

RANSOMED HEART

LOVE GOD. LIVE FREE.

April 2018

Dear Friends,

I've been thinking quite a bit about "The World" lately.

Not the world as in planet earth; not meaning global affairs. Rather, The World as Scripture speaks of—The World it has some fairly strong words about. In fact, it was passages like these that really caught my attention:

Do not love the world or anything in the world. 1 John 2:15

Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. James 4:4

Those are stark warnings; almost offensive, if they weren't from the God who gave his life for us. What is he so upset about?

I think we have a pretty good idea how dangerous the devil can be; and we are only too familiar with the trouble our "flesh" or sin nature can get us into. But this thing called "The World"—what is it? That's what got me thinking, and it led to a six-part podcast series we are starting this month. So I wanted to share a few highlights here with you.

Generations past have tried to define The World as things like dancing, card playing, drinking, going to movies, women wearing pants. Looking back, those seem absurd now. Sexual mores have always been the other prime target, and that is getting closer to the issue. But God is very specific when he warns about sexual immorality; here he is clearly turning our attention to this other thing called "The World."

The team began kicking this around in preparation for our series, and what we first noticed is that The World we have created is a world utterly committed to *convenience*. Why else would there be Starbucks on every corner? (A spoof in *The Onion* announced a new Starbucks opening in the restroom of an existing Starbucks). You can do all your banking, correspondence, appointments, travel arrangement—even turn the lights in your home on from your phone. Vegetables come bagged, ready for the microwave. The next level up appears to be self-driving cars. *We can't even drive our own cars anymore?* What is with humanity's craving for an easier way?

The trouble with this value system is that the soul is not shaped, nor is character ever formed, through comfort and convenience. Any parent knows this. "Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it" (Matthew 7:13-14). "Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us" (Hebrews 12:1). The Christian life requires strong and resilient souls; the soul is compromised by a life of comfort and convenience.

The World we now live in also constantly assaults our attention. Taxi cabs, elevators, airplane seats, gas pumps all have TVs in them now, spewing ads at a captive audience. Anytime you go online, Google knows your buying patterns and sends to your screen tailor-made videos and advertising. Push notifications, alerts, “click bait”—everything in our life is constantly trying to grab our attention. We barely have space to think. So much so that we have come to *prefer* distraction; people check their mobile devices more than 80 times a day. If you think I’m overstating this, just try putting your phone on “do not disturb” for a week; you’ll see how much you want to check it.

The outcome is further erosion of the soul; we have become so easily distracted. This is dangerous because scripture says our transformation depends on our ability to give lingering attention to God: “They looked to Him and were radiant” (Psalm 34:5); “fixing our eyes on Jesus” (Hebrews 12:20). As we look to him, Paul says, we become like him (2 Corinthians 3:18). Souls committed to comfort find it very uncomfortable to spend time with God; easily distracted souls simply cannot give God their lingering attention. Thus The World poisons us without it looking “immoral” or blatantly evil.

A third observation we made is that The World as we now have it prefers the Artificial to the Real. With medication, spas, and surgeries, a woman of 75 can now look 35—artificial youth. Social media creates a sense of connection (and hear me now—I do enjoy photos of my grandchildren). But it is artificial community, as is watching a church service on TV artificial church. We use emoticons—little cartoon images—instead of actually saying how we are feeling, or better, having an actual conversation with a real human being. We create artificial meaning by constantly trying to make small stories seem like big stories (witness the Super Bowl—such hoopla over nothing, really). Men fall prey to artificial sex.

There is so much more to say, but let me summarize it this way: The World as scripture warns of is mankind’s *Flight from Reality*. We run from God to create a world where (we think) we don’t need him. We deny reality and say “this is all there is,” so we are fixated on the present. We distract ourselves; we choose artificial meaning and community. We demand greater freedom and less responsibility. No wonder the Desert Fathers fled The World of their day! As Thomas Merton explains, The World “was regarded by them as a shipwreck” from which every person “had to swim for his life... they believed that to let oneself drift along, passively accepting the tenets and values of what they knew as society, was purely and simply a disaster.”

In this way, you can think of discipleship to Jesus as swimming lessons.

I’m sorry we’ve run out of space here; we do offer more insight and many practical suggestions to take your soul back from The World in our podcast series; I do hope you will tune in.

Offered for your soul’s welfare, with love,


John