

As a kid, I heard plenty of sermons about being “in” the world but not “of” the world. But a few years ago, I got a whole new appreciation for what this means when I reconnected with my East German cousins and heard about their experiences growing up as Christians under communism. Talk about being “in” that world but not “of” it! Here, having your kids baptized is pretty routine, but there it was a very serious decision, for not only did it make the parents politically suspect; it automatically made their kids outcasts. The Communist Party made sure of that. In school, Christian kids could count on having their faith ridiculed...constantly. After school, they were excluded from organized youth activities. Sports especially! That was for loyal citizens, and besides, games and practices were deliberately scheduled on Sunday morning so Christian kids couldn’t participate. As for creature comforts, they always had less than their friends, because church members couldn’t get high paying jobs, and even if they had money, they were at the bottom of the list for luxuries like a telephone. Even at home there was no escape. Radio, TV, magazines, newspapers constantly barraged them with non-Christian messages. And that was just if you were baptized. Should you decide to be confirmed – well, forget about college...or a career...or any say in the political process. Again, the Communist Party made sure of that! So it was hard, very hard, living “in” that world but not being “of” it.

As my cousins shared their experience, all I could do was shake my head in amazement. How different from the world I grew up in! But you know, as I’ve thought about it since, I’ve realized it’s not so different from the world our kids are growing up in. They know just what it’s like having their faith and values ridiculed; or getting barraged by the media with non-Christian messages; or having to choose between church and sports; or being pressured to fit in with what everyone else is doing. Yes, they know just what it’s like! Kids these days endure a lot more attacks on their faith than we did. It’s much harder for them to live “in” the world but not be “of” it – maybe even harder than it was for my cousins. True, our government doesn’t pressure Christians to cave in. But society does a good enough job on its own! And true, there has never been an official decision to attack Christian values, but it’s been happening – and it’s been effective, gradually undermining Christian values little by little over time.

In fact, that’s what has made it effective – that it’s been happening gradually. It’s the old “frog in the kettle” strategy. You know: drop a frog in a kettle of hot water and it’ll jump right out, but if you drop it in a kettle of cold water and just gradually turn up the heat, the frog won’t even notice...until it’s too late. And isn’t that what’s been happening in our society? Think how Christian values have deteriorated over the past few decades, and then ask yourself: When did things change? When did Sunday worship become the exception for Christians, not the rule? When did lifelong faithfulness become the ideal for marriage, not the norm? When did purity become a joke? When did virtue become old-fashioned? When did the Ten Commandments become “suggestions”?

And if I may dare ask, when did kids' sports become the end all and be all of our existence? You think I'm exaggerating? Consider the facts. Half the kids baptized in this church rarely if ever come to worship or Sunday School; I guarantee you most of their families have plenty of time for sports! Half the kids who do come to worship and Sunday School do so irregularly; I guarantee you they wouldn't dare be so lax playing sports. As for priorities, ask most any kid starting Confirmation to explain the rules of soccer, baseball, or basketball, and they can do it with amazing precision. But ask them to recite the Ten Commandments, and it's a whole different story. You're lucky if they can come up with five or six! As for the Trinity – what's that? Or justification – what's that? And no matter how convenient we try to make the Confirmation program – just three weekends a year! – every single time, I guarantee you at least one kid, probably several, will not be able to go...because they have a game. Because they have a game! And adding insult to injury, some parents have even used the excuse, "Sorry, but we did make a commitment to the team!"

When did we come to this? When did a commitment to the team override the commitment they made to God when their child was baptized? The commitment to bring their child to the services of God's house. The commitment to teach their child the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, and the Ten Commandments. The commitment to place in their child's hands the Holy Scriptures and provide for their instruction in the Christian faith. The commitment to raise their child, first and foremost, as a child of God, as a follower of God, as a servant of God. When did we lose track of what matters most? Not just yesterday. Because it's not just the younger generation. On an average weekend, two-thirds of our members don't worship. Still fewer are involved in service. Even fewer take time for Bible study. So it's not just the younger generation. Not by any stretch of the imagination. Our frog has been in the kettle for quite some time. The heat's been gradually going up for quite some time. And make no mistake, we're now in hot water. If something doesn't change, our frog is cooked!

My friends, we need to think seriously about what it means for us, here and now, to live "in" the world but not be "of" the world. This needs to be more than a phrase. Mind you, it is not a call to go "Amish" and separate ourselves from society. In some ways, that might actually be easier. Instead, it is a call to stay where we are, but stand firm in our faith and practice our values unashamedly. We can enjoy life – but the right way. We can get involved – but with the right priorities. In fact, we need to get involved. We need to be salt in a world that's gotten pretty tasteless. We need to be light in a world that's darker than it knows. That is Jesus' call. And if our Christian lifestyle brings ridicule or opposition, so be it! Jesus said to expect it. That's how people treated Him, too. Christians are not called to an easy life. We're called to an abundant life, a blessed life – and ultimately an eternal life! This world is not our final destination. This world will not be our final judge. That would be God. So we need to keep our focus on God – first and foremost on God. And we need to keep our commitment to God so that we live "in" the world but are not "of" the world.

Granted, this is easier said than done. It's hard! Very hard! So hard, in fact, that I'm sure that's why Jesus prays about it in our text. "**Father,**" He prays for His disciples and for us, "**Father...I am not asking You to take them out of the world, but I ask You to protect them from the evil one... Sanctify them in the truth; Your Word is truth.**" Basically, Jesus prays for two things here – our protection and our sanctification. Now, if that's what *He* prays for, that's what we should pray for. So let's take a closer look at both.

Protection is an obvious need – protection from evil; even more, protection from the evil one; from various and sundry temptations. And, if I may, I'd like to suggest that we pray especially for protection from little temptations, not just the big ones, for it's the little ones that are most likely to trip us up. You know, people don't usually fall away from God deliberately. Most often, it's a gradual process. A little laziness here. A little moral compromise there. Doing this little thing to fit in. Not doing this little thing that might look weird. Telling themselves: *It's no big deal. God will understand.* And so it goes. Before they know it, they're well on their way down the slippery slope! And I'll tell you something, the tempter doesn't care what it takes to make that happen. A big juicy sin, a bunch of little ones – it's all the same to him. Whatever it takes to do the job! So let's not be naïve. The world around us has millions of ways to trip us up mentally, physically, and spiritually. Some of them are big. Most of them are small. We need protection from them all. So we need to pray for our protection – as Jesus did – if we are to live "in" the world but not be "of" the world.

Even more, we need to pray for our sanctification – as Jesus did: "**Sanctify them in the truth; Your Word is truth.**" What exactly does this mean? In addition to outward protection, Jesus prays about our inner defenses: that God will so fill and strengthen us with His truth that it will shape our thinking, it will steer our conscience, it will motivate our actions, not the world. When we've got that going on inside, it's a powerful defense system! I mean, if God's truth really shapes who we are, it's going to be tougher to budge us from our faith and values, and a lot tougher to make us fit in with the world. Of course, this sanctification also happens gradually. For being "**sanctified in the truth**" means more than just knowing the truth up here [*head*]. It means the truth has really sunk down and taken charge in here [*heart*]. But again, if that's what Jesus prays for, that's what we should pray for: that God would sanctify us in the truth.

And mind you, not just any old truth or truth as we perceive it to be. When Jesus prays "**Sanctify them in the truth,**" He is careful to add, "**Your Word is truth.**" Your Word: the Bible. Especially in times like these, when there are so many beliefs and values claiming to be Christian, we need to build on what's genuinely Christian. Our inner defenses need to be based on the Bible. And not just bits and pieces. Not just the palatable parts. That's what the world does with the Bible. To live "in" the world but not be "of" the world, we must be sanctified in *the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth*. That means we need to nourish our faith on *the Word, the whole Word, and nothing but the Word*.

There was a time in the Lutheran Church when this went without saying. We proudly proclaimed three enduring principles: Faith alone, Grace alone, Scripture alone. Nowadays, some seem to think that two out of three will do – or that they can stick to the Bible when they like what it says, ignore it when they don't, and even substitute what they think the Bible *would* have said if the Author had just been more enlightened. Forgive me for being blunt, but that approach is not just arrogant, it's dangerous! If our conscience is not "captive to the Word of God," what else do we have to go by? And if we pick and choose on peripheral issues, what's to keep us from doing that on doctrinal issues? Or salvation issues?

We may think that can't happen in a Bible-based church like ours, but it can and does. You should see what has happened to the church where I did my seminary fieldwork: Ebenezer Lutheran in San Francisco. It's the oldest Swedish Lutheran Church on the west coast. At one time, it was also the biggest. Today it's called "Her Church." They now worship the God/dess. They even have a rosary to the Goddess and a revamped Lord's Prayer. It's true! If you think I'm exaggerating, do a Google search. And as far as I know, this is a church in good standing – if you can even still call it a church. Sure, I know this is as extreme example. They've gone way down the slippery slope. But my point is: why risk even a tiny step in that direction? Why risk letting down our inner defenses when Jesus prays so powerfully to build them up? **"Sanctify them in the truth; Your Word is truth."** This needs to be our prayer, too – for ourselves, for the whole church. What's more, it needs to be our approach in all things spiritual. To live "in" the world but not be "of" the world, we must be sanctified in *the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth*. That means we need to nourish our faith on *the Word, the whole Word, and nothing but the Word*.

Now, as you've heard me say all this, some may have been thinking: *We agree with you, Pastor. We're concerned, too. But the ones who most need to hear this aren't around today. So what can we do?* There are two things.

Obviously, we can pray – as Jesus did. Pray for God's protection over individuals, over our congregation, over the church as a whole; protection from every kind of temptation. And even more, we can pray for each person's inner defenses – that God's truth will shape us, steer us, and motivate us, not the ways of this world. First of all, we can pray.

The other thing we can do is dig into God's Word – dig into it daily, mull it over prayerfully, listen to it carefully for the full counsel of God. By doing this, we'll not only be firmly established ourselves, sanctified in the truth ourselves; we'll also be better equipped to help others get established in their faith and stay *firmly* established. Whatever else we might do, these are two things we *can* do and *need* to do: pray and dig into God's Word.

This may not seem like much given the challenges before us, but by the same token, remember when it was that Jesus prayed the words of our text. It was just

before His suffering and death, a time fraught with dangers and temptations for His disciples. At that moment, there were many other things He might have done to help them live “in” the world but not be “of” it, many other strategies He might have recommended, but this was His prayer, and we would do well to take it as our cue: **“Father...I am not asking You to take them out of the world, but I ask You to protect them from the evil one... Sanctify them in the truth; Your Word is truth.”** Amen.