**APOSTOLIC OPTIMISM AND OTHER SERMONS - SERMONS BY JOHN H. JOWETT**

**04. WHAT IS WORLDLINESS? by JOHN H. JOWETT**

*"I pray not that Thou shouldest take them out of the world, but that Thou shouldest keep them from the evil."*

*John 17:15*

Not abstraction from the world, but protection from the evil! The deliverance is to be effected, not by the removal of the body, but by the reinforcement of the spirit. Our redemption is to be accomplished, not by changing our locality, but by changing the conditions of the heart. The purpose of our Saviour is to perfect us in holiness, not by withdrawing us from all infections, but by making us proof against all disease in the endowment of invincible health. The ideal of aspiring discipleship is not to be found in innocence, with an environment destitute of temptation, but in holiness, despite the menacing advances of infection and disease. "In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer: I have overcome the world." "I pray not that Thou shouldest take them out of the world, but that Thou shouldest keep them from the evil."

Now what is this world, this ever-present worldliness, so perilous, so pervading, surging like an infected atmosphere round about the disciple's life? We shall never apprehend its significance by dwelling merely in the realm of external conduct, and classifying acts in the two categories of white and black, worldly and unworldly, pious and depraved. Worldliness is never to be known from the careful memorising of a catalogue of things to be avoided, and things to be esteemed. Conduct will never be safely and fruitfully guided by mere attention to labels, by whomsoever the labels have been attached. I must know why this act has been labelled worldly, and this other unworldly, and what were the conditions which prevailed when the classification was made. A label may prove grandly effective in checking my steps, in arresting my thought, in sending me to the Court of Appeal to stand before the tribunal of my conscience, in causing me to review my conduct by the illuminating principles of the Christian faith. So far, a ready-made classification may be morally useful. But we are never going to learn the meaning of worldliness by confining our attention to external acts, by doing this and by avoiding that, and guided solely by the labels which have been attached by other hands. I turn to the labellings, and I find that the classification has been prosecuted into most scrupulous minuteness. I do not condemn the classification. I only assert that we cannot wisely and safely begin and end with the enumeration itself. Dialogues are classified as unworldly. Trialogues are getting perilously near the border, and the addition of two or more characters renders the performance theatrical, and most assuredly merits the condemnation of worldly. Draughts are catalogued as unworldly; dominoes are in the region of moral twilight, a kind of uncertain grey; while cards are indisputably placed in the ranks of the worldly. A country-dance is innocent and unworldly; added complications change the category and determine its place among the worldly. My dear old landlord in Edinburgh used to visit his lodgers' sitting-room late on Saturday night, and carefully lock the piano and unlock the harmonium. His classification was determined by his sense of Sabbatic fitness, and to have permitted the piano to speak on the Sabbath would have appeared to him as the opening of the floodgates of a most offensive sacrilege. Well, I have mentioned these things, not to secure their reprobation. To sneer at these devoted souls would be to fling scorn at men whose shoes the majority of us are not worthy to stoop down and unloose. I have mentioned them to support the assertion that we are not going to apprehend and wisely appreciate the genius of worldliness by the study of the mere enumeration of unlawful and permissible acts. Why, the appraisement of the moral contents of an external act changes with the changing times. Our Puritan forefathers regarded the eating of a mince-pie as an act of abject profanity. I suppose that even fifty or sixty years ago it was regarded as a symptom of sheer worldliness and of compromise with the devil for a minister to wear a coloured tie. I am not sure that the judgment is yet altogether obsolete, but certainly it does not enjoy the same widespread prevalence as in the days of old. Classifications vary with the varying days, and it is not in the most scrupulous observance of the most minute classifications that we escape the infection and contagion of the world. It is possible to avoid all the things labelled "worldly," and yet to remain incorrigibly worldly, to be steeped through and through with the spirit of this " present evil world."

What, then, is the world, against which our Master yearns that we should be secured? It is a spirit, a temperament, an attitude of soul. It is life without high callings, life devoid of lofty-ideals. It is a gaze always horizontal, never vertical. Its motto is "forward," never "upward." Its goal is success, not holiness. Hearing no mystic voices, it is destitute of reverence. It never bows in rapt and silent wonder in the secret place. It experiences no awe-inspiring perceptions of a mysterious presence. Its life is bounded by the superficies. It stops at the veil, and does not perceive it is a veil, the thin, gauzy covering of the Eternal. It has lusts, but no supplications. It has ambition, but no aspiration. God is not denied; He is forgotten and ignored. Such is the world, -- the subtle presence of the non-spiritual, earthliness without heavenliness, life without the conscious possession of an over-arching spiritual firmament, and the forces that call and move in the infinite.

Now see the perilous influence of this upon the disciples of Christ. The presence of the non-spiritual is ubiquitous. It confronts us everywhere. It is mighty, mighty by reason of its visible proportions. Worldly people are in the majority, and their numerical proportions tend to make us timid and afraid. The non-spiritual folk, the folk with the merely horizontal vision, the worldly folk, are so abounding, that the unworldly, the man whose life has sky and aspiration and prayer, stands out in bold and almost curious relief. The oddity of the spiritual has not yet ceased, and he who lives in the heavenly places must be prepared to reveal a life full of glaring eccentricities when contrasted with the life and usages of his day. But that is just what makes us afraid. We shrink from being original. We don't like to appear odd. We are reluctant to be conspicuous by our contrast to non-spiritual men. We should be glad to wear white garments if they were worn by everybody, but to wear them when the prevalent fashion favours quite another colour demands a courage to which we are by no means eagerly inclined. And so, for fear of oddity, we make a compromise. To avoid offence we lower our flag. We check our spirits. We strangle our supplications. We shut out the infinite. We lose the influence of that mystic wind which breathes upon the soul that lives confronting the infinite. This confinement of vision this harsh delimiting of aspiration, effected by a worldly compromise, brings a smothering influence round about the powers of the soul. The soul has hitherto breathed in infinite supplication; now it drowses in cribbed and cabined temporisings. All the coronal faculties begin to lapse into a profound and perilous sleep, and the soul becomes the captive of this present evil world.

Is that a fanciful analysis, remote from the highway of practical life? Let us put the teaching in the shape of a concrete example, which shall be taken from common life. Here is a man who has gone into business as a disciple of Jesus, with lofty hopes and aspirations. He discovers that he has underestimated the might and influence of the ubiquitous and non-spiritual world. He painfully realises the oddity of his position. With others, business speeds; with him, it only crawls. He begins to experience the drawings of an evil gravitation. The emphasis of his life is changed. His eyes are allured to success more than to holiness. Ambition becomes more fervent, and aspiration grows more faint. For him the infinite begins to close, and the closing of the infinite means the corrosion of conscience. "First he called the doings of the place dishonest." The judgment was sharp, immediate, and final. "First he called the doings of the place dishonest; then he called them sharp practice; then he called them a little shady; then he said it was rather close sailing; then he styled it clever; then he laughed at the success of a vile trick; then he touched the pitch, and, thinking all the time it was with one finger, he was presently besmeared all over." A man's experience of men is but small if he cannot confirm the accuracy of this description. It represents an invasion of worldliness, which accomplishes its triumphs by robbing souls of their spirituality, shutting up their heavens, turning their aspirations into lusts, their prayers into carnal ambitions, and confining the total movement of their lives to the horizontal plane of the common earth.

But, now, is it possible for men to be in the world, and to remain undefiled? Jesus of Nazareth did it. "Oh yes, but Jesus was a simple peasant, living among the sweet simplicities of village life, and to the years of manhood experiencing nothing of the blighting and defiling seductions of the more crowded towns and cities." Well, I am not so sure of the accuracy of our common description of village life, of its sweet and undefiled simplicities. No more terrible and appalling concentration of nastiness is to be found anywhere than in many an English village. But be that as it may, Nazareth was not remote from the more voluminous currents of the world. Just near the village was the highroad "along which legions marched, and princes swept with their retinues, and all sorts of travellers from all countries went to and fro. The scandals of the Herods buzzed up and down these roads. The customs too of the neighbouring Gentiles, -- their loose living, their sensuous worship, their absorption in business, -- all this would furnish endless talk in Nazareth, both among men and boys. Here Jesus grew up and suffered temptation, tempted in all points like as we are, yet without sin. The perfection of His purity and patience was achieved, not as behind a wide fence, which shut the world out, but amid rumour and scandal, with every provocation to unlawful curiosity and premature ambition." Yes, Jesus remained un-defiled in a world abounding in subtle infection and seduction. But not in Syria alone, not only in those few strange and mystic years, has the radiant achievement been wrought. The Christian centuries have been beautified and glorified by Christian disciples, who have walked with Him in white. In their lives have we seen the strong fulfilment of the word of the olden days; -- "Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night, nor for the arrow that flieth by day, nor for the pestilence that walketh in darkness, nor for the destruction that wasteth at noonday... . Thou shalt tread upon the lion and adder; the young lion and the dragon shalt thou trample under feet." What is the spiritual content of that great promise, but this -- that they who "dwell in the secret place of the Most High" shall be proof against all things noisome and noxious and venomous; they shall step over and through them without being tainted, poisoned, or defiled? "They shall take up serpents," says Christ our Lord -- "They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them." They shall be in the world, yet kept from the evil; mingling with sinners, yet separate from sinners; and if they are called upon to labour in atmospheres reeking with moral pestilence, "it shall not hurt them."

Yes, purity, even in the defiling ways of the world, is a grand possibility; how can we make it a glorious achievement? On one point the New Testament is perfectly clear, and indeed the teaching is enshrined in my text, that the attainment and retainment of unworldliness is not to be found by means ascetic, but by means athletic, not by flight, but by fight, not by indolent retirement, but by the health of a strong, resolute, and aggressive spirit. It was a true inspiration of the artist who depicted a monk at his desk in the monastery cell, with pen in hand, and eyes looking upward for illumination, and the Holy Spirit descending in the form of a dove to bring the light and guidance he sought. That was a true inspiration; but it was equally true to depict a foul spirit speaking from beneath, seeking to engage the monk's attention, that he might whisper in his ear the corrupt and corrupting counsel of the world. In convent and in the busiest highway the two voices call, and no with-drawal of the body will deliver us from the subtle and ensnaring influence of the evil world.

How then is unworldliness to be an actuality, a radiant and ever blessed possession? The only defence against an ill contagion is exuberant health. It is the man who is run down who becomes the victim of the pestilence. It is not otherwise in the realm of the Spirit. If we are to be protected against the pestilence that walketh in darkness, we shall have to be possessed by a plenitude of spiritual life. How is that defensive life to be gained? "This is life … to know Jesus." To know the Master is to appropriate the Master's life. "I am come that ye might have life, and that ye might have it more abundantly." It is in this abundant life that we find the secret of moral security. If life is to rise within us like a well, it must be because of our intimate fellowship with the Christ. He is "our refuge and strength." Our offensive and defensive forces are to be gathered in Him. Familiarity with Jesus makes a man invincible against the world. "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me." "We are more than conquerors in Christ."