

## **Introduction**

I'd like to begin by asking you a series of questions that you can answer to yourself. Should you and I who follow Jesus watch *Dancing with the Stars*? Should we eat Whoppers? I'm invested in that question. It's my favorite sandwich. Should we play computer games? Should we wear makeup? Should we follow professional sports? Should we read Harlequin romance novels? And finally, should we use credit cards? Those questions introduce us to the single greatest challenge that disciples and friends of Jesus face today. Paul and John tell us what that challenge is in the texts we read, Romans 12:1-2 and 1 John 2:15-17.

## **The World**

Both of those texts address the same subject, which is the **"world."** As a practical matter, the **"world"** refers to our cultural context. Every generation of Christians has had a cultural context and so do we. Ours is called **"popular (pop) culture."**

If you want to know what popular culture is, you don't have to look very far because we're immersed in it 24-7. Just observe the television shows, movies, magazines, newspapers, advertisements, websites, music, homes, clothing, products, and more around you. Popular culture is comprised of the expressions, artifacts, fashions, forms, rituals, habits, myths, practices, and so on you see and hear there.

I drove by a furniture store, for instance, and noticed its sign out front. It advertised that customers can buy furniture now and not start making payments for six months. That sign illustrates one of popular culture's most life altering offerings – instant credit.

So that's to what the word **"world"** refers - popular culture and all the tangible and intangible realities that comprise it.

Now, notice what Paul and John do in our texts. They teach us how we, as followers of Jesus, should respond to it. An old axiom we use sums up well, I think, what they teach – **"Be in the world but not of**

it.” That old axiom is frequently used but rarely explained, in any depth at least. So, I’m going to explain it, in depth, today.

## In the World

First, God wants us to be *in* the world.

Many followers of Jesus down through the centuries have failed to grasp that. On the contrary, they believed that He wants us to be *out* of the world, separated from it. Some of those, unfortunately, were Quakers, like those on the 19<sup>th</sup> century American frontier. They denounced almost every aspect of their culture and forbade participation in it. That included music, especially fiddling, which was popular at the time. One Indiana Friends church, for instance, disfellowshipped a member and recorded why in its monthly meeting minutes. It was for **“buying, keeping, and playing a fiddle.”**

That isn’t what God wants. He doesn’t want us to be out of our cultural context but *in* it. Genesis 1-2 record that He Himself established human culture in the Garden of Eden before the Fall. That implies that many of the things that popular culture offers us are divine blessings.

And in 1 Timothy 4:4, Paul instructs us what to do with them, **“For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with gratitude.”** To **“receive”** means to participate gratefully in things that popular culture offers us. **“Everything created by God”** refers to the things it offers us that are both permissible and beneficial. Permissible means they aren’t immoral – aren’t contrary to God’s will and word. Beneficial means they’re more helpful than harmful. The gain outweighs the loss. When popular culture’s offerings are both permissible and beneficial, we can participate in them.

Examples abound. Some of you text. Texting isn’t immoral. It’s also helpful. Or I’ve watched several movies that are part of the *Love Comes Softly* series. Those movies aren’t immoral. They’re also helpful. They entertain and even inspire. Texting and watching wholesome movies are both permissible and beneficial. We can, therefore, text and watch

wholesome movies. We are *in* the world when we do.

Make no mistake about it. Our discipleship to Jesus allows us, even compels us to be *in* the world.

### **Not Of the World**

But we shouldn't be *of* it. Notice two words in 1 John 2:16 that describe human culture generally and popular culture specifically - "**lust**" and "**pride.**" Those words rehearse what Genesis 3 and 4 record. The Fall of Adam and Eve corrupted it. Sin tainted and distorted it. The result is this. Many if not most of its offerings are instruments and even catalysts of evil. So, we shouldn't be *of* it. That means two things.

First, according to 1 John 2:15, we shouldn't "**love the world.**"

That implies something that all of us desperately need to grasp. Popular culture is lovable to fallen human beings.

There's a reason it is. It's so accommodating. Author Richard Swenson observes that two words, more than any others, characterize it, "**more**" and "**fast.**" Want pornography? No problem. Just click on websites at home and you have it. Want new furniture but can't afford it. No problem. Just charge it. Hungry? No problem. Just go to the Burger King drive thru and you'll have a Whopper and fries in your hands in a matter of minutes. Popular culture is more accommodating than any other culture in history. It gives us more and more of what we want faster and faster. And people love it because it does.

But we shouldn't. The NEB's translation of 1 John 2:15 is instructive, "**Do not set your hearts on the godless world.**" I'd say "**Amen**" to that. Followers of Jesus shouldn't be enamored with or captivated by the offerings of popular culture. Almost all Americans are but we shouldn't be. Don't love the world.

Not being *of* the world means a second thing. According to Romans 12:2, we don't "**conform**" to it. The Greek word translated "**conform**" there connotes something changing to be like its surroundings. A chameleon does that. It takes on the color of its environment. Its

environment, therefore, actually determines its color. In a similar way, people take on the beliefs and behaviors of the popular culture around them. They allow it to determine how they think, feel, and act.

But in Romans 12:2, God calls us to be counter to our popular culture. We don't take on its beliefs and behaviors. We don't allow it to determine how we think, feel, and act. The J.B. Philips paraphrase of this verse articulates it well. We don't allow it to "**squeeze us into its mold.**" We're non-conformists in other words.

Our non-conformity is directed to what is impermissible and to what is detrimental. Many of popular culture's offerings are what 1 John 2:16 calls "**the lust of the flesh**" (hedonistic), "**the lust of the eyes**" (materialistic), or "**the boastful pride of life**" (egotistic). They're immoral, in other words, and thus impermissible. Some aren't impermissible but they are detrimental. They aren't immoral but they are more harmful than helpful. Now, when popular culture's offerings are either impermissible or detrimental, we don't participate in them.

One of America's mega-church pastors, Marc Driscoll, claims that if Jesus were living on earth today, He'd be a man's man who would enjoy things like Ultimate Fighting Championship. That's utter nonsense. UFC is egotistic and brutal. It's immoral and so impermissible, which means Jesus wouldn't watch it and neither should we.

### **How to Be In the World but Not Of It**

We now know how God wants us to respond to popular culture. Be *in* it but not *of* it. That's His call and Paul reveals how we answer it in Romans 12:2. It's by "**the renewing of your mind.**"

I'd like to make an observation in that regard. People are almost mindless when it comes to the offerings of popular culture they find appealing. They embrace them with little thought or no thought at all.

Consider a question about one of those offerings in which over 800 million people participate – Facebook. The question is this. How does routinely using Facebook affect people's dispositions – their inner

dimensions? Does it enhance or diminish how they think, feel, and will. How many of those 800 million users do you suppose asked and thoughtfully answered that question? It's probably less than 1%.

I'm not condemning Facebook but just using it to make a point. People participate in the offerings of popular culture they find appealing. And they usually do so with little question and thought or none at all.

But God wants us, in contrast, to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. The celebrated philosopher, mathematician, and Christian Blasé Pascal said this and it's a million dollar insight, "**Our first moral obligation is to think clearly.**" He was right especially when it comes to the offerings of popular culture. We must think humbly and hard about them. We think humbly and hard by doing two things.

First, we know reality. We study the Bible first of all and the universe and life in it second of all. We come to learn the defining facts of our existence when we do. We come to grasp what is real and what is not real – what is true and what is not true.

For instance, I studied the Bible (1 Corinthians 6:19-20) and learned these facts. Our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit (verse 19) and the showcase of God (verse 20) that we should care for and protect. I also studied human life. Statistics show that 28% of football players, ages 9-14, are injured during a season. A physical therapist told me the majority of injuries he treats occurred playing basketball. And my son Aaron sustained five concussions competing in gymnastics. I know this fact. Organized sports routinely injure bodies.

We think humbly and hard by doing a second thing. We apply the reality we know to the offerings of popular culture. It offers something that appeals to us: credit, Facebook, texting, sports, fast food, rap music, or tattooing to name a few. Some of the facts we know are relevant to that something it offers. Recognizing that, we apply those facts to it. We stack it up against them and determine whether it's permissible or impermissible, beneficial or detrimental.

Going back to the reality I know, I apply it to organized sports like

football, basketball, and gymnastics. I stack them up against it. I ask and thoughtfully and objectively answer a question. Does participating in them profane our bodies as the temple of the Holy Spirit and the showcase of God? If I conclude it does, it's impermissible. If I conclude it doesn't, it's permissible, which then prompts a second question. Is it also more helpful over the course of a life than harmful? If I conclude it isn't, it's detrimental. If I conclude it is, it's beneficial.

That then is what we need to do. Think humbly and hard.

But thinking humbly and hard isn't enough. We must also **"prove what the will of God is"** to quote Paul in Romans 12:2. Thinking humbly and hard makes God's will known to us. We then make and carry out the decision to do it. On the one hand, we don't participate in the offerings of popular culture that are either impermissible or detrimental. On the other hand, we do participate in those that are both permissible and beneficial. And when we do participate in them, we do so wisely not foolishly - in ways that are constructive not destructive.

So, knowing reality and having applied it to organized sports, I prove what the will of God is. If I conclude participating in a particular sport is either impermissible or detrimental, I don't. If I conclude participating in it is both permissible and beneficial, I do, or at least can.

There you have it - how we achieve being *in* the world but not *of* it. We know reality and then apply it to the offerings of popular culture, which makes God's will known. We then do what He wills.

## **Conclusion**

I close with a profound point. Popular culture is the most powerful socializing force in the world today. Fast food in France and Iranian young women wearing American made jeans illustrate what I mean. So, ***it takes great effort not to be mastered by it***. Our call is to make that effort. Be transformed by the renewing of your mind and prove what the will of God is. You'll meet the greatest challenge Christians face today if you do - to be *in* the world but not *of* it.