

Dear friends and members of St. John,

Most of us have heard the phrase, "We are *in* the world, but not *of* the world." Christians are certainly involved in **the world**, for that is where **our vocations** are carried out. We serve God by serving others, and that does not mean we only serve in the confines of the church. We serve *wherever* God places us in this world.

But that's where it gets a little tricky. **The world is an enticing place, full of temptations and pleasures and distractions that remove us from regular communion with our Lord.** St. John reminds us in his first epistle: "*Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions—is not from the Father but is from the world.*" (1 John 2:15-16, ESV).

And it wasn't just the apostle John that provides us with this warning. St. Paul, inspired by the Holy Spirit, writes: "*Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.*" (Romans 12:2, ESV)

From this text, we understand that the will of the Father for our lives will certainly be challenged by **this world**. Think how easy it is to be distracted by family, friends, work, sports, entertainment... – the worldly distractions could fill volumes!

But **we're not alone in our fight** to keep Christ at the center of our lives: The Spirit works through His word in multiple ways to help us in this battle. **First**, the Spirit is at work in us to transform our minds, so that we more closely resemble Christ. This "renewal" isn't a once-and-done thing. No, this a constant work of the Spirit that continues to take place throughout our lives. When we read the Bible, when we are involved in Bible Study, when we come to worship, the Spirit is at work in us - to grow us spiritually.

Second, the Spirit helps us to test what is good and beneficial. We have an Advocate that wants to help! There are questionable things on TV, in the music we listen to, and on the Internet. There are people that may have a negative influence on our souls – by the way they talk or act. Is it God's will that we subject ourselves to these hurtful and damaging people or things? Of course not! We are able to "test" these, so that we can separate ourselves from them.

Third, the Spirit and our conscience will bear witness to things that we've thought or said or done or left undone that are sinful and hurtful. We are brought to contrition – a sorrow over our failings. The Spirit leads us to the cross, and the recognition that our failings are completely covered by Christ's shed blood.

As we grow in the Christian faith, **we begin to have a real contempt for the things of this world, while never losing our love for our neighbor.** We understand that our neighbor needs our help, so that his or her mind may be transformed as well. We can't do the transforming – but we can bring them to God's word and the Spirit who works through His word, so that they can receive help.

A **real question** that we frequently need to ask of ourselves is this: **"I'm I growing closer to God or am I growing closer to the world?"** There's a tug-of-war going on inside of us. Our sinful nature and the world are pulling one way. The Spirit of God who dwells in us is pulling the other way. Complicating this is the evil one that is always trying to tempt us to walk away from God. If your answer to this question is "I'm not sure," then ask yourself this: "When I come to worship, do I receive God's word and the Lord's Supper with **joy in my heart**, or is it just one more thing that I must do (just going through the motions)?" We all will experience, from time to time, a "dry spell" in our spiritual growth. Things may not always progress toward our growing stronger in Christ. But continued difficulty in receiving Christ with joy can be a symptom of a greater problem. The solution is always the same: **Return to the word of God and live!** Bible study with other Christians is important to reconnect us with God. When we are connected, God can work to transform our minds – so that we are not "carried away" by this world.

Pastor Travis