveal our faith, with a lifestyle indistinguishable from that of unbelievers, we are *of* the world, no matter what label we carry (Christian, evangelical, etc.). That's not how we are supposed to live.

But that get's tricky, doesn't it? If we hang around with worldly people, we may pick up some of their habits, or be tarnished with their reputation. Jesus himself ran that risk; he spent so much time eating and drinking with "tax collectors and sinners" that people called him a glutton and

a drunkard. (Mt. 11:19; Lk. 7:34)

Plus, it's hard. We constantly face the pressures of a secular society to conform to its standards. It seems indisputable that western culture is moving away from traditional Christian values. It is commonly understood that we live in a post-Christian society. How can we Christians put up with that?

Not by trying to escape. Jesus prayed for us to stay *in* the world, yet without being *of* the world. Wherever we can, we should try to penetrate the world, to engage its people, to take part in its activities, to do everything we can to be *in* it, without crossing the line that separates the world's values from those of God's Kingdom. No, it's not easy, but that's what Jesus prayed for us to do.

Second conclusion: Another way of disobeying Jesus's will for our lives is to adopt worldly values and a worldly lifestyle, to move so far into the world's orbit that we are really *of* the world.

The final questions are these. Have I – have you – been too timid, or lazy, or clueless, to obey Jesus's desire that we who call ourselves Christians should be *in* the world? On the other hand, have I – have you – swerved so far into the life of the world around us that we've adopted a worldly lifestyle and worldly values and really have become *of* the world?

Or are we, by God's grace, living *in* the world without being *of* the world?

– Roland Chase
February, 2015