

Postmodernism & Culture Wars

Let us pray together.

Heavenly Father, we thank You so much that You are the Lord of heaven and earth. You are the Lord of all of creation, the One who cares for every last little bird and fragment of all that You have made so wonderfully. And Father, You care for us, too, and we worship You for that. And we thank You for Your commitment to teach us, to renew our understanding, and to shape and conform our hearts into the likeness of Your Son. We pray that our time learning together will be used by Your Spirit to that end. Lord, shape us, mold us, and make us people who are imitators of Jesus Christ. We ask it for His sake and for His glory. Amen.

We were talking at the end of our last session about what kind of authority we are displaying, and I challenged us to be those who are in love with the servant King and who seek to imitate the way He exercised authority, that is, by serving those to whom He came. And I want to finish that section by looking at a passage from 1 Corinthians 9 where Paul describes how he understands the task of evangelism, outreach with the Gospel, and apologetics. Because in my mind, and you will find different definitions of this in some of the books you read, I make no distinction between apologetics and evangelism, because I do not think the New Testament does. Apologetics is simply giving an account of the hope that I have to those around me—to my family, to those I love, and to those I know. In other words, it is communicating the Gospel. The words can be used interchangeably in the New Testament. To make an apology, to give a testimony, to bear witness to Christ, to proclaim the Gospel are words that can be used interchangeably and are used interchangeably in the New Testament. And we will look at that later.

But here in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23, Paul describes how he understands his ministry. And of course, as you look at this, what Paul is saying is that God has called him to be an imitator of Christ. Paul writes this: “Though I am free and belong to no man,” because he belongs to Christ, that is why he expresses it this way, “I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews.” That is a remarkable statement, because Paul is a Jew. But that shows how much he sees his identity as primarily being in his relationship with Christ; he is a new creation. Your identity is not that you are American, Chinese, or Korean, or whatever you happen to be, white, black, or anything else. You belong to Christ. That is your fundamental identity, but you need to be able to say, like Paul, if you are an American, for example, “To the Americans I became like an American, to win the Americans,” because that is not really who I am. Who I am first of all is a disciple of Jesus Christ. I belong to Him. Before I am white, black, American, Korean, or anything else, I am a Christian. And we will talk more about this issue of identity in a later session. Paul says, “I make myself a slave to everyone to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law.” He is talking about his fellow Jews who saw themselves as obligated to obey not only the Law of Moses, but all the additional rules and laws that they had attached to it. “I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so as to win those under the law.” And he speaks about the Gentiles, the pagans in the culture around him: “To those not having the law I became like one not having the law, though I am not free from God’s law but I am under Christ’s law.” In other words, I am always constrained to be obedient to the commandments of Christ, but I was prepared to become like them so as to win those not having the law. “To the weak I became weak to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel that I may share in its blessings.” As Paul thinks about the

task of apologetics, the task of evangelism, the task of outreach, the task of testifying to Jesus Christ, he understands at the very heart of everything that he is called to be a servant of those to whom he goes.

He is called to be a servant that is to enter their lives and embody their culture in his own life, just as Christ had done. “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” If you met Jesus, he did not look any different from any other Nazarene of His day. There was nothing on the outside, culturally, that distinguished Him. What distinguished Him was the beauty, purity, and righteousness of His life, His complete love for God with His heart, soul, mind, and strength, and His total love for His neighbor. That is what distinguished Him, but culturally He looked exactly like anybody else. He embodied Himself in that particular culture; He was a first century Jew for all appearances. And that is how Paul says he lives. He became just like the Gentiles, eating their food and understanding their culture, and we will talk about this later. He entered into it by reading their books and delighting in them, and he was happy to quote them. And it is your calling to embody the Gospel, to incarnate the Gospel in this moment of history, in this culture or whatever culture to which God sends you. That is your calling, because in every human culture there are things that are good, beautiful, and lovely, which reflect the image of God. And you are to embody the Gospel right now, in this time, so that in one sense you are not distinguishable from anyone around you. And you understand them completely, listen to the music, read the books, watch the movies, and look the same. What is different about you is that you love God with your heart, soul, mind, and strength, you love your neighbor as yourself, and you are characterized by the beauty of righteousness and by being a servant. That is what is going to be different about you. That is the calling of the Christian always: to embody the Gospel in a particular culture. Your calling today is to be a servant of everyone, a servant of those to whom you go.

This is what it means to have the mind of Christ. Paul speaks about this in Philippians 2. He says, “This is what I long for you. Make my joy complete.” How do you make the apostle’s joy complete? By having the mind of Christ, which is to think of others more highly than you think of yourself. That is exactly what it is. We know that this is at the heart of marriage and the heart of family life, but it is also the heart of evangelism. The heart of living as a Christian in the world is to think of others more highly than I think of myself, and to look not only to my own interests but to look to theirs, too.

Now this brings us to our next section on the culture wars. And I want to begin by saying a little bit about the offended perception of unbelievers. We have already spoken about this, so I do not want to say much at length here. In a postmodern culture, we observed how people are set against each other in little power-hungry groups, in lobby groups, each demanding that their own agenda be observed. And this is indeed how many non-Christians perceive us: as another extreme lobby group who are a strident, intolerant, aggressive minority with lots of money and too much power, seeking to impose our will on other people. And this is an enormous barrier to many of the unbelievers around us. It is a barrier, for example, to homosexuals. Most homosexuals would never dream of coming to one of our churches because their assumption is going to be that they will be rejected and that we will attack them if they come. We need to understand that how people see us is as a strident, intolerant lobby group.

Now, I want us to reflect on this here in some detail and challenge us personally to ask if we are caught up in this culture war mentality. And I want to express it by saying that we create a series of barriers between ourselves and the world. And the first of those barriers is intimidation or fear. How are we responding to the culture war; are we caught up in it? And I see many Christians completely intimidated by the culture in which we live. We are afraid of it. We look out at our society and we see that much of it is deeply hostile to the Christian faith. This is true with regard to much of the intellectual culture in American universities, but it is also true with regard to much of the popular culture on television, in music, and in the movies. Much of what is out there in popular culture, as well as in intellectual culture,

is post-Christian and even explicitly anti-Christian (not that the culture was ever genuinely Christian, which is not my point). So we can respond with fear to this. Is this how we respond? Just think of some of the examples out there. Much of what you see on so-called Christian television and hear on so-called Christian radio in America is full of “conspiracy theories” about the culture and its hostility and antagonism toward Christianity and Christians. Take, for example, the books of Frank Peretti. Although I am not saying that he personally is afraid of the culture, I have talked to many Christians whose reading of his books, *This Present Darkness* and *Piercing the Darkness* and so on, has had that effect on them. Because in those stories there is this kind of conspiracy of the far left of the democratic party, the liberal wing of the church, the ACLU, liberal lawyers, and so forth, and the devil and his hosts, all working together to destroy the Church of Jesus Christ, to destroy Christians personally, and to seek to undermine their faith. Of course these are just simply novels, and they are cliffhangers. At the end of every chapter, the Christians are about to be destroyed again by this conspiracy out there in the culture which is serving the devil. Now, those are just simply novels, and I am not saying these are Frank Peretti’s own views. But many Christians read those books and think that this is really what is going on, that the reality is that there is this conspiracy out there in the society where really all these separate groups are working together undercover to destroy the Church. People are extraordinarily divided from each other, and this kind of fear is not an appropriate response. It is not an obedient response. But if I am terrified of people around me, afraid of the non-Christians in my community, and afraid of the cultural products of the society in which I live, the consequences are disastrous, and we will go on to look at where this leads.

The second element of the wall is what I will call condemnation. If we live afraid of the culture in which we live and afraid of the people around us, the consequence is going to be simply condemnation and the constant judging of those who are out there. Just think of the popularity among American Christians of people like Rush Limbaugh or Dr. Laura. And one of the fundamental reasons why they are so popular among believers is because they so stridently condemn what is happening in the culture. That is why we write them and why people put bumper stickers on their cars saying, “Rush is Right” and “Down with the Femi-nazis,” or whatever particular group it is that he is attacking at the time. And Dr. Laura has her passionate attacks on homosexuals. When my colleague Dr. Chapman gave his lecture on Dr. Laura last semester for our “Friday Nights at the Institute” at a bookstore, several of the people who work at the bookstore who are homosexual were very concerned about that evening because of the way Dr. Laura attacks homosexuals so vigorously. And we assured the staff at Borders that Dr. Chapman was not going to be simply agreeing with Dr. Laura, because this is not the appropriate way for Christians to speak. We were not concerned at all about what Dr. Chapman was going to say, but what we were concerned about was what some of the Christians who come to Friday Nights at the Institute might say, in terms of standing up and thinking that Dr. Laura was the best friend to the Gospel. We were concerned about the impact that would have had on the homosexuals who work at the bookstore. How do we come across? Let us say three or four of you are sitting at a table in the coffee shop any day of the week, or anywhere, and you are sitting discussing something in the culture, let us say homosexuality. How do you talk about people, how do people overhear you, and what kind of language do they hear you using? Do they hear you using the language of condemnation and of self righteousness? What do people hear from us?

Let us take another example. Think of the violent responses to the books of J. K. Rowling about Harry Potter. If you read some of the Christian web pages that are out there, they are extraordinarily vicious attacks both on the author and her personal character and integrity, and also on her books. Now personally, I think they are wonderful books, and I am going to talk about them for a Friday Night seminar. I think they are excellent books. For vacation last year, I had a week and I bought the fourth book and I read it from cover to cover—twice. It is 800 pages long. That was my holiday last year, and I enjoyed it enormously. But Christians seem to delight in just attacking and condemning people. The first

time somebody asked J. K. Rowling a question publicly about whether she was a Satanist and was promoting Satanism, she was so astonished she just simply said, “I think you need to go and see a doctor.” She was amazed that anybody could understand her books that way. When I gave a talk on Harry Potter recently at the L’Abri conference in Minnesota, somebody came up to me afterward and said that they had been researching this fourth book for the past several months, and that in it the author was clearly covertly—I do not know how you can “clearly covertly”—but clearly covertly promoting 64 separate occult and satanic groups, which he had identified in the book. And I made the simple point that evil is presented as evil in these books—as wicked, destructive, and totally alien to our humanity. But he said, “Well, that is not the point. She is covertly promoting all these different groups.” Well, that kind of condemnation of people and our culture is thoroughly unbiblical.

And let me give the example of Jane Fonda. Now many of you have heard that she was converted. I got a letter at the time from a friend of mine. He is a graduate of this seminary who knows the circumstances of her conversion thoroughly, because a close friend of his was leading the Bible study in which she became a Christian. And he said in his letter to me that what was most difficult for Jane Fonda, in coming to terms with the Gospel, was the hateful things that Christians had said and written about her publicly. The violent and strident way in which she had been personally vilified by evangelical believers was the most difficult barrier for her to overcome in coming to faith in Jesus Christ. I do not know what you have said personally about Jane Fonda in the past. Our response to people should be to pray for them, not to hate them, and not to vilify them. Jesus forbids us to condemn people. This is not our calling, and I will come back to that in a moment. Let me finish this point with two personal examples. One was from a Jewish man who came to one of my classes several years ago for the whole semester. He is not a Christian; he is a committed Jew. And halfway through the semester he stood up in the class one evening and he said, “This is so different from what I had expected.” This man is about 80 years old; he goes to the local synagogue. And he said, “All my life, all I have ever heard personally is Christians against Jews. This is the first time in my life, and I am almost 80 years old, that I have ever experienced Christians speaking graciously about Jews, or to us.” Now he knows perfectly well that I want to see him converted; he is under no illusion about that. But I hope that makes us ashamed.

Let me give you another example. This happened with my youngest son when he was in high school. He invited a friend home for the weekend. Philip was 15 at the time, so this was about 10 years ago. His friend said, “Philip, I know your dad is a pastor, so please do not tell him that I am an atheist, because if he knows that I am an atheist, he will hate me and he will not allow me to come and stay with you for the weekend.” What is it that we have done that a 15-year-old boy could have this understanding of the way evangelical Christians and evangelical Christians in the ministry are, and that he should expect to be hated and never welcomed into the home of someone? What has this got to do with the Gospel? It has got nothing to do with the Gospel. This is an illustration of exactly what Jesus talks about in Luke 18:9-14. Jesus told this parable to some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else: “Two men went up the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, robbers, evildoers, adulterers, or even this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’” Now is this how we think about ourselves? Another friend of my youngest son went to an evangelical church one Sunday for the first time in her life. She was taken by a friend and basically this is what she said: “I thought, ‘there is no place for me there, because all I heard was people congratulating themselves on how righteous they were, just telling God how wonderful it was that they were not like everybody else around them.’” She said, “I thought, ‘there is no point in my going back, no point at all.’” How do we pray in our public worship? How do we, ourselves, think about other people? It is of course one thing to say, “Thank you, God, I can only live but for Your grace.” That is a very different statement from what the Pharisee is saying and from what we often say. There is a Pharisee—filled with pride, self-

congratulation, and a harsh and judgmental spirit toward others inside every one of us—who is struggling to get out. But Jesus says about this man that he was not really praying at all but was just talking about himself. “But the tax collector stood at a distance, he would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God have mercy on me, a sinner.’ I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

So let me ask you, how do you talk and think about unbelievers around you? Or, let me ask you this question: Who do you love to hate? How do you think, respond, and speak every time you hear another item of news? Let us say that there is a negative news item on someone with whose politics you disagree. How do you respond to such things? Is your response in your heart basically another curse or even gloating, and is that how we are called to respond as Christians? This problem of condemnation of the culture is why I pleaded with some students last semester to try to write something positive about the movies, musicians, or books that they were writing about. If we can find it in our hearts only to condemn people and their cultural products, then there are many things about ourselves and about the Gospel we are hardly beginning to understand.

A third part of this wall, and all these things go together, is retreat, cultural retreat. We can become so distressed by the world because it is so worldly, as if that should surprise us, that we try to create our own distinct evangelical culture so that we can avoid the sinful society as much as possible. We have our own separate Christian, or even Reformed, groups and institutions of every kind so that we are able to have as little to do with the world as possible. I remember speaking at a conference of pastors about this issue, and one of them said, “In our city, we have our own Reformed country club.” Now he was quite serious. “So on Saturdays, the weekends, and whenever else, we can go play golf and have our sports and everything else with fellow Reformed believers. We do not need to participate in the other country clubs and golf clubs out there. We have our own separate Christian and Reformed club.”

Let me use another illustration, and this was one I heard from an elder in one of our own churches. The church was thinking about building a new sports facility, and I make no criticism of that. If you are going to have a sports facility and it is open to people in the community around you and it is a service to the community, that is a great thing. But this is what the guy said when he was encouraging people to give toward this. He said, “We want to turn our church into a haven, a haven from the world.” Those were his exact words. He said, “Already we have our church services here where we can be together. Already we have our friends here. Already we have our school here for our children,” and I am not criticizing Christian schools, but I am just quoting him. He said, “Now we will be able to have our sports here, too, and we will not have to have anything to do with the people out there. So please give to the building of this sports facility.” To turn our churches into havens from the world is not what the New Testament calls us to do. That is not how Christ redeemed us, by living in a haven that was completely retreated from the world. But this issue of cultural retreat is one of the strongest characteristics of the evangelical community in this time in which we live.

I was speaking at a Reformed conference recently, and one of the people there asked a question. I happened to mention *Hamlet* in one of the lectures that I gave. I was not speaking about literature or Shakespeare, but I just used *Hamlet* as an illustration. And this person stood up and said in the discussion time afterward, “I was astonished to hear you referring to a play by Shakespeare. I have always assumed that Shakespeare is much too worldly for Christians and for our children, so I am educating them.” And again, I am not criticizing home schooling. It depends on how it is done. If it is done to retreat from the world, then it is not a good thing; if it is done to prepare children to live in the world, then it can be a very good thing. You need to think about your motivation for why you do the

things you do. But she went on to say, “I have always considered Shakespeare much too worldly, so I have not allowed my children to read Shakespeare or to learn it.” In fact, Shakespeare was personally a Christian; I have no doubt about that. But that is not really the point here. What this woman was doing was creating a life and an education that were totally retreated from and apart from the culture.

I remember visiting a school in Australia once when I was over there speaking, and it was a Christian school, and again I am not criticizing Christian schools. But to get an idea of how this school thought about the world around, they had a huge cartoon that they proudly showed me, that they had had published locally. It is a mother waving goodbye to her child as the child gets on the bus to go to public school in the morning, and the mother is saying, “Goodbye, dear. Have a nice day in Babylon.” And at this school they proudly showed me around their library, but they had no books in there by non-Christians, and they did not even have books by Christians whom they considered suspect. They did not have any books by C. S. Lewis, for example, because he was not quite clear enough about every issue. And his children’s books have magic in them and witches and wizards, like Harry Potter, so they are dangerous, occult. And so they would not have C. S. Lewis’s Narnia stories for their children. And this was a school that went right up through 18 years old, right through high school. Consequently, as you can imagine, it had a very small library in terms of what was allowed culturally for Christians to read. Is this how we are characterized, by this kind of retreat? We argue that if I am a doctor, a lawyer, a plumber, in business, or whatever I do, that I would be unequally yoked with unbelievers if I were to work with non-Christians in my practice or my business. I know lots of Christians who say that all of our institutional involvement must be apart from the world, it must be retreated. So that is this third characteristic: cultural retreat.

The fourth barrier is personal separation. This is when we feel that the only way we ourselves can grow in the faith and continue in the faith is by keeping ourselves personally separate, personally inviolate from the unbelievers and the sinners around us. And not only we ourselves, but we keep our children and the young people in our churches rigorously apart from people who might contaminate them in some way, by either the things they believe or the way they live. Of course that is what this boy Jason was saying to my son Philip: “Your father would not have me in your home if he knew that I was an atheist. He would insist that you keep yourself completely separate from me.” A friend of mine who is not a Christian put it this way to me one day. He said, “The trouble with you Christians is that you put yourself in a kind of cocoon where all your friendships are with other believers. And who is going to reach pagans like me if that is what you do?” So personal separation is the insistence that what it means for us to be holy and set apart from sinners, as the Scripture calls us to, as Jesus was—He was holy and separate from sinners—is that we must be personally separated from them, in the sense of keeping ourselves apart from them and having nothing whatsoever to do with them. So, the commitment to personal separation is a barrier.

I used the illustration at the beginning of this course of this girl who had gone to a secular university, who for four years had gone to classes and had never spoken to anybody personally, because her pastor had told her to keep herself separate. Let me use another example. Some years back I was invited to speak to a group of ministers for a lunch time meeting. And this was a local ministers’ colloquium, so I had every possible kind of minister in it. There were pastors from every protestant denomination that you can imagine, a couple of local Catholic priests, the local Unitarian minister who was a woman, and several others as well. And when I got there to speak at this lunch, I said at the beginning, “Please ask questions. Do not hesitate to interrupt me if you have questions.” And after about 10 seconds somebody interrupted me, and we had a discussion for the next hour and a half over this lunch instead of my giving a talk, which was fine with me. And what this person said was, “I am just amazed to see you here because of the last time we had any contact with someone from your seminary.” He was not talking

about a faculty member; he was talking about one of our graduates who had become a pastor in the area. He said, "I called him and asked him if he would like to come to the colloquium, and he just slammed the phone down after saying, 'We have nothing to do with people of your kind.'" That was his response to the invitation. We have nothing to do with people of your kind. Is that who we think that we should be? Do we think that we should have nothing to do with people of that kind?

Now, if we build these walls—and in many of our lives and in many of our churches these walls are there—this creates an enormous barrier between the church and the world. It is not surprising, if we create such a wall, that the only kind of evangelism that is going to take place could be described as "raids." Now I use this word purposely. Do we think of evangelism as raids that we undertake for a brief moment or two, or an hour or two? We go always in groups of two or three, never alone, to make sure that we are secure. We go in groups of two or three from the church into the world, hoping that we can grab somebody and bring them back with us. Now, is that your model of evangelism? It has very little to do with the biblical model. You cannot possibly read the Gospels or the book of Acts and imagine that Jesus or the apostle Paul, or anyone else for that matter, conducted evangelism as raids out of a church and into the world for a brief moment with a quick return. Now, in responding to this, what is our calling? And let me put it simply this way by asking a question. Do we love the Lord who became incarnate in the world? Jesus has not saved us by dashing briefly from heaven with an angel or two for support, coming into the world afraid of it, judging it, retreating from it, and personally separate from it. The Gospel is about something totally different. Jesus forbids us to be afraid. In Luke 12:4-7, Jesus addresses His disciples, saying, "I tell you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more." We are called not to fear unbelievers, even if they are enemies of the Gospel, of Christ, of the church, and enemies of us personally. We are not to be afraid of them, or even of the devil. "But I will show you whom you should fear. Fear him who, after killing the body, has power to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him!" He is talking about fearing God. We have to fear God only. And then Jesus goes on with these wonderful words: "Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten by God. Indeed the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Do not be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows."

As we relate to unbelievers and to the culture in which we live, whether it is on behalf of ourselves, our children, the young people in our youth groups, or the people in our congregations, we are not to operate on the basis of fear. Jesus knows perfectly well that the world has its problems. But He challenges us to go into the world and not be afraid, but rather to trust our Heavenly Father who cares for every sparrow that falls. And if He cares for every sparrow, He most certainly cares for us, for our children, for our young people, and for the members of our churches. Of course He does. That is why Jesus in His high priestly prayer prays that the Father will protect us from the evil one as He sends us out into the world. It is His job to protect us, and He prays for us. It is not our task to be afraid, because if we live in fear we will never serve the culture in the way God calls us to. Instead of being afraid, we are called to recover trust in the Lord. Of course we are going to feel overwhelmed by the culture in which we live, but God is greater. There is only one superpower, and that is God, and He cares for us. And He cares for us precisely as we go out into the world, because that is what He has called us to do. And we will say more about that in a moment. Certainly we need to pray, we need to pray for His protection for ourselves, for our children, for our young people, for our congregations. But we must not operate out of fear. The culture may be overwhelming, but God is far more overwhelming. We serve the Creator of heaven and earth. Just think about those wonderful words in Isaiah 40. The nations are just like dust on the scales compared with God. You think of the whole book of Daniel. He is confronted with these overwhelming secular powers in the time in which he lives, but he trusts God. He does not run away from Babylon. You see, God calls us to live in Babylon. That is exactly where He calls us to live. You think of the letter to the exiles in Jeremiah 29. The exiles in Babylon are saying, "We have got to escape from

Babylon. This is a dreadful place to live and to raise our families. We cannot be God's people here." And Jeremiah writes them and says, "Stay there. Stay there, live there, and pray for Babylon." That is what he tells them to do. Pray for Babylon. That is where God calls you to live, even if your culture is like Babylon, and of course some aspects of it are. So we are not called to fear, but to trust God.

And second, we are not called to condemn. In fact, we are called to exactly the opposite. Think of what the New Testament says to us about condemnation and judgment. We are called to judge by the New Testament, but we are called to judge ourselves. See, that is what the Pharisee did not do. He congratulated himself and condemned the sinners. And Jesus commends the tax collector who condemned himself. "Lord have mercy on me, a sinner." Jesus teaches us in Matthew 7:1-5 that we are to be very wary about the way we judge other people. "Do not judge, for you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you." Think of the criticisms we make of other people. Judge yourself first. Jesus says, "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?" Just think of the issue of blasphemy and swearing that I mentioned earlier, where we say, "Well, Christians should not see this movie because it has blasphemy in it." Well, you read the statement of Job's comforters and they are filled with blasphemy. It is right there in Scripture. But our blasphemy as Christians is much, much worse than the blasphemy of unbelievers who do not believe in God, worship Him, or love Christ. When we take God's name lightly and we say, "God bless you" or "I will pray to the Lord for you," and then we never think about it again, or about that person, that is really taking God's name in vain. And we love the Lord. Our misuse of His name is far worse than the misuse of His name by unbelievers out there. I am not saying that they do not have to face their own judgment. Of course they do, but that is another issue. That is not where I have to challenge them, their sins. It is not our business to be condemning people out there.

In 1 Peter 4:17, Peter says, "Judgment is to begin with the household of God." That is where it begins. We are called to judge the Church first, not the world. You think of Jesus' sharpest words in the Gospels. They are not about the prostitutes, the tax collectors, the sinners, and the pagans. Jesus' hardest words are for the people who are absolutely sure that they love God, serve Him, and observe His law. His hardest words are for the Pharisees, the ones who are absolutely sure that they have got it all right before God. Jesus reserves His hardest words for the purest of the pure within the church, not for the world, not for the sinners. And Jesus says this about Himself in John 3:16: "God so loved the world, that he sent his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life." We all know those words. We love those words. But think of the next verse, which says, "God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him." Jesus says it over and over again in His ministry: "I did not come into the world to judge the world, but to save it." And yet we think that our calling is to judge everybody all the time. Just think of some of the sermons you have heard and of the things you can hear on Christian radio and television. You hear constant scorn, condemnation, criticism, and judgment of the culture and of unbelievers by name, like Jane Fonda a few years ago, or J. K. Rowling right now.

Look at these words of Paul in 1 Corinthians 5:12, and we will come back to this passage in a few moments, too, in another context. In 1 Corinthians 5 in the context, in verse 9 onward (and we will read those in a few minutes), Paul is talking about the issue of church discipline. And at the end of it he says this in verse 12: "What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside?" God will judge those outside. What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Our calling is not to condemn the world. Of course we have to be discerning about truth and falsehood and righteousness and unrighteousness, to test everything and hold onto things that are good. But it is not our calling to go out there blasting everybody. Let me use an illustration about a young man

who came to stay with us at the English L'Abri. He had gone to work at the gas station where they were servicing cars, and he said, "On the first day I saw they had all these lewd posters and calendars on the wall, and so I rebuked them. In the name of God I rebuked them. And then on the second day when I went back they were much worse. So then I left, because how could a righteous man stay in such a situation?" What do we expect the world to be like? That is not how Jesus operated wherever He went, by blasting people. That is how the disciples wanted to respond. James and John, the sons of thunder, said, "Shall we call down fire from heaven?" They wanted some thunder and lightning. Let us call down fire from heaven and consume this city. That is not our calling. It absolutely is not our calling to wish God's judgment on people. Instead of condemning the world, we are called to be the priests for the world. That is what God has put us here for. We are God's priests in this world, not God's pronouncers of judgment on the world. Our calling is to be like Abraham, praying for the city of Sodom, and just think of his prayer for this wicked city filled with all kinds of immorality, including homosexual practice. There is all sorts of immorality, and what does Abraham pray? He says, "Lord, have mercy on Sodom." And he says, "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right even if there are only 10 righteous people in the city of Sodom? Surely, Lord, you would not judge it, for just 10 of them in this huge city."

I have probably used this illustration before, but there was an earthquake in Los Angeles several years ago. Afterward many Christians said that because it was centered in North Ridge, which is the center of the pornography industry, praise God, because this was God's judgment on the city of Los Angeles, Hollywood, and all its immorality. There are probably at least a million Christians in Los Angeles, so how could we possibly pray such things or say such things if we really understand the Word of God? "Shall not the Judge of all the earth be right?" And if there are just 10 righteous people, Lord, you would not judge this city and blast it from the face of the earth. What do we think? I can tell you I did not respond that way. Our middle son was studying at UCLA at the time and we were very worried when we heard the news while people are saying, "Great, God, you blasted the city." Look at what Jesus says in Luke 6. This is in the sermon on the plain. Luke 6:27-36 says,

But I tell you who hear me, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If someone strikes you on one cheek turn to him the other also. If someone takes your cloak do not stop him from taking your tunic. Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. Do to others as you would have them do to you. If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that? Even sinners do that. And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners expecting to be repaid in full. But love your enemies. Do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great and you will be sons of the Most High, because He is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father in heaven is merciful.

We are not called to condemn the culture in which we live, but to be merciful toward it. And it does not matter if people hate Christ, the Church, and the Gospel; we are called to love them. We are not to condemn them or curse them, but to bless them and pray for them. See, our response to somebody like Jane Fonda should be to pray for that person and that God will have mercy on her. I wonder how many Christians prayed for her. Well, God always does more than we ask or imagine, and it is God's gentle rebuke to us that He has a different attitude, and He delights in saving people who make themselves enemies of His law, of His Word, and of His Son. Think of the apostle Paul. I wonder how many Christians prayed for him as he persecuted the Church. Well some of them did; we know Stephen did. Even as he was being stoned to death he says, "Father, forgive them." Why should we be surprised if people hate the Gospel, the Christian faith, the Church, and us personally? They hated Christ. Jesus says,

“Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you.” What else do you expect? But our response is not to reply in kind. That is why Jesus says, “Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you.” We are not called to condemn the world. We are here in the world to serve it, to pray for it, and to bless it. That is, to pray God’s blessing on it and on these people.