

The World
The World, The Flesh, and The Devil
Downtown
May 2, 2021

Welcome!

We are on our final week of our series - The World, The Flesh, and The Devil.

So if you have a Bible or Bible app - we're going to be in **John 17**.

A friend of mine is a little older than me, and he has a daughter who is 16. They have decided that it would **not be wisest for her to have a smartphone** at this point. She is the only person in her class who doesn't have one, she has a dumbphone. The other kids think it is *wild* that she doesn't have an iPhone. That it's some inexplicable mystery of the universe. They keep asking and asking, "When are you getting an iPhone? When? I can't believe you don't have one!"

At first, his daughter didn't love this. Now, she's turned it into a way to be different and kind of revels in it. As my friend was telling me this, I had a few thoughts:

- **One**, I am terrified of my kids becoming teenagers.
- **Two**, thank God I didn't have an iPhone when I was 16.
- **Three**, how does a culture go about deciding when someone is ready to have all of that access in their pocket?

Now, this question is a **wisdom issue** that is child-specific, and I'm not trying to throw out broad judgements. Moreso what I'm remarking on is the **broad dynamic** found in that classroom - especially high school - where in this one little confined universe of sorts, all these kids are looking at this young girl and they are so bewildered, and there's this chorus of voices begging her **to comply with the standard** they have set. Having an iPhone at their age has become so normalized that they can't even wrap their minds around the alternative.

And this invisible standard to normalize certain values over others gets us to what we're talking about today - the final enemy of our soul - **the world. From the Greek word kosmos**. Biblically speaking, the term "world" has a few different meanings. Sometimes it is talking about the earth, sometimes it's talking about the people in the world, but in this sense it means the patterns of the world.

So when you hear "the world," a very small example would be that high school classroom. The culture that exists there, the expectations and beliefs that exist there, the peer pressures that exist there, the things that have been normalized there.

In week 1 of this series, here's how we defined the world: the **sinful patterns of thinking, living and believing that become normalized in a society**. It is a system or pattern of being that is opposed to God. And according to Romans 12, just like that classroom, the world/culture has a conforming effect on us:

Romans 12:2

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind...

According to the New Testament, there is a way of the world that functions **like a current**. It conforms you to its image and takes you where it wants you to go. Certain beliefs and thoughts and practices become normalized to the point where it's hard to see things being otherwise.

Now this will have **different expressions** at different times in history, and it will look different in Asia than it does in America. But in any particular time and place, there is a "world" as the backdrop that is serving as a **powerful conforming influence**. It's a more invisible but more powerful version of every kid in class incessantly asking when you will be like them. I'm sure all of us can think of examples like this. Where the world shaped what we wanted. My desires were formed because of outside influences. Where they are now my desires, but initiated by the world.

Now in one sermon it would be impossible to tease out all of the different ways the "world" of 21st Century America tries to conform us to its patterns. We are doing a series in the fall on morality and the 10 Commandments that will dig in a lot deeper to those things.

Today, I simply want us to start to have eyes to see it. To start to ask more questions, and be cognizant of the power the world has to conform us without knowing it. I also don't want to be overly prescriptive, because some of the categories we mention have some nuance to them. But I do want us to start asking questions that we maybe aren't in the habit of asking.

Alright, so John 17. This is Jesus praying to God the Father about His disciples before His death, resurrection and ascension. He's trying to prepare them for His departure.

John 17:14-23

14 I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one.

Jesus came on a rescue mission from outside of the world. He calls the devil the ruler of this world, where sin and darkness and chaos reign. Where we are ruled by our flesh. Jesus comes to save us so that we will no longer be of the world.

Because of who the ruler of the world is, the world hated Jesus and He says it will hate His disciples too. He would eventually be crucified by "the world," and the disciples would eventually be martyred as well. They were so different from the conforming culture around them that they would eventually be killed, but Jesus prays for their faith to withstand the devil's attacks on them.

16 They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth.

In this passage Jesus is teaching us to live as people who are distinct. In fact, the Greek word "church" means "called out ones." Those reconciled to Him by faith are called out of the world into union with Him. We leave our former identity and nature and citizenship and affiliations behind to follow the way of Jesus.

The words in verse 19 "consecrate" and "sanctify" echo this, that we are to be distinctly set apart from the world we find ourselves in. If you grew up around church, you may have heard the phrase "in the world but not of the world." That comes from these verses - that we are to be separate from how our world and culture thinks and operates.

Just to make what Jesus is saying here as simple as possible: **You should be able to walk into any culture and fairly easily recognize** “Okay, there’s the dominant culture, and here’s how they think and operate around what they worship, how they think about relationships and sex, how they handle their money, how they parent, how they fill-in-the-blank.” And over there, you should go “Oh--they are different. There’s the called out ones. They spend their time and money in uniquely different ways, they focus their attention on distinctly different things--they obviously believe something different from the rest of these people around them.”

The difference found in the called-out ones should be pervasive and obvious. Gathering with God’s people on Sundays is inestimably important, but it should go far beyond that, Monday through Saturday, and through the course of an entire life.

Jesus goes on in chapter 17 talking to His disciples, but as we read you’ll also see He’s talking about us too:

20 “I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.

So there’s something compelling about our called-out-ness, our distinctiveness, our unity in that singular purpose, that shows the world that their normal is not actually normal, and that God loves them too and wants to call them out of their folly like He did for us.

But this breaks down when the church gets colonized, or overtaken, by the world. When we look just like the world around us, the effect is lost.

Celebrity Pastors

I’m not one to pick on pastors in general, and not even celebrity pastors, but journalist Ben Sixsmith wrote an article recently about the downfall of a somewhat famous celebrity pastor. It was titled “**The Sad Irony of Celebrity Pastors**” and there’s some low-hanging fruit there as you could imagine, but one part in particular was weighty. He goes in not just on celebrity-ism but on a larger trend of what he sees in the American church that is pretty revealing that he calls “with a twist of Christianity” trend.

He started out by commenting on this church where this pastor had fallen, which was a high-fashion neo-pentecostal church, and writes this (and for those that want to get this full quote - we usually have our entire sermon transcript available a few days after this - so check it out)

Ben Sixsmith

There is mainstream culture, celebrities, fashion, music, modish political activism and a message of self-love, but with a twist of Christianity. Most people stick with mainstream culture because they can have all those things and premarital sex.

Touche, Ben. He goes on:

We can see the “...with a twist of Christianity” trend elsewhere. [Jerry] Fallwell was a representative of the right-wing, business-oriented evangelicals who offer capitalist self-enrichment and hubristic jingoism (yes, I had to look that up) ...with a twist of Christianity.

Then there are progressive Christians...who promote the usual left-wing causes...with a twist of Christianity. While different in beliefs, such people share patterns of thought: the former believe secular individualists mysteriously share God's wishes for what should be done with money while the latter think that secular progressives mysteriously share God's wishes for what should be done with bodies. **So, if Christianity is such an inessential add-on, why become a Christian?"**

Okay, the heat is turning up but it hasn't boiled yet....listen to this:

I am not religious, so it is not my place to dictate to Christians what they should or should not believe. Still, if someone has a faith worth following, I feel that their beliefs should make me uncomfortable for not doing so. If they share 90 percent of my lifestyle and values, then there is nothing especially inspiring about them. **Instead of making me want to become more like them, it looks very much as if they want to become more like me.**

The Last 20-30 years

Here's what I'm afraid has happened. I don't have all of the data points for this but just going off of experience and my perspective, it feels like a couple of decades ago the idea of the church being different from the world had a **PR problem**. Of course, there have always been meaningful and tear-jerking ways that the true church has stood out from the world in any context, but speaking specifically about American Christianity a few decades ago, I feel like somehow the overly-reduced picture of standing out from the world as a Christian was essentially **"don't drink, don't smoke, don't dance, and don't date girls who do."**

God was painted in more of a stodgy light, as if He wasn't a big fan of fun in general. **There were a couple of problems with this:**

- One, that overly simplistic picture falls woefully, painfully short of the **beautiful ways Christians are to stand out** in Scripture. We are to be bursting with spiritual vitality and the fruit of the Spirit, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control. We should be, at our cores, the most joyful people on the planet.
- And two, thoughtful Christians began to be like... "Wait, **the Scriptures are filled with people enjoying wine and dancing**. In fact, Jesus served it on multiple occasions and the Psalms celebrate dancing with joy to our God... have we reduced necessary nuance and made a moral standard that would exclude Jesus?"

But along with some of that thoughtful nuance, I would argue, **came another trend**, and that was that we were just tired of being uncool in the world's eyes. So maybe in some ways we just unthinkingly stepped in sway a bit too closely with the world around us, trying to curry some favor, trying to avoid their derision even if they disagree with our beliefs. A bit like wanting to be invited to the **cool kids table in high school**.

And sometimes, I'm afraid the unfortunate outcome of all of that is that a sharp journalist would look at some of those Christians and conclude, **"Instead of making me want to become more like you, it looks very much like you want to become more like me."**

I am not interested in turning us into some disengaged, unrelatable prudes. And praise Jesus that we get to gather on Sundays and praise Jesus that we find ways to be in each other's lives. But I'm afraid that for many American Christians, their non-Christian neighbors would look at their lives, and they might think: "But what about the things you truly love? They don't seem all that different from the things I love. The things you orient your life around, the things you talk about, the ways you spend money, the things you

are most passionate about--they don't seem uncommon or noteworthy at all. So I'm failing to see how Christianity is not an inessential add-on.

So here's what I want to do for the rest of our time today: I want to give us two questions to think about. First:

What is normal in the world that should not be normal for me?

Being the *ekklesia* in our culture means that there will be things about our culture that seem utterly normal, but in no way should be normal for us. And I mean this on a far deeper level than the description before.

There is no way to give an exhaustive picture or list here, my goal is simply to make you think and start asking this question: should this thing be normal for me, for us?

Amish

To be clear, the Amish are not our model here. They have the "not of the world" part down pat, but not the "in the world" part. But there is something about their practice that I think is challenging for us. I didn't know this at one point, did you know new technologies are actually not forbidden for them? It's just that, when a new invention comes along they deeply and thoughtfully consider how it will impact their community. So when something comes along, they literally use us, surrounding Americans, as guinea pigs. They see what it does to us first, and then they will have a community meeting to discuss if they'd like to adopt it. They ask things like:

- Is this good for me?
- Is this good for us?
- Will this grow my love for Jesus and my neighbors or not?

So for example - they decided no for cars, which is wild to think about. A journalist one time asked an Amish man why they made this decision, and he answered by saying, "Have you seen what they did to your society?" The writer was like, "Ummm...what do you mean?" The Amish man responded by saying "Well, do you know your neighbors? Do you know the names of your neighbors?" The journalist had to admit that no, he didn't.

- Do you see how far away we live from our friends?
- How many of us can walk to our friends houses?

All of this relational distance is actually, in some ways, the product of automobiles.

Again, I have no desire or intention to get rid of my minivan, but there's something there to glean from. There's a community with distinctly different values that meaningfully affect their way of life. And maybe most importantly, the community is ruggedly aware that "What's normal out there will not necessarily be normal in here." And I'm afraid that we just don't have that sort of category most of the time.

Us

The thing about the world is that it's powerful, persuasive. **You don't know the current is moving you.** And many times, we just get caught up in whatever flow we find ourselves in and we just don't stop and ask the question: wait, should this be normal for me?

Consider the entertainment choices that are incredibly normal in our culture. If we truly have different baseline values about what content is healthy for us, about sexuality, then should we Netflix differently than the world around us? Should we HBO differently than the world around us? What if instead of uncritically accepting any form of entertainment, we stopped to ask the question what is this doing to me? Is it praiseworthy? What is this normalizing? What will this do to us, if this becomes normalized in the church?

Think about technology usage. It is aggressively normal to always be swiping, clicking, viewing, typing. We are hooked up to the digital IV at almost all times, and our devices start to feel like appendages, like we aren't whole without them. This causes us all too often to be distracted, frazzled, or zombie-like at times.

But as people of Jesus, **we value peace, presence, and engagement.** To have the ability to be a non-anxious presence, empowered by the Spirit of God who births supernatural peace, love, and joy in us. We see what digital addiction and social media does to us and those around us - we see the links between tech and our mental health problems and overall life satisfaction so we should be cautious. What's normal out there better not be normal in here if we are to be distinct.

Through Jesus we have an opportunity to be called out of all of that. To be unhurried, present, and have an uncommon depth and maturity to us. What if that's an area for someone like the writer of that article, were he to be around you, would think "There's something different about you. You are more present, more engaged, less anxious."?

- It's normal in our world to run yourself into the ground with **busyness**. You won't get any flack for that. Should that be normal for us?
- It's normal to build your own **spiritual buffet of beliefs**. That should not be normal for us.
- It's normal to allow your **kids extracurriculars** to erode meaningful involvement in your faith community. You will be par for the course in that. The question is, should it be normal?
- It's normal **to gossip** and call it "processing" here. Should that be normal for us?
- It's aggressively normal to get into your **ideological tribes** and just talk about how crazy and maybe even evil everyone else is. That should not be normal of us. Jesus ends this passage by talking about the unity of the church being deeper than any other distinctive.
- We should constantly be **looking at things and patterns** around us, aware of our temptation to be pulled into them, and ask the Spirit: should that be normal for me?

Again, I'm not trying to over-prescribe behaviors, but If the differences in some of these areas are not clearly discernible, then we need to ask some questions.

And then the second question in light of all this:

What isn't normal here that should be normal for me?

Here's the thing: Jesus was not normal. In any way. He was abnormal. He was different. His life was full of constant prayer to His Father. When He spoke, He often quoted Scripture. He regularly withdrew from people to spend time alone with His Father. Fasting was a regular practice for Him. His life was oriented around these practices, and His communion with God.

People flocked to Him with wonder. People constantly remarked that His teaching had authority they hadn't heard before. There was no question that He stood out from the crowd.

He explains this in John 8:23:

John 8:23

He said to them, “You are from below; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world.

Jesus emphatically declares, “I am not from here.” The most famous sermon of Jesus, the Sermon on the Mount, is framed up by Jesus saying “You have heard *this*, but I tell you *that*.” Like a messenger from a foreign country, He upends the collected wisdom of the day.

They marveled at His abnormalcy.

In other words, **He came to create a new normal.** To show what the perfect human in communion with God was supposed to look like. By saving us, He means to fashion us into the same kind of redeemed abnormalcy. And the way we follow in His footsteps is to our patterns to His patterns.

The world normalizes sinful and unhealthy patterns, **but we are trying to normalize Godly things.** And if we do not normalize the things He did, then we should not expect the same outcome.

We have a lot to celebrate here, to be honest. We have people who serve until their feet hurt, people who are radically generous in beautifully counter-cultural ways. People who show up week after week to sing truth to themselves and to their neighbor here until both of them believe it. People who confess and repent of their sin instead of hiding it, and that is definitely abnormal in our culture.

But let me tell you, man. **There is a reason we repeat ourselves so often.** There is a reason why we harp on our member covenant practices that we’ve all agreed to. Because the tides pulling away from doing all of those things are incredibly strong. It sometimes feels like if we were to stop rowing that boat for just a few minutes, we’d collectively be halfway back to where we started.

So it’s worth checking in to see if you are actually following Jesus in His abnormalcy.

Like, **how different is the way you spend your time from your non-Christian neighbor?** If they observed you for a week, would they walk away thinking your life is meaningfully different? Would they see you in the Scriptures, praying for friends and neighbors fervently, checking on people in your LG, arranging times to build relationships with those far from Jesus?

What about if that same person observed your family dinners and conversations. Would they notice any difference in what you talk about with your kids than your non-Christian neighbor? How about the drive to school? Do you take time to engage your kid’s hearts about their day and pray for them? What about the way you use your home for hospitality?

How would this hypothetical and potentially a little creepy spectator judge the way you forgive people? Do you forgive in a distinctly unique way compared to those who don’t know Jesus? Would you ever be caught intentionally fasting from anything, for spiritual purposes?

Are you abnormal in the way Jesus was abnormal? And are you normalizing the things of God that allow you to become a new kind of normal like Him?

To be this compelling counter-culture of called-out ones according to John 17, **we have to do all of this together**, as one. You will not fight the world successfully on your own. That’s not the way it works. **The way you fight the world is through full identification with a counter-culture that normalizes**

righteousness. Its not that we are loosely connected to a people, but immersed in a group that normalizes the things of God or you'll get swept away by the currents you can't even see.

The power of the world is that everyone seems to be doing the same things. So it's all normalized to me. I don't even notice some of it. And what I do notice no longer seems that bad because everyone is doing it. So it's imperative that I have a group that normalizes the things of God...so that I can even begin to notice the patterns of the world for what they are not simply as "the way life is."

Portland church

There is a pastor in Portland Oregon, which is not exactly the most Christian place in America, who talks about this. He says in the early parts of their church, rather than his people transforming their lives and their communities - they ended up getting conformed by their culture and eventually stopped walking with Jesus. They were swallowed by the world because they didn't have the solid footing of biblical teaching, the spiritual practices or godly community. They had not yet normalized the things of God to an extent where it sustained them.

We've seen the same thing happen in our family of churches and honestly I've seen this happen to people I grew up with, where friends of mine whom I thought were fairly solid in their faith just get totally colonized by the world around us. Where years later I'm scrolling through FB, and my heart breaks and I say, "No not them too"

The tides of the world are very powerful, and they are so effective because they are very hard to see. They train us and normalize things for us while we don't even see what's happening. The world is a powerful enemy that we are wise to pay attention to.

Jesus!

But thankfully it is no match for Jesus. He alone perfectly withstood the raging currents of the world around Him. Never once succumbing to its effects. He saw with perfect clarity what we do not, how the ways of the world are under the power of the devil and normalized to appeal to our flesh.

In this same dialogue with His disciples, He would tell them something they needed to hear. **John 16:33**

John 16:33

I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.

Some of you especially need to hear that this morning: Take heart, for I have overcome the world. When faced with an invisible and influential enemy, that's a beautiful word to end on. Don't be overwhelmed by the forces set against you, but rather take heart. Have confidence, courage. Because He has overcome the world and it's pull and power.

Through His perfectly abnormal life, His sacrificial death, and His resurrection He has saved us out of the world. We are no longer captive to its forces and demands. For those in Jesus we have been rescued from the dominion of darkness and brought into his kingdom of light.

And through His Spirit, Jesus gives us his power! It's not impossible to fight the world - or for that matter the flesh of the devil - we have his spirit! He died to defeat sin's power and the world's influence. God by His Spirit and grace is making us into a new humanity. To be the light on the hill showing others by our abnormalcy what it really means to be human. People who are of His Kingdom and not this world. People

who choose unity over divisiveness. People who choose love over apathy. People who choose transformation not conformity. Through His God's People, through God's Spirit, according to God's Word, we can fight and see radical resurrection victory in our lives.

He's given us His Spirit to help us see what is so hard to see, to lead us into all truth, and to help us become beautifully abnormal just like Him

Pray.