

Do Not Love the World

This morning's text is 1 John 2:15-17.

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. ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.

John wrote this letter, this little Bible book, primarily to show us the marks of authentic faith in Jesus Christ. There are certain characteristics to look for in your own life which if found, give assurance or confidence that you indeed know God.

But that's not all that this letter is about. Last week, for instance, we saw that John also sought to encourage his readers. He pointed out what God, in His grace, had done for believers in their various stages of spiritual maturity.

But also woven in this letter are *warnings* to his readers. John wanted his fellow Christians to be aware and vigilant about certain areas of danger. This morning we come to one of those warning passages.

Remember, John is a long-time, seasoned follower of Jesus. He actually knew Jesus in the flesh. He traveled with Jesus all over the countryside and heard Him speak and saw Him hold children and heal blind people and walk on water. John was there when Jesus was crucified and he saw Him after He rose from the tomb. He saw His Lord rise into the heavens. And since then, John taught people about Jesus. He experienced a lot of persecution and struggles. Yet he never wavered from his faith in Christ.

So, like an old, grizzly mountain man who knows all about the terrain and the landscape of the wilderness, John knows where the danger zones are in the Christian life. He knows where it is most treacherous. So, near the end of his life he sits down with a pen and a parchment, and he writes with wisdom and with compassion to those that he dearly loves in the faith. And he tells them—he tells us—watch out here. There is a spot where the going gets tough. Here is an area where people tend to get tripped up.

John's warning for us today is, *"Do not love the world or the things in the world."*

If the apostle Paul had been alive when John wrote this, and if he would have read this warning, his heart would have sunk like a brick in water. Paul saw this happen first hand. In 2 Timothy, with sadness, he wrote: *"For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica."* Demas abandoned the Christian faith because he was in love with the present world. What a tragedy!

It happens. This is a very real danger zone for all of us. It was a real danger for the people in Asia Minor who first read this letter from John. And it's a real danger for us, here in Iowa, almost 2,000 years later.

Listen to a comment from C. J. Mahaney: "Today, the greatest challenge facing American evangelicals is not persecution from the world, but seduction by the world. . . . Our peril is far more obscure and far more insidious. We aren't under attack from without; we're decaying from within. Our success as ambassadors for Christ, as witnesses of the life-changing power of the gospel, hangs in the balance.

"We've let down our guard against worldliness." (*Worldliness*, p. 22)

I am afraid that he's right. And what makes this so dangerous is that it's subversive. It creeps in on us. It's a stealthy danger.

What I want to do with this text is first to explore the command itself. But secondly I want to examine the rest of this passage, because John doesn't just tell us, "Don't love the world". He also supplies us with help. He supplies us with three realities about loving the world that, if we understand them, will serve as powerful counter-measures to the lure of the world. And then, finally, I want to share the antidote to the attraction of the world.

THE COMMAND: DO NOT LOVE THE WORLD

First, let's take a look at the command itself. John writes: "*Do not love the world or the things in the world.*"

In order to understand this command, we need to define the terms. We must understand what John means by two things, first with what he means by "the world" and then, secondly, we must grasp what he means by "love".

What is this "World"

The word "world" has a variety of meanings in Scripture. It's the Greek word "cosmos", which originally meant "order". And "it came to refer to the universe as the well-ordered ornament of God" (1 John 2:15-17 sermon by Pastor Steven Cole, Flagstaff, AZ). We get our word "cosmetics" from this word. One way of thinking about cosmetics is they're an attempt to restore order!

This word can refer to planet earth, the created world (John 1:10).

It can also mean all the people that live here on earth (John 3:16; 1 John 2:2).

But there's a third way that this word can be used, and that's to refer to mankind in the grip of rebellion against God. It's the way of people who are under the spell and influence of Satan. If you are computer savvy, it's the default operating system of people apart from God. It's how people who don't know God naturally operate. And don't just think actions, it's more than that. It's the way people apart from God operate in their actions and attitudes and motives and outlook.

When John writes, “Don’t love the world”, that’s what he’s referring to: the godless system that governs people who don’t know God.

By the way, don’t be shocked or surprised when non-Christians sin. That’s their default mode! That’s what sinners apart from the grace of God do. They sin. So, don’t be shocked.

To use another word, what John has in mind is “worldliness”.

Listen to a couple of quotes that help me understand what John has in mind.

The first is by Iain Murray who paints this picture: “Worldliness is departing from God. It is a man-centered way of thinking; it proposes objectives which demand no radical breach with man’s fallen nature; it judges the importance of things by the present and material results; it weighs success by numbers; it covets human esteem and wants no unpopularity; it knows no truth for which it is worth suffering; it declines to be ‘a fool for Christ’s sake’. Worldliness is the mind-set of the unregenerate. It adopts idols and is at war with God.”

(Evangelicalism Divided, P. 255)

Joel Beeke, pastor and seminary professor, says this: “The goal of worldly people is to move forward rather than upward, to live horizontally rather than vertically. They seek after outward prosperity rather than holiness. They burst with selfish desires rather than heartfelt supplications. If they do not deny God, they ignore and forget Him, or else they use Him only for their selfish ends. *Worldliness . . . is human nature without God.*” *(Overcoming the World, p. 16)*

The air, the atmosphere, around us is this God-ignoring, me-centered way of life. And it’s deadly. It’s poisonous. It’s lethal. So John warns us not to love this world.

What does it mean to “love the world”?

That leads to the next question, What does it mean to “love the world”? What is John urging us not to do?

What John is referring to here is having a *fondness* or an *affection* for this world. He’s warning us against setting our hearts on the same things that the people of this world set their hearts on. He’s warning us against falling in love with what the unbelieving world loves.

The reason it is important to define our terms is because in one sense we *are* to love the world, right? We’re to love sinners. We’re to move toward them with kindness and with grace and love. We’re to pray for them and seek to introduce them to the Savior, to Jesus. So, I am to love the world, when we define love as moving towards someone for their good, for their eternal welfare.

But we must not love the world when we understand love to mean buying into their godless values and ideals and philosophies. When we do that, we lose our distinctiveness and we lose our credibility. We lose our flavor and our essence.

Charles Spurgeon said this about the church of his day. If anything, it is more true today. "I believe that one reason why the church of God at this present moment has so little influence over the world is because the world has so much influence over the church."

In another sermon, he commented: "Worldliness is growing over the church; she is mossed with it."

THREE REASONS TO NOT LOVE THE WORLD

Not only does John tell us to not love the world, but he also provides us with three solid reasons why. He reminds us of three things that show us why loving the world is so destructive and deadly.

1. Loving the world is INCOMPATIBLE to loving the Father.

The first reason is that loving the world is incompatible to loving the Father. Note what John says in the second half of verse 15.

If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.

That is one of the scariest verses in all of the Bible to me. If I love the world, John states so, so clearly, I don't love God the Father. It's not possible to love both. They aren't able to coexist together.

A lot of people think they can have their cake and eat it, too. They're caught up in the same pursuits that everyone else is into. But John warns us that love for the world pushes out love for God. John's point here is to show the horrible danger of loving the world. It squeezes love for God out of your heart.

As I said, that's scary because in a number of places in the Bible love is shown to be part of faith. To believe in God means you love Him. If love for Him gets replaced, that means faith is in danger as well.

2. Love of the World engages the HEART in directions that are diametrically opposed to love of the Father.

In verse 16, John provides us with a second reason why the love of the world is so dangerous. It's similar to the first reason, but it goes deeper. John writes:

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.

This reason is that love of the world engages the heart in directions that are diametrically opposed to love of the Father. When we love the world (as John is using that phrase here), there are things going on deep in my soul that run counter to what God is about and up to.

Love of the world is not merely about what we do. It includes our actions, but more importantly it's a matter of the heart. In fact, it's possible—very possible—to look like you're not worldly but in fact are very worldly, because of what's going on in the heart.

And I want to spend a chunk of time here, because this is so crucial. It's important that we see what John is saying here. John provides us with three snapshots of what being in love with the world looks like. He gives us three descriptions of it. And the thing to notice is that they all have to do with the heart. We tend to think of worldliness as carousing or drinking or maybe gambling. And that may be part of it, but it's not the essence. The essence of what goes on in the heart.

I like how David Jackman puts it: "The 'worldly' characteristics of which this verse speaks are in fact reactions going on inside us, as we contemplate the environment outside." (*The Message of John's Letters*, p. 61)

THE THREE DESCRIPTIONS

1) The **DESIRE**s of the Flesh

The first description John writes about is "*the desires of the flesh*". The NIV translates it "the cravings of sinful man". Other ways it can be translated is "lusts" or "longings". The word "desires" basically means wanting something. And it depends on the context in order to know whether the desires are good and healthy, or bad and out-of-line. Jesus told his disciples that he desired to eat the Passover with them before His sufferings. Paul wrote to the Thessalonians that he was "eager with great desire" to see them (1 Thess. 2:17). So, desire itself isn't wrong.

It's the direction our desires go, or in the intensity of our desires. David Powlison wrote: "The evil in our desires often lies not in what we want, but in the fact that we want it too much." (*Seeing With New Eyes*, p. 149)

Here Paul describes these longings as of "the flesh". "Flesh" here refers to our sin nature.

I like how Sam Storms defines these desires of the flesh: "Any and every desire that competes with the soul's satisfaction with God."

These are desires that are attempts to satisfy the soul with something other than God. So, these can be desires for bad things, things that are wicked in themselves, but they can also be desires for good things if we make those good things ultimate things.

Again quoting C. J. Mahaney, these cravings can be “legitimate desires that have become false gods we worship. It’s wanting too much the things of this fallen world.

“A sinful craving is when a legitimate desire for financial success becomes a silent *demand* for financial success; an interest in clothes and fashion becomes a *preoccupation*; love of music morphs into an *obsession* with the hottest band; or the desire to enjoy a good movie becomes a *need* to see the latest blockbuster.” (*Worldliness*, p. 30)

2) The DESIRES of the Eyes

That’s the desires of the flesh. The second description is “desires of the eyes”. It’s the same word for “desires”, but here it’s of the eyes. This points to cravings that are awakened by what we see.

The world of advertising is built on these desires, the seeing of things so that we’ll say, “Whoa, I need that.” You’re doing fine, fairly content with your life and your possessions . . . until you see an ad in the morning paper, or a commercial, or something in your neighbor’s house or garage. And, from out of nowhere something inside you screams, “I gotta have that!”

Another term for this is *coveting*. Or, good old fashioned *greed*. That’s part and parcel of what it means to be worldly. It’s not just doing what the world does or having what the world has. It has more to do with my desires and cravings. I can be bankrupt, without a penny to my name, and still love the world through being greedy and coveting.

3) PRIDE in Possessions

The third description is “pride in possessions”. Literally, this reads “the boasting of life”, and includes possessions but goes farther. In the book of James (4:16), it is translated as “arrogance”. This is self-admiration because of external circumstances. It’s being proud over my possessions and my life. “Look at what I’ve achieved. Look at what I’ve accomplished.” Often, if not always, what these desires are all about is *comparison*. It’s the desire to be better than, or more important than, or something else than others.

At the root of this is *pride*. It’s boasting in me, even if it means lowering others so I seem and feel higher.

To love the world is to have the affections of your heart become horribly entwined with desires that take you away from God, not toward Him. And that is tragic.

3. The love of the world is an investment in something very TEMPORARY.

Quickly, in verse 17 John supplies us with a third reason why we shouldn't love the world. If we love the world, John says, we are loving something that is very temporary. He writes:

And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.

We all want, or at least we all know we should want, the long-term view. The clock's already ticking on the world, on this present system of life. It's going to be gone very shortly. So, why attach your heart to something with no future?

John Owen described this as having "living affections for dying things."

Loving the Father has no end in sight. It makes sense to value and prize that which will endure.

THE ANTIDOTE TO WORDLINESS

Apart from God's ongoing grace, our hearts naturally drift toward the world. My heart continually wants to lean in that direction. I catch myself comparing my ministry with another pastor's. I lust after the latest must-have computerized gadget. The Spirit exposes that I'm craving "this" or "that" more than I pant after God.

Anybody else feeling a little bit convicted? So, what do we do? Where do we turn? Is there help?

Is the answer to try harder? A lot of preachers seem to think so. "You're just not committed enough!" Effort is involved, but that's not the real solution. Get in an accountability group where the others will ask deep and penetrating questions? Having people around you that are willing and skilled to gently probe is a good thing. It might help expose my heart, but doesn't change my heart. Maybe if I shut down all desire, like is taught in Buddhism. Maybe that's what we need. But, again, that doesn't really change the heart.

John has already given us the antidote. To counter the love of the world I must love God more. I must grow in the love of God. Remember the principle that loving the world and loving God are incompatible? Love for the world squeezes out love for God from my heart. But the reverse is also true! As my love for God grows, as I learn to love Him with all my heart, soul, mind and strength, love for the world gets pushed out. That is the only way a person counters the lure of the world, by growing in love for God.

Thomas Chalmers, a Scottish pastor who served in the early 1800's, understood this in a profound way. In fact, he preached a sermon on this text of Scripture. The title of that sermon is *"The Expulsive Power of a New Affection."* And his argument was that the way to remove affection for the world is by replacing it with a new and better affection. We overcome wrong desires and cravings and lusts, not just by saying no, but by having a stronger affection for something more beautiful and more amazing.

To overcome the lure of the world, we must get and we must cultivate love and affection for God Himself.

And the only way we do that is through Christ crucified. It's only by embracing the gospel, the good news, that Jesus loved me and died in my place, taking my sin and giving me a new heart.

Listen to John Owen, the brilliant Puritan theologian, about this: "When someone sets his affections upon the cross and the love of Christ, he crucifies the world as a dead and undesirable thing. The baits of sin lose their attraction and disappear. Fill your affections with the cross of Christ and you will find no room for sin."

Come to Jesus and believe. Believe His love and His grace for you. Receive His forgiveness based on His sacrifice for you.

If you are already a believer, stay at the foot of the cross. Meditate on the cross. Dwell at the cross. Rehearse the gospel to your soul over and over and over.

Stop doing the things that fuel your desires for what the world values. And fill your life with the things that fuel your affections for Christ.