

Do Not Love The World...And What To Do When We Do
Semron: 1 John 2:15-17 (May 2, 2021)

15 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 of life—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.
1 John 2 (ESV)

One of my favorite things about Christinity -- one the things that motivates me to remain a follower of Jesus and to keep my faith -- is that throughout Scripture, again and again, I am invited and encouraged and commanded to pursue the virtue of love.

Over the past few weeks, as we have studied the letter of 1 John, we've seen how important love must be to someone who believes in God. John tells us that it is our ability and commitment to love that reveals our obedience to the Lord, and it is our love for one another that proves we are walking not in the darkness of this world but in the light of the living God.

As John's letter continues he will describe in greater detail how wondrous it is that God loves us, and how important it is that we allow His love for us to transform us into people that love others well. In 1 John 4:7 (which we will look at in greater detail in a few weeks) the apostle writes,

7 Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. 8 Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love.
1 John 4 (ESV)

For reasons I will never really understand, every single science teacher, textbook, and class from grades 7-12 thought it was of life-and-death importance for me to know that "the mitochondria is the powerhouse of the cell." I've never once used that fact in my everyday life, but in the same way my teachers used to hammer that point home, every single writer and book of the Bible presents this truth as a matter of life-and-death importance: love is the powerhouse of the Gospel and our faith.

So it ought to be jarring, it should make us sit up in our seats and pay careful attention when we come across a command in Scripture that instructs us to NOT love something. To withhold our affections, admiration, and fidelity. To keep our devotion from being given to the wrong sort of things.

15 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.
1 John 2 (ESV)

John does not mince his words or do anything to soften their impact on our conscience. His point is very clear:

Love for the world is incompatible with the love of God.

Love for the world -- devotion to the realm of humanity and it's fallen, broken, sinful, rebellious opposition to God -- is incompatible with the love of God.

If we let the truth of this command really sink in...it's very sobering. Maybe even a little unsettling. You cannot claim to love God while harboring a love for this world or the things of this world. God will not share his throne or the devotion He is rightfully owed with anyone or anything. He will tolerate no rival and will not compete for your affection. This has always been God's expectation of his people:

2 “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.³ “You shall have no other gods before me.

Exodus 20 (ESV)

This is an ancient, woven-into-the-fabric-of-the-universe, sort of truth. We need to pay attention to it, take care to truly understand it, and if necessary do what it takes to correct ourselves if we discover we’ve fallen in love with all the wrong things.

Do not love the world. Do love the Father. A simple message, easy to read, harder to truly understand, harder still to obey. But that’s our task for this morning. **Do not love the world. Do love the Father.**

Let’s first take a minute to be sure we really understand what John means when he tells us, *“do not love the world or the things in the world.”*

What this verse cannot mean is that we must separate ourselves from this world or deny ourselves the use or even enjoyment of God’s creation. John’s not commanding us to demonize the material world. We know from other places in Scripture that God created the world and that at creation He looked upon it as good. As you read through the Gospels you even see Jesus, at times, enjoying his life here on earth. He made friends, loved his family, took naps on boats, wandered in the wilderness while talking with God, and even went to parties and liked cooking fish on the beach.

What I’m saying is that if you love the beauty of creation, or biting into a great piece of fruit; if you love your family and friends and delight in spending time with them; if you love experiencing different cultures and learning new things; if you love catching an awesome midwestern sunset while sitting by the lake...you don’t necessarily need to fear your love for these things. One of God’s gifts is that the world is here for us to enjoy. People are here for us to make wonderful relationships with. God does not have an expectation that you deny the material world and live like a hermit. The world itself is not bad.

However, the way we relate to the world, if we allow ourselves to believe that the things of the world are what ultimately matter and then allow that belief to dictate our actions -- that is when we begin to love the world over and against and instead of loving God. If Jesus had loved fish fries camping with his friends more than he loved God, he never would have endured the cross. If Jesus had loved his power, position, and authority more than the Lord, he never would have submitted it all for the sake of saving you and me.

But “the world” is more than just a collection of things that could be good or bad depending on how we interact with them. It is also a system where our misplaced affections and sinful devotion have resulted in a realm that is actively and intentionally opposed to the will of God. Because of this opposition the world is a place that promises greed will be rewarded, any desire we feel should be satisfied, and that power is there for the taking for those strong enough to seize -- it no matter the cost or what happens to the people around us along the way.

Every one of those promises is a lie, and they always have been since the very beginning. Humanity’s tendency to believe in those lies is part of the reason we continue to live in such a broken and loveless world. It’s why we continue to perpetuate the very worst things, things we have become all too familiar with over the last few years. Our devotion to sin and misplaced love for the world creates and perpetuates things like racism, violence, sexual immorality, murder, rape, corruption, and on and on and on.

And John says that if you choose to love those lies, and the junk you get to “enjoy” because of them, you cannot also choose to love the Father. It is impossible for love for God to be in your heart if you’re trying to make a space to love the world too.

Love for the world -- devotion to the realm of humanity and it's fallen, broken, sinful, rebellious opposition to God -- is incompatible with the love of God.

You can and should love people. And to a certain extent you can “love” things in the sense of deep enjoyment. But if you allow either into the place of primacy that should be reserved for God alone, you’ve got it wrong. And that’s what John is worried about here. Losing your true, unique, exclusive love for God.

For many of us this is probably somewhat easy to affirm. We may even feel pretty good about how we’re doing in regards to loving the world vs loving God. And it would be reasonable to assume John’s original readers may have felt the same way. After all, up until this point he’s spent his letter celebrating their faithfulness and affirming their commitment to Christ. Still, he wants to be sure they understand just how easy it is for love of the world to slip into our hearts and replace our love for God. So he gives them a kind of diagnostic, a grid to evaluate where their love is really being given (and whether or not it’s a problem).

John tells them...

16 For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world.

1 John 2 (ESV)

So here in v16 we get a threefold description of what loving the world looks like at its core. The first two have to do with the twisting and corrupting of our desires, away from what is good and toward what is fallen, sinful, and evil.

It’s important to note that “desire” itself is not a bad thing. It is not sinful to have desires. In fact the same Greek word used in v16, *epithumia*, is used elsewhere in the New Testament to describe very good desires. In Luke 22 Jesus says he has greatly desired the chance to share the final passover with his disciples. The apostle Paul speaks a number of times in his letters about his good, deep, all-consuming desire to be with God.

So v16 isn't a warning to remove all desire from your life. What John wants us to understand is that desire can be misdirected. Our deepest longing needs to be for God, for obeying his commands, and for the joy of our eternally-increasing fellowship with Him.

But the world is very good at pulling our desire away from where it should be and instead focusing it on all the wrong things.

First in this list of worldliness is the danger falling to the **“desires of the flesh”** -- it’s easy to read a phrase like that and immediately think this is talking about our sinful sexual desires, our craving for sexual immorality. And that is definitely part of “desires of the flesh”, but it’s not the whole picture. Desires of the flesh are the things of this world that we love, long for, and even obsess over that have no spiritual or eternal value. They are the things we want so badly that we put them in the place of worship that only God should occupy. We desire them in such a way that we move aside our love for God so we can make more room in our lives for the love of what is ultimately, worthless..

If you suffer from a desire of the flesh then you are submitting to an inappropriate relationship with the things of this world. We could make a list of things pretty easily: food, drink, entertainment, sex, comforts, etc -- but John’s point is not to give you a checklist of things to make sure you aren’t enjoying too much. He’s digging deeper than mere behavior modification or avoidance. He’s asking you to be honest about what you love. Is it the Lord of the universe...or is the temporary satisfaction you get from satisfying a twisted, terrible desire?

What, or who, do you really love?

Coming in right alongside the desires of the flesh are the “**desires of the eyes**” -- longing for the gratification of what can be seen or envied. This is the exaltation of beauty and the propping up of appearances that either makes us more desirable or makes us consumed with the thought that we must have what we are seeing. Our attention is locked into the mirror or the selfie camera or the social media feeds we think we need to live up to that we never get a chance to look up to the cross or the Kingdom of God. Consumerism would likely fall into this category: the need for more and more because we believe more will satisfy something in us that has yet to meet its match. The problem is that what we need can't be found by our wandering eyes. It can only be found in devotion to our wondrous God.

Again, the deeper question we need to ask is: ***What, or who, do you really love?***

Third in this list is “**the pride of life**” -- this is creating a false sense of security through our success, accomplishments, and all that we have worked hard to acquire. The pride of life leads us to boast that we have severed ourselves from dependence on anything or anyone...including God. This is idolatry, the sort where we elevate ourselves in the place of highest honor. This is the sin of allowing superiority complexes to set up shop in our hearts -- we're stronger, better, faster, smarter, we work harder, earn more, deserve more, we belong to the better people, we live in the better neighborhood, our kids go to the better school, our home has the better furnishings, our politics are more righteous, our opinions are more valuable, and on and on and on...all because we are sure, deep down in our hearts, that we are the best, better than all the rest.

All the while, God reigns sovereign and flabbergasted by our arrogance. Because our obsession with boastfulness tells God all He needs to know about how we've decided to invest our love. And that testimony breaks his heart.

What, or who, do you really love?

There is a passage in John's gospel that has always gutted and leaves me crushed over the reality of just how awful getting our love wrong really is. Jesus is in Jerusalem, and he's already gained some notoriety for his ministry and miracles. People are starting to take notice. You'd think this would be a time when Jesus can rally together his support and get some great things done. But, because of humanity's love of the world and what that misplaced love does to us, instead we read this:

23 Now while he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Festival, many people saw the signs he was performing and believed in his name. 24 But Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all people. 25 He did not need any testimony about mankind, for he knew what was in each person.

John 2 (NIV)

Jesus can answer the question, “***What, or who, do we really love?***” And all too often...the answer is not good. Because it's not God.

Love for the world and love for God are incompatible. Desires of the flesh, desires the eyes, and the pride of our feeble, sinful lives drives a wedge between us and Christ. If you choose to keep that sort of love in your life, you can't keep fellowship with Jesus. You just can't.

I know this is heavy stuff. And I know coming to terms with these things, for many of us, won't be easy. Because at its worst love for the world manifests itself in things that are really hard to get rid of: addiction, depression, anxiety, too many lies propping up far too much of what we've built for our lives. Honestly answering the question, “***What, or who, do we really love?***”, can be very hard and very costly.

But John also says that is very worth it.

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

1 John 2 (ESV)

I came to a new understanding of this verse this week as I prepared this sermon. I'd always read v17 in a gloom-and-doom sort of way. "The world is going to end, so you'd better not like it too much!"

But in the context of the passage and the whole letter, I think John is actually promising something quite wonderful. I think he's making a connection to the Gospel. The world that is passing away is the one suffering from being overwhelmed and overrun by sin. That I think we can see pretty clearly. But the REASON it is passing away is not because everything is awful...it's because something tremendously good is coming to take its place.

Look back at 1 John 2:8...

8 At the same time, it is a new commandment that I am writing to you, which is true in him and in you, because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining.

1 John 2(ESV)

The world is passing away because Christ is risen. The dawn is shining. And the true light of that dawn changes everything. We don't have to live as a slave to these life-destroying desires. We can find freedom, not in ourselves or in our own will, but in Christ and in the will of God.

This the promise that makes walking away from the love of the world worth it: "*whoever does the will of God abides forever.*"

Here's the crux of John's warning: if you spend your life in devotion to worldly desires, beware: absolutely nothing you acquire is eternal. It will all die. It will all fail. It will all pass away. Only that which is done in accordance to the will of the Father will have any lasting value. And devoting ourselves to God's will is exactly the sort of life Jesus modeled for us and the way of life the promise of eternal fellowship with God is inseparably connected to:

38 I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. 39 And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. 40 For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day."

John 6 (ESV)

We are called to live like Jesus, to love the Lord and to strive to obey His will. This is no small thing. It's not something we can do on our own. And it's not something we're going to get 100% right all the time.

So when we get it wrong, when we discover a love for the world that threatens to take over and dissolve our love for God...what should we do? What can we do when our love goes wrong?

John's actually already given us the answer, back in 1:8-9...

8 If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. 9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

1 John 1 (ESV)

Or, to quote Jesus: *Repent. For the Kingdom of God is at hand.*

Repentance breaks the power of our love for the world. Going before the Lord, laying out our sins, our misplaced devotion, our twisted desires and out of control cravings at his feet and crying out “help, I can’t escape these things on my own” is how we move out of a world that is passing away in into the light of God’s presence where we can abide forever.

Repentance changes our lives, not because of who we are, but because of who God is and what he wants for us. His will is for us to be in this world, but not of it. To be here doing His work, not filling out time with pointless work of the world.

So my challenge for each of us today, this week, and moving forward throughout our whole lives is to honestly answer the question, “***What, or who, do we really love?***”...and if (or when) you find yourself with an answer other than “I love God first, foremost, and move all else”...don’t run and hide. Don’t set yourself to working harder for your own salvation. And please don’t just throw yourself further into the love of whatever has taken God’s rightful place in your heart.

Go to the Lord. Confess. Repent. Believe in His goodness and his love for you. Because God is always “*faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*”

Do not love the world. Do love the Father.