



Junk Drawer - Previous Publications

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What is the difference between these two statements?

1. Do not commit adultery.
2. Do not be worldly.

The first statement is objective and can be measured objectively. The second cannot be. Nevertheless, both are requirements of Scripture. How are we to be in submission to the will of God when we have trouble distinguishing between His various requirements? We have to do some careful thinking about what He has told us to do.

When someone lusts internally, they are guilty of committing adultery. Give the right circumstances, this lust will manifest itself in the form of actual adultery. God's word is very clear in its prohibition of adultery, both internal and external.

Consequently, knowledge of whether adultery has occurred *requires no discernment*. It only requires the facts. God's word prohibits sleeping with another man's wife; this individual slept with another man's wife; therefore adultery has occurred. When lust boils over into adultery, it is very plain that God's will has been violated.

But when someone has a worldly heart, what sort of behavior will result from it? The answer is every form of behavior imaginable. Consequently, worldliness cannot be defined, but it must be *discerned*. This is a road with a ditch on both sides, and Christians have erred in both directions.

Some Christians realize that worldliness cannot be defined. But their reaction to this truth is to assume that nothing can be done about worldliness and that any attempt to do something is "legalism." This neglects what God has explicitly told us to do: "Love not the world . . ."

Other Christians, zealous for good, have attempted to do something about worldliness by defining it and then proscribing whatever manifestations of worldliness they have placed under the ban. The definitions, however, are necessarily inadequate, and it is not

long before worldliness appears again, with all the well-intentioned rules captive in her train.

The first group of Christians find themselves carried along by whatever fad the world produces. The motto of this group seems to be a challenge thrown out to the world, "Whatever you can do, we can do worse." You name it, and Christians are doing it with a Bible verse glued on where possible. A list? Rock music, aerobics, dieting, hair styles, makeup, self-help psychology, and so forth, ad nauseam. These are areas where worldliness can be discerned; they are not representative of any attempt on my part to formulate a new list. You can diet without being worldly, and I am listening to rock music as I write this. But it cannot be denied that such activities (and many more) are saturated with worldliness.

The Christians in the other ditch see the problem and publish updated rules. But these rules are at best ineffective, and at worst legalistic. Is it worldly to go to movies? Yes. So that goes on the list, and the members of the church are told they can't go. The result? They watch movies on a VCR. Legalism occurs when people think that their sanctification consists in not doing things. A legalist could attempt to be consistent in his external behavior (no VCR), but is still missing the heart of true godliness.

What is the solution to this dilemma? Worldliness must not be allowed in the church, and yet it cannot be effectively dealt with by means of rules. Worldliness can only be rooted out by *discerning* men and women of God. When they see worldliness they must speak to it. But such outspokenness will certainly place them in an awkward position.

What type of person can be trusted to deal with worldliness? The author of Hebrews mentions the characteristic of maturity during a discussion of different levels of teaching. He says, "But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil" ([Heb. 5:14](#)).

Notice that the mature have an awareness of good and evil that can only be acquired as a result of "constant use." In other words, a young Christian would be unable to make such a judgment. But this is not the case with behavior that is clearly prohibited by Scripture. The Bible prohibits murder, adultery, theft, etc. All Christians understand these things to be wrong, and that understanding requires no discernment.

But there are clearly areas where immature Christians need the insights of their more

mature brothers and sisters. Problems develop, however, when Christians have been taught to regard any extra-biblical application of biblical principles as legalism. "What do you mean I shouldn't wear this?" Where does the Bible say I can't wear this?" This misunderstanding is all the more likely because there is so much real legalism.

This problem can be solved if a few crucial things are remembered. First, maturity is not the same thing as age. There are many of the older saints who are not only stuck in the mud, but the mud hardened years ago. These people are not asking you to be free of your culture because they are free of theirs. They want you to be free of yours because they are bound by theirs. They want you to trade your 501s for a three-piece suit, and rock music for swing. Such a trade misses the point.

Secondly, a *claim* of discernment is not the same thing as discernment. No one is going to identify his own actions as legalism. Everyone claims to have insight, whether they do or not.

When you are confronted by someone about your behavior in any gray area, consider whether the person meets the following criteria:

1. Is this person living in accord with the revealed will of God? Do they live within the bounds of biblical morality, and do they live there joyfully? If they have trouble with black and white, there is no reason to trust them with the gray. If they can't see the big E on the chart, there is no sense asking them to read the bottom line.
2. Is this person independent of his culture, or is he simply independent of yours? Has his opposition to worldliness had any effect on the way he lives?
3. Is this person free? The Spirit of the Lord brings liberty, and that liberty should be apparent in the life of anyone entrusted with detecting worldliness.

If these criteria are met, such an individual should be trusted when he makes a statement about some particular thing. As younger Christians submit to this pattern of instruction, they too will learn and grow in maturity. The result will be true freedom from the world.

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