

LIVING AS A CHRISTIAN IN A WORLD THAT ISN'T: FIVE THINGS I NEED TO REMEMBER

Christianity is expanding throughout the world. In many places, it is emerging amid governmental systems and cultures that do not embrace or support it. For us to choose to live as authentically biblical Christians, we will be standing up in the midst of those who may not understand—or even approve of—our decision. When someone else's views or values become legally compulsory, I must decide to what degree I am willing to obey them to stay true to my biblical convictions. To live authentically and biblically may come at personal cost. And biblically, I am not permitted to stop loving the world Jesus loves. To love God and neighbor will inevitably lead to a life of tension. This is a good tension. It is the ability to stand firm in convictions and in love and mercy toward all because God loves the world and desires everyone to be saved (1 Timothy 2:4).

Living as a Christian in a world that rejects Christ will require that I understand a few key things. In fact, five things come to mind when I think about navigating the murky waters of culture as a Christian:

1. All of us fall short of God's glory.

It can be difficult to remember that the Bible says we all have sinned, especially since we tend to view certain sins—like sexual immorality—as worse than others. However, the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah, for instance, were more than sexual. Ezekiel 16:49-50 tells us exactly why these two cities were destroyed: “Sodom's sins were pride, gluttony, and laziness, while the poor and needy suffered outside her door. She was proud and committed detestable sins, so I wiped her out, as you have seen.” According to the prophet here, the sins of Sodom went deeper than just sexual sin and included arrogance, pride, obesity, selfish hoarding of food, and a callous disregard for those in need. I write this as an overweight man, and I am stopped in my tracks here. I think we need to admit that a “Sodomite” is someone who lives selfishly, lacking love for God and concern for others. The word for detestable used in this passage means “morally sinful” and is also used in Leviticus 18:22 in reference to homosexuality. The same word is used in both instances demonstrates how serious God views pride, gluttony, and laziness. While we may view sexual immorality as the ultimate sin, God views a lack of love and concern for others as equally detestable.

Yes, Jude 1:7, and Romans 1:18-2:4 also refer to Sodom as a place of sexual immorality

and perversion. And the Apostle Paul in Romans 1 talks about God's judgment in light of those who, as adults, willfully choose to engage in sexual activity with those of the same gender. However, he concludes his description of the corruption of the world by saying, "You may think you can condemn such people, but you are just as bad, and you have no excuse!" He goes on to say that if it weren't for the amazing grace and patience of God and His offer of forgiveness and restoration, we would all be condemned.

As a Christian, I know people who engage in sexual sin but simultaneously live self-sacrificially towards others. The love in their hearts certainly did not come from Satan! Therefore, I applaud their tender hearts and relate to them on that basis, especially when I can learn from them. Regarding people in sin within the church, I must be extremely careful about pointing out the specks of sins in others while ignoring the logs of my own disregard for Scripture in my life. Jesus said only after removing the log will we see clearly to help our brothers (Matthew 7:5). Judging with a discerning heart within the body of Christ is necessary for us all to help each other on our journey of becoming like Christ (1 Corinthians 5:12).

We all need healing. When Jesus spoke with people who engaged in sin but wanted his presence, he applauded their longing hearts and also commanded them to "sin no more." He celebrates our desire to let him reign in our lives. Therefore, I must do my best to not let sin reign. I cannot let disobedience set up camp in my heart; I must allow the Holy Spirit to drive down the stakes of His tent (tabernacle) in the campground of my life. I need to allow His influence to push out into the wilderness of all those things that have up to this point stood in opposition to God. I need to let His presence reign, using the power He provides me to say "no" to self-reign and selfish living. We can do this because if Jesus calls us to action, he will preserve us and enable us with his power. Salvation is an ongoing relationship with God who speaks matter into existence and speaks shame and failure into victory. All have sinned, but all can be saved!

2. Judging and discerning are not the same thing.

Galatians 6:1 commands us to "gently restore" others who are caught in sin but to do so carefully because of our own tendency to fall into sin. "Others" refers to those in the church, but gentleness with those outside the church is absolutely essential as well. We may be tempted to condescend or consider ourselves better than a brother who has fallen. Still, a gentle spirit understands the folly of this thinking and guards against a harsh or hateful spirit.

Matthew 7:1-6 draws boundary lines around how we are to engage others who are involved in willful disobedience to God. The warning to not judge must be understood in the context of what Jesus is saying. He tells us not to judge because we are prone to think in a position to determine the heart of another and condemn his or her soul. It is God's place to judge in this manner.



The whole speck and log thing means we must understand that judgement is universally deserved, but only when we understand this are we in a position to “remove the speck from a brother’s eye.” We are to discern our own fragility, sinfulness, and tendency to get off track with God while helping our brothers and sisters stay on track in their relationship with Jesus.

Discernment means we understand the sanctity of our standing before God and the value He places on our mutual concern for and helping of one another in our commitment to Christ. We can remove specks in one another’s eyes, but only after acknowledging our own spiritual proclivity and weakness. Gentle advocacy for one another is the call placed on each of us for the sake of others.

3. Sexual sins are singled out in Scripture.

While sexual sin is not the worst sin, 1 Corinthians 6:18-20 tells us that sexual sin is different than other sins in that it assaults the very God-given temple of our bodies. Our bodies were gifted to us as a way of showing others the goodness and glory of God. Our culture believes that our bodies are our own, but those who are in Christ realize they have been purchased by Christ and are, therefore, stewards—not owners—of their bodies.

As a steward, I recognize that my Master sets the agenda on how I will care for His property. I take care of my body as the home He lives in. To use my God-given body to engage in sinful activity is not only shortsighted, but it is also an entitled presumption of His mercy and patience.

Sexual sin allows vagrants to move into the very house I’ve been entrusted to steward for the Master who loves me. Sexual sin is any sexual act outside the boundaries of the marriage relationship blessed and affirmed by God.

4. Marriage between a man and a woman is designed by God and affirmed by Jesus (Matthew 19:1-12).

God designed the genders of male and female to complement one another (Genesis 2:18-24). Both express an aspect of God’s image, but the very word “help-suitable” (ezer-kenegdo in the Hebrew) implies an ability to help the other in ways the other can’t help his or herself. Before sin ever entered the world, men and women were designed to need one another to fully express the image of God.

The next sentence in this story begins with, “This explains why a man leaves his parents and unites with a wife” (Genesis 2:24). In this scriptural context, men and women complemented one another and harmoniously expressed God’s image even outside of marriage. God then blesses marriage as a way to fully express the mystery of His love. Jesus affirmed this, and Paul said marriage is an example to the world of the mystery of the love relationship between Christ and the Church (Matthew 19:1-12 and Ephesians 5:32).



Even if culture defines marriage in ways that are contrary to scriptural revelation, it is not marriage as God defines it. Therefore, as Christians who adhere to scriptural instruction, we uphold God's design for marriage. If culture demands adherence to a definition of marriage contrary to Scripture, we are obliged to disagree. Our disagreement may produce dire consequences, but we must decide if truth can be compromised for the sake of peace. Peace as a result of truth, not at the expense of truth, is God's desire.

5. We need to translate culture through the paradigm of Scripture, not Scripture through the paradigm of culture.

A paradigm is a lens through which we view our world. Like a pair of prescription glasses, we either use Scripture or culture as the basis of our interpretation. If culture is our paradigm, we will examine Scripture as an applicable guide to our lives as long as it lines up with our culturally defined ideas of right and wrong. When Scripture runs contrary to our cultural bias, it will be laid aside and considered outdated, irrelevant, or even judgmental.

If Scripture is our paradigm, we will examine culture through the values and morals revealed in the Bible. Our biblically conceived ideas of what is right and wrong would then define how we engage the culture. When culture runs contrary to our scriptural bias, it will be laid aside as thinking and behavior that hinders the will of God in our lives (1 John 2:15-17).

It is more difficult to wear scriptural glasses than it is to wear cultural glasses. The very call of Christ on us to engage the world puts us in a difficult position. How can we be "in" the world without becoming "of" the world? Retreat from the world tends to be the most common solution to this problem. But as Paul told Christians in Corinth living in a pagan, anti-Christian culture in 1 Corinthians 5:9-12,

When I wrote to you before, I told you not to associate with people who indulge in sexual sin. But I wasn't talking about unbelievers who indulge in sexual sin, or are greedy, or cheat people, or worship idols. You would have to leave this world to avoid people like that. I meant that you are not to associate with anyone who claims to be a believer yet indulges in sexual sin, or is greedy, or worships idols, or is abusive, or is a drunkard, or cheats people. Don't even eat with such people. It isn't my responsibility to judge outsiders, but it certainly is your responsibility to judge those inside the church who are sinning. (*NLT*)

Jesus didn't pray that we would be taken out of the world—how else could we become light, salt, and hope? Rather, Jesus prayed we would be protected from the evil one. With humility, we engage the world with the kindness of Christ. We are to compassionately connect to people, Christian or not. We are not to judge but to offer them the good news of God's love and forgiveness.



Living as Christians in a world that rejects God is difficult. The tensions of living this way will put you in the minority, but it is the life to which we are called. It's easier to do what the majority is doing. It's more peaceful to not engage or challenge world views that dismiss God and His offer of relationship. But a herd mentality rarely leads to true freedom.

We must walk gently, humbly, gracefully, and hopefully. Some will be drawn to our light, and others will not. We must love with the full acceptance and knowledge that our love will rarely be reciprocated. Jesus warned us that rejections and condemnation will happen for those who act like him. So, living as a Christian in a world that rejects Christ requires wisdom and courage—both of which the Spirit of God promises to those who ask.

