

The Pastor and the World

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Using, Not Abusing the World

We must begin our subject 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 people. The New Testament also speaks of the world as the sinful, corrupt system of beliefs, values, relationships, and activities of fallen mankind. However, when I speak of the world, I am referring to the material world around us, the resources and objects (Psalm 24:1, "The earth is the Lord's, and the fulness thereof").

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 everything 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 (Psalm 19:1), we have enslaved ourselves to his creatures by idolizing them.

The very world God created good has become evil to us, not because it is evil, but because we twist it, elevate it and set our hearts on it to be our God. That is what we mean by worldliness. We must resist and overcome this abuse of the world, if we hope to participate in the new creation in Christ.

This is the tension we live in as fallen human beings-between using the world as God's gift and our tendency to abuse it as if it were God. Let's 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).

Use the World as God's Gift

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 (Genesis 2:8-15). So, Paul declares that the living God "giveth us richly all things to enjoy" (1 Timothy 6:17).

John Calvin (1509-1564) said, "God provided food... not only to provide for necessity but also for delight and good cheer." 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. 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."

So, if you are a believer, how are we to use the world as God's good gift?

First, we can 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 so that we might recognize the Author and give thanks for his kindness toward us." Gratitude understands 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.

Psalms 148 calls upon every part of the world to praise the Lord because he made it. The psalmist provides us with a catalogue 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, vapours, 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" (vs. 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." They use the world with a heart of gratitude.

A Mindset of a Pilgrim

We must use the world in a way that is holy and pleasing to God. We must allow the teachings of the Bible to shape how we think about the world and our activities in it. We have been thinking previously about the doctrine of creation to help us think rightly about the world or act rightly in it.

Another doctrine that is helpful in this regard is the return of Christ and the end of the age. In 1 Timothy 4:1, Paul refers to “the latter times,” and in verse 8 he mentions “the life ... which is to come.” He returns to the theme again (6:12, 14-15, 19), and shows how we must always view the things of this present 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 (Matthew 6:24³⁴; Hebrew 11:8-10). Calvin said Christ “teaches us to travel as pilgrims in this 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, "If heaven is our homeland, what else is the earth but our place of exile?"

The Puritans picked up Calvin's pilgrimage theme and developed it further. The pilgrim view should include at least six perspectives:

A biblical outlook for our faith and practice.

- A godly outlook that promotes diligent living in the childlike fear of God in our duty to God, to family, and to country.
- A churchly outlook that is concerned pre-eminently with God's glory and the worship, fellowship, 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.
- 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 (Hebrews 12:1-2).

The Word of God teaches us that we are pilgrims, but it also teaches us that all mankind is headed for one of two ultimate destinations. A pilgrim mindset therefore 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 Timothy 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.

An Attitude of Dependence on God

We come to the final part of how the Christian should use the world-by an attitude of dependence on God.

In 1 Timothy 4:5 Paul says that the creatures of God which we eat are "sanctified by the word of God and prayer." Our thanksgiving at meals is one way that we honour God. However, honouring God and depending on him goes far beyond saying grace at meals.

The word prayer specifically means appealing to someone in power to take action. 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 what he needs and desires on his own strength. 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 (Psalm 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. John Calvin said that Christians "should know how to bear poverty peaceably and patiently, as well as to bear abundance moderately."

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?