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You in the World

Soren Kierkegaard, the Danish theologian and philosopher, told this parable: A wild duck was flying northward with his mate across Europe during the springtime. En route, he happened to land in a barnyard in Denmark, where he quickly made friends with the tame ducks that lived there. The wild duck enjoyed the corn and fresh water. He decided to stay for an hour, then for a day, then for a week, and finally, for a month. At the end of that time, he contemplated flying to join his friends in the vast Northland, but he had begun to enjoy the safety of the barnyard, and the tame ducks had made him feel welcome. So he stayed on for the summer.

One autumn day, when his wild mates were flying toward the south, he heard their quacking. It stirred him with delight, and he enthusiastically flapped his wings and rose into the air to join them. Much to his dismay, he found that he could rise no higher than the eaves of the barn. As he waddled back to safety of the barnyard, he muttered to himself, "I'm satisfied here. I have plenty of food, and the fare is good. Why should I leave?" So, he spent the

winter on the farm.

In the spring, when the wild ducks flew overhead again, he felt a strange stirring within his breast, but he did not even try to fly up to meet them. When they returned in the fall, they again invited him to rejoin them, but this time, the duck did not even notice them. There was no stirring within his breast. He simply kept on eating the corn which had made him fat.

Today we face a challenge. It is the challenge of abandoning the security of worldly attitudes and life styles to be free from the gravitational pull of the world. It is the challenge of choosing the hard path even when an easy one is open to us. It is the challenge of living supernaturally; it is the invitation to lose our life in order to find it.

Some of us will turn a deaf ear to our calling. Many will sense only a faint stirring within when they learn what Christ expects. For a fleeting moment, they will feel the impulse to walk in newness of life. But the comforts of the world, the pressures of their occupation, and the love of luxury will keep them bound to the earth. They are satisfied with themselves. They will stay where they are.

Others of us will try to rise above their present commitment. They will free themselves from the attraction of money, status, and self-satisfaction. They will turn over a new leaf, make fresh promises, and determine to live a dedicated life. But they will not rise very high. Their dreams will lie buried beneath the fear that the cost is too great. They will walk slowly back to the security of former ways.

Fortunately, we find that others—perhaps only

a few—will rise above their complacent friends. They will feel a tug toward the earth, but they will be drawn toward heaven too. They will not be satisfied by satiating themselves with the luxury, pleasure, and status-conscious value system of the “religious” community. They will turn from security to exposure, from contentment to a gnawing hunger, and from prejudice to love. They will begin to serve one Master rather than two. And unlike the wild duck of Denmark, they will fly!

However, changing our life-style is painful, threatening, and often humiliating. It necessitates the delicate task of being *in* the world though not *of* it. It also involves an evaluation of ourselves, an evaluation that penetrates to the hidden thoughts and secret motivations of our hearts.

When we knowingly adopt the life-style of the world, we have the option of abandoning our present values to live a life of radical commitment. But tragically, many Christians have accepted worldly attitudes without even being aware of it. They cannot have their lives changed, because, as yet, they sense no need for inward renewal. They have not awakened from the peaceful slumber of self-righteousness. They have yet to realize that a person may give money to the church; abstain from drinking, dancing, and playing cards; win awards for Sunday school attendance; be scrupulous in conduct, and at the same time, be worldly to the core.

Oddly enough, those of us who have had religious training often find it most difficult to evaluate ourselves. The Pharisees, who knew the law and did

their best to live by it, were further from the Kingdom than the publicans and harlots (Mt 21:31). It could be that great sinners are more conscious of their need for God's mercy than the self-righteous. Perhaps some of us have even eliminated our need of God. More of that later.

Living in the world is not easy. Take conduct, for example. A generation ago, many Christians simply assumed that certain amusements and fashions were not acceptable for them. Some churches published lists of sins to be avoided. Members in good standing conformed to the list and expected their children to do the same.

This method of solving questions of conduct had the advantage of being simple and clear-cut. The boundary between Christian conduct and worldliness was drawn with some degree of precision, and a Christian could simply follow the expected pattern.

Perceptive Christians, however, noticed some contradictions between the various sins associated with worldliness; in other instances, they discerned hair-splitting distinctions that could not be defended. Furthermore, standards varied from church to church and from state to state. As a result, many questioned whether we had found *God's* standards or whether we were following the opinion of fallible men.

Interestingly, this generation of Christians condones what the past generation condemned. Those who were opposed to television twenty-five years ago now have a set—if only in their basement. Their grandchildren have already spent untold

hours in front of the tube.¹ Even ten years ago, Sunday sports were condemned; today Christian athletes—who play on Sunday—are heroes in the Christian community. A few years ago, a Christian was defined as one who saw his movies twenty years too late. Now that attending movies is no longer taboo in most places, that definition can be discarded. At any rate, neat distinctions between good and evil vanished with the horse and buggy.

Even among non-Christians a generation ago, there was more agreement regarding right and wrong, or, at least, between what was *considered* right or wrong. Today, many of these views are being questioned and even rejected, and the black and white of yesterday has dissolved into the blurred gray of today.

With new forms of amusement being invented and with changes in the moral climate being greeted with indifference by many Christians, we cannot possibly predict what might be acceptable Christian conduct in the future. Someone has observed that time is the great sanctifier. The “sin” of today becomes acceptable tomorrow.

A factory official phoned a news bureau every morning to set the factory clocks to conform to the clocks at the bureau office. But when the noon whistle of the factory blew, the head of the bureau changed their clocks to agree with the whistle. The factory depended on the bureau and the bureau on

¹ According to one estimate, the average eighteen-year-old has spent 15,000 hours viewing TV. Assuming he has had perfect attendance in Sunday school, his Bible instructions would total a maximum of 900 hours.

the factory. Neither set its clocks by an objective standard. Likewise, the standards Christians accept today are often those of the local Christian community. But the standards of the Christian community are merely the product of local Christians. When we superficially compare ourselves with ourselves, since we create our own standards, we can gleefully give ourselves a passing grade. We are like the four-year-old boy who announced to his mother, "I'm seven feet tall." And he was right—according to the yardstick *he* had made.

Where will all the discussion on proper Christian conduct end? Perhaps that question cannot be answered apart from a more fundamental one, namely, where did it all begin? Surely God's standards have not changed. Why then have we become trapped in inconsistencies and contradictions? Why has no agreement ever been reached as to which list of sins is complete? Perhaps it is because our view of worldliness is too shallow—or too unbiblical. Maybe we have strained at a gnat and have swallowed a camel. Maybe.

What should our attitude be toward modern trends that hammer away at the accepted standards of the past? Does the Bible have anything to say about these matters? Could it be that we must reexamine principles of Christian conduct that will deliver us from simply accepting the standards of the world a few years later?

Questions of conduct also force us to reflect on how we should relate to other Christians. What should be our attitude toward Christians whose life-styles differ from ours? Or whose doctrinal

views do not coincide with ours?

Our relationship with society presents its own difficulties. On one hand, we are not to be drawn into sin; yet we are also to befriend unbelievers. Many Christians think it is impossible to do both. As a result, they have withdrawn from the non-Christian community. They transfer to the sinner their supposed hatred for sin. They would prefer not even knowing their neighbor's name, let alone trying to love him as they do themselves. But before we wash our hands of direct personal involvement, before we shirk our social responsibility under the guise of preaching the gospel, we must take another look at what it means to do good to all men—even to those who are not of the household of faith. Maybe we even have to rethink our understanding of the total biblical message and its implications for the social needs of today.

Jesus prayed that His followers, remaining *in* the world though not *of* it, might not be overcome by the world. What this means specifically has been discussed and debated. Some Christians tell us that we should become more involved in the world; others, believing that Christians are too worldly already, argue for more separation. Some isolate themselves from non-Christians in order to maintain purity; others have participated in doubtful activities to win souls to Christ. A growing number work toward church unity; others are opposed to it, and a good number are indifferent. Hopefully this book will shed light on these matters.

Also, this book is a call to commitment that will rise above the humdrum of traditional Christianity.

It is a call to march to a different drummer and to be out of step with the world.

To be holy in heaven will not be difficult. It will be the only life possible. To be holy in the world, however, is another matter. Here we feel the pressure of the world, the flesh, and the devil. Yet, we are to live in the world without being contaminated by it. Heaven is not the problem; it is here on earth that we face our most difficult assignment. As the anonymous jingle puts it:

To live above with the saints I love,
Oh, that will be glory.
But to live below with the saints I know —
Well, that's another story.

This other story is what this book is about: saints living with other saints in a world of luxury, pleasure, and moral decay. Living in this world is difficult enough, but the crucial question is, How can we live in this world and yet be holy? This question cannot be answered thoughtlessly. We shall consider it in the following chapters.

Questions for Discussion

1. Discuss the problem of being *in* the world though not *of* it. What challenge does the Christian face in this regard?
2. What are the dangers of adopting worldly attitudes and life-styles?
3. Discuss the difference between Christian conduct and worldliness. What should be our attitude toward modern trends of conduct that conflict with accepted standards of the past?