

# THE WORLD, THE FLESH, & THE DEVIL

## Ephesians 2:1-3

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Second Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC, June 29, 2008

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And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind (Eph. 2:1-3).

**I**n the opening words of Ephesians 2, the apostle Paul describes man apart from Christ as “dead in trespasses and sins.” It may seem surprising that having described us this way he then goes on to talk about the way in which we have lived. We lived but were dead; we were dead but we lived. This is the second major point Paul makes about life in sin in these opening verses of Ephesians 2. Paul wanted us to know that man in sin is spiritually dead. But he also wants us to know what kind of life spiritually dead sinners live.

Paul considers it important for us to understand what sin is all about. The reason is that apart from an understanding of sin we cannot understand Christianity. Take the doctrine of the incarnation. Why did the eternal Son of God take up flesh and live in this world? Because of the greatness of the problem of sin. Because man, whom God created for himself, was spiritually dead and in bondage to sin. People who say they don't want to talk about sin therefore don't want to know the purpose for Christ's coming into the world. “You shall call his name Jesus,” the angel told Joseph, “for he will save his people from their sins” (Mt. 1:21).

Take also the crucifixion of our Lord. What was it for? Peter tells us, “Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God” (1 Pet. 3:18). Furthermore, take Christ’s present work in heaven. Jesus is interceding for us with the Father in heaven. Why? To deal with our present sins. John writes, “If anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous” (1 Jn. 2:1). Even something as basic as the love of God cannot be grasped apart from sin. It is the greatness of our sin, for which God gave his own beloved Son, that measures the greatness of his love for us.

Not only can you not understand Jesus Christ and Christianity, but unless you face the biblical facts about sin you cannot understand the world as it is. Martyn Lloyd Jones writes, “You cannot understand the whole of human history apart from this, with all its wars and its quarrels and its conquests, its calamities, and all that it records. I assert that there is no adequate explanation save in the biblical doctrine of sin.”<sup>1</sup>

Finally, unless you understand the Bible’s doctrine of sin you cannot even understand yourself. Sin is the power that wants to control your life, and from which you must be delivered by Jesus the Savior.

In the last chapter we considered the results of sin: sin is death, sin reduces us to cravings, and sin leads to eternal destruction. Now we will look back again to these verses to see what the life in sin is like. Paul tells us that life in sin is bondage to three great powers: the world, the flesh, and the devil.

## FOLLOWING THE COURSE OF THIS WORLD

**W**hat does it mean to live in sin? The first thing Paul tells us it that *it is to live in conformity with the world*. He writes, “You were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world” (vv. 1-2).

The Bible uses the term *world* in a variety of ways. John 3:16 says “God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son.” In that

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<sup>1</sup> D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *God’s Way of Reconciliation: An Exposition of Ephesians 2* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1972), 15.

case, *world* speaks of the human race in its entirety. But more often, *world* speaks of the sinful world system in rebellion to God. In Galatians 1:4, Paul speaks of “this present evil world.” The antithesis between God and the world is clearly stated in 1 John 2:15-16: “Do not love the world or the things in the world... For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions—is not from the Father but is from the world.”

This is what Paul has in mind when he speaks about living “in conformity with the world.” He means the world in its values, in its materialism, in its unbelief and opposition to the rule of God. Leon Morris observes that Paul “reminds the Ephesians that before they became Christians they not only were dead in their sinfulness, but their pattern of life was one dictated by the world in which they lived and not by any such motive as a pure desire to do the will of God... The world is always sensual and obviously given over to evil.”<sup>2</sup>

Much of Paul’s desire is for his readers to walk not in the ways of the world, but rather to walk in good works (2:10), to walk worthily of their calling (4:1), to walk “in love” (5:2), and as children of light (5:8). By speaking of a walk, Paul means our active approach to life, which should not be worldly but godly. As he famously put it in Romans 12:2, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind.”

There is nothing easier to prove than that non-Christians are controlled by the world. The world demands conformity and will ostracize and ridicule you if you do not conform. We learn this from an early age and the result is that people’s ideas are derived from the newspapers and magazines. The way people dress, how they talk, their hair styles, the music they listen to is utterly controlled by the latest fashion that is praised in the media and thus by other people. Undoubtedly, the most powerful influence of our time is television. It is nothing less than astonishing to see how in a few generations, television has almost eradicated the Christian values that once formed the backbone of our nation and replaced them with other values once utterly rejected as pagan. How did this happen? Not by presenting fair and rational arguments, but by making sin seem attractive and

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<sup>2</sup> Leon Morris, *Expository Reflections on Ephesians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1994), 42.

pleasurable; living in a godly manner is not so much repudiated intellectually but made to seem narrow and stupid. For this reason the amount of television you watch is at least related to how worldly you are. It is not that television and movies are inherently evil; godly themes can also be conveyed by these mediums. But it is a thoughtless imbibing of unbelieving worldviews through shows and movies that leads so many “in the course of this world.”

It is hard to overestimate today how important it is that Christians not to live not according to the values of the world. You used to hear about a category of people called “carnal Christians”. This designated people who were saved but who lived in accordance with the world. I am glad not to hear that expression much anymore because it is utterly unbiblical. A professing Christian who lives in a consistently worldly manner is nothing more than a false professor of faith. In 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, Paul explains, “Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.”

One thing this means is that what we expose ourselves to matters. Worldliness happens subtly. If you want to be worldly, then just watch a lot of television, read all the best-sellers without discrimination, go to movies that glorify adultery and play video games or groove to music that promotes lust and violence, hate and even death. You will become worldly all too quickly.

This applies especially to young people. They are under so much pressure to be “cool”, which often is just another way of saying “worldly”. Therefore young Christians must be helped to understand that to follow Christ is to take up the cross. We can either “follow the course of this world,” or we can follow Jesus Christ. We can either be followers of Christ along his narrow way that leads to life, or we can join the broad way that leads to death (cf. Lk. 13:24). The apostle John warns us, “The world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever” (1 Jn. 2:17).

If this is true of Christian individuals, surely the worse thing the church can do is pattern itself after the world. Yet churches are criticized today not for being too worldly but too holy. It is a mortal

sin of church-growth to make anyone uncomfortable in the church. But to be truly used by God, to make a difference for Christ in our time, we must be willing to be different – not because we are trying to be stuffy or formal or high and mighty, but because we are trying to be faithful. It is when we are centered on God that the world notices there is something different about us. Many will scoff, but others will come, pay attention and be saved. Lloyd-Jones summarizes this well:

The glory of the gospel is that when the Church is absolutely different from the world, she invariably attracts it. It is then that the world is made to listen to her message, though it may hate it at first... It should not be our ambition to be as much like everybody else as we can, though we happen to be Christian, but... our ambition should be to be like Christ, the more like Him the better, and the more like Him we become, the more we shall be unlike everybody who is not a Christian.<sup>3</sup>

## FOLLOWING THE PRINCE OF THE POWER OF THE AIR

**T**he first power governing people in sin is the world. Secondly, Paul directs our attention to a power that is much more sinister.

To live in sin, he says, is *to live under the domination of the devil*. He says the man or woman in sin follows “the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience” (v. 2).

This may sound like a strange designation for the devil, but it is consistent with his portrayal all through the Bible. By “air” Paul means the spirit realm. The devil, or Satan, is the ruler of the evil spiritual powers and his rebellious spirit energizes all the disobedience of mankind. In Ephesians 6:12, Paul writes, “For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” Jesus called Satan “the ruler of this world” (Jn. 12:31), and Paul called him “the god of this world” (2 Cor. 4:4) who blinds the minds of unbelievers.

Satan is not, in fact, a god, but rather a fallen archangel. But he has usurped the place of God in the lives of men and women in sin. Augustine said that man is like a horse and can have only one rider at

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<sup>3</sup> D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Expositions on the Sermon on the Mount*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 1:37.

a time. Either the horse is ridden by God or it is ridden by Satan. Paul teaches here that those who are dead to God are under Satan's rule; indeed, they are realizing the devil's fondest ambitions by rebelling against God and destroying themselves in sin.

Furthermore, Paul tells us how this works. He says that Satan is "the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience." The verb translated "at work" is the Greek word *energeo*, from which we get the noun *energy* and the verb *energize*. Paul used this same verb in Ephesians 1:19-20, when he reminded the Christians about the "greatness of [God's] power toward us who believe, according to the working [that is, energizing] of his great might that he worked [energized] in Christ when he raised him from the dead." It is God by his Holy Spirit who energizes godliness, just as he energized Christ's resurrection, and it is the devil who by his evil spirit energizes all disobedience. Satan is the spirit of the age – this present, evil, condemned world in which we live.

It was the devil's influence that caused our first parents to plunge our race into sin. He is still at work, and his aim is the same as it always was – to insinuate that God is not really good and that his ways will hold us back, to tempt us to believe that through sin we will find fulfillment. When we sin he then accuses us so that we believe that God will never take us back. The devil rules a vast host of demons who operate unseen, carrying out his program of rebellion and sin.

Most significant to Paul's thought here is not the temptation that the devil or his minions might afflict directly on us. Rather, it is that as the ruler of this world, he controls the world and supplies it with its evil values. Surely you do not think it is by chance that a culture that turns from God always takes on the same characteristics! It is not by chance that a godless people always becomes sensual and violent, that families break down and moral absolutes are discarded, that poverty and ignorance and cruelty begin to reign. Tall the while, rebels against God think they are charting their own original course, yet it is always the same. Man in sin is not free, as he imagines, but under the vicious rule of Satan. The devil always rules when God's rule is denied, either individually or on a grand scale.

If you wonder why it is that the world's entertainment leaders keep pushing farther and farther into sin, this is why. If you wonder why the legislatures and the courts advance into pagan ways of thinking, this is why. There is a spirit to the age, and Satan is energizing the rebellion of the world. This is why the fashion leaders and the best-sellers and the trend-setters all seem to be taking us in the same direction. James Boice comments, "This tells how the devil enslaves men and women. It is not that he is personally present. He is only one creature and can only be present in one place at one time. It is rather through the evil spirit or outlook present in the world that he rules us."<sup>4</sup> We may be from time to time under direct assault from unseen spiritual powers, although most of us have probably never directly encountered the devil himself. But we are under his control when we give ourselves to sin and follow the values that are popular in the world.

#### FOLLOWING THE WILL OF THE FLESH

**M**an in sin is governed by the world's expectations, and also by the devil. But there is a third force that drives everyone who lives in sin: the sinful nature, or the *flesh*, which rules us from within. To live in sin, Paul says, is *to be dominated by the lusts of the flesh*.

If you peruse Paul's letters you will see how deadly serious he is about the matter of not living in the lusts of our sinful nature. He writes in Romans 6:12-14: "Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness. For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace." In Romans 13:13-14, Paul adds, "Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires."

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<sup>4</sup> James Montgomery Boice, *Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 50.

The way to conquer the bondage of lusts, Paul says, is two-fold. First, we must “make no provision for the flesh.” This means that we are not to subject ourselves to likely sources of temptation. In our day, we think first of all about sexual morality; it is essential that Christians be different at this point. But different people are susceptible to different temptations. Paul lists these in Galatians 5:19-21: “Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.” However we find ourselves driven by our sinful nature, we must come to God for forgiveness, for power in the Holy Spirit, and then apply ourselves diligently to the task of self-control.

But it is not enough merely to strive against sin and avoid temptation. We must also, as Paul said, “Put on the Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 13:14). In the long run, the only way to avoid being enslaved by sinful desires is to become more and more like Christ through his Word and through prayer. The apostle writes, “You were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness” (Eph. 4:21-24).

One of the great tragedies of the nineteenth century was that of Oscar Wilde. His brilliant mind won him the highest academic honours. His literary genius won him accolades; his charm and kindness made him well liked. However, because he fell into fleshly temptation of various kinds, the most famous of which was homosexuality, Wilde fell from his high perch, ending up in prison and disgrace. He wrote of all this: “The gods had given me almost everything. But I let myself be lured into long spells of senseless and sensual ease... Tired of being on the heights I deliberately went to the depths in search of new sensation... I grew careless of the lives of others. I took pleasure where it pleased me, and passed on. I forgot that every little action of the common day makes or unmakes character, and that therefore what one has done in the secret chamber, one has some day

to cry aloud from the house-top. I allowed pleasure to dominate me. I ended in horrible disgrace.”<sup>5</sup>

This is something for us all to remember. When we dabble in sin, we are risking our character and the domination of the devil who rules through the sinful passions. Sin always takes us farther than we wanted to go, keeps us longer than we meant to stay, and demands far more than we ever wanted to pay, even the price of our souls.

## THE DEVIL’S BANQUET AND THE FEAST OF THE LORD

**L**ife in sin is life under the domination of the devil. It is a life spent following the course of the world, the spirit of which is controlled by Satan. It is a life driven by fleshly desires, which are the devil’s whips to keep his slaves in line.

Therefore, the choice between righteousness and sin is nothing less than the choice between the rule of God – the holy, good, and loving Creator and Redeemer – and the rule of Satan – the lying, enslaving, accusing, destroying devil.

In a typically brilliant sermon, Charles Spurgeon depicts this choice as the choice between two banquet halls. There is the banquet of the devil and the feast of the Lord. Spurgeon takes as his theme verse a statement made at the wedding at Cana where Jesus turned the water into wine. The wine Jesus had miraculously made was presented to the master of the banquet, who exclaimed, in John 2:10, “Everyone serves the good wine first, and when people have drunk freely, then the poor wine. But you have kept the good wine until now.”

Spurgeon explains that this is the difference between the world, the flesh, and the devil on the one hand and the Lord Jesus Christ on the other. The devil’s banquet gives all of its luscious pleasures up front; only afterward do things turn sour. Spurgeon considers the man of fleshly desire, to whom the devil first comes with the sparkling cup of pleasure. It intoxicates his senses, be it sexual pleasure or narcotic pleasure or gambling or any other fleshly lust. He thinks, “What a fool I was, not to have tasted this before!” Spurgeon explains, “He drinks again; this time he takes a deeper draught, and the wine is hot

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. William Barclay, *The Letters to the Galatians and Ephesians* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), 100

in his veins. Oh! How blest is he! What would he not say now in the praise of Bacchus or Venus, or whatever shape Beelzebub chooses to assume? He becomes a very orator in praise of sin.”<sup>6</sup>

But in time the first course is over, and devil brings out a different cup. This is not the cup of pleasure but of satiation. This is the poor wine that follows the good. It lacks the excitement the now dulled senses crave, but gives just enough to keep him drinking. It gives only disappointment to go along with addiction.

This second cup is followed by a third, the cup of wrath and damnation. “‘Drink of that,’ says the devil, and the man sips it and starts back and shrieks, ‘O God! that ever I must come to this!’ ‘You must drink, sir!’ the devil replies... ‘Drink, though it be like fire down your throat!... He who rebels against the laws of God, must reap the harvest.’”<sup>7</sup> This is the grim cup that never features in the advertisements for sin. The devil always sets forth the best wine, the pleasurable wine first, knowing that thereby he will someday put the cup of wrath to the lips of our souls.

How different is the feast of the Lord Jesus Christ. His practice is exactly opposite from that of the devil. The master of the wedding said to him: “Everyone serves the good wine first, and when people have drunk freely, then the poor wine. But you have kept the good wine until now.”

At Jesus’ table, the feast of salvation, the bitter and difficult things come first, and to those who press on in faith there are better things to come. In this life, Christ’s people are often afflicted. Spurgeon writes, “Jesus brings in the cup of poverty and affliction, and makes his own children drink of it... This is the way Christ begins. The worst wine is first.” The same is also true in our reception of the gospel. We must first drink the bitter cup of conviction of sin, the very drink Paul is serving in these opening verses of Ephesians 2. He knew it well, having tasted it himself.

But then comes another cup. In it Jesus has mixed something better. Spurgeon writes, “I have drank of [the cup of conviction] and I

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<sup>6</sup> Charles Haddon Spurgeon, “Satan’s Banquet” in *Spurgeon’s Sermons*, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1883), 5:273.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 5:274.

thought that Jesus was unkind, but, in a little while, he brought me forth a sweeter cup, the cup of his forgiving love, filled with the rich crimson of his precious blood.”<sup>8</sup> Jesus’ second cup brings us consolation for all our trials and relief for our sense of guilt. As he drinks deeper and deeper from that cup of fellowship and love, the believer grows in communion with God, until at last he cries, “The LORD is my chosen portion and my cup... The lines have fallen for me in pleasant places” (Ps. 16:5-6). Finally, Jesus brings the best cup last, the taste of which is incomprehensible in blessing to those of us who have yet to enter heaven. It is the cup of glory, the cup of resurrection life, the cup that makes us sing: “You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore” (Ps. 16:11).

That is the promise of God for all who were dead in sin, following the course of the world, obeying the prince of the power of the air, and doing the will of the flesh, but who by faith in Christ are born again to a new life, are forgiven and cleansed from all their sins, and take their place at his banquet feast. All the others serve the good wine first, but then when the people are drunk, in comes the bad. But Jesus calls us now to join him at the cross, to the bitterness of confessing our sins and to the struggle against the world, the flesh and the devil. Yet he will lead us on to the crown of life, when only the best wine will be served and where joy abounds forever.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 5:286.