

The Futility of Loving the World

1 John 2:15-17

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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 of life—is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever. (1 John 2: 15-17 ESV)

Last week we spent all our time on verse 15. Do not love the world or the things in the world. What does John mean by “world”? He does not mean the physical world or the world of humanity; he means the values and priorities of a world hostile to God. The corrupted world has its own kind of religion, “life lived without God.” He means they lived out the practical atheism of a world in rebellion against its creator. It is immoral and materialistic; it refuses to acknowledge God, morality, sin, accountability, and judgment.

Practically speaking, it urges us to live only for this world and this life. It values things and seeks to have and hoard as much stuff in this world as possible. It finds its significance from status and the symbols of status. It craves the admiration of man, not God, and avoids at all costs thoughts of an impending death. It is the “world.”

Where is it located? The world is not out there, the world is in here (the heart).

John says, Christians shouldn't, and ultimately can't, find their identity, meaning, status, security, or happiness from, and in, this world. No true Christian will do so in an ultimate sense. Why? You can't make this world your ultimate (love) and at the same time have God as your ultimate. The human heart only has one throne and a genuine Christian will have God on that throne and live directionally with a greater love for God than anything in this world.

He unpacks that with three reasons a Christian shouldn't and won't make this world their ultimate.

Why to NOT Love the World

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 2:16)

John's argument is one of source. To love the Father means I love everything that comes from him. To love the world means I'm all about what comes from the world. Love the source and you love what comes from it.

My sister Barb lives in Texas but we all grew up in Iowa. Barb tries to plan summer trips to Iowa to coincide with the Iowa sweet corn season. She loves it. She takes bags of it back to Iowa and throws a party for other friends living in Texas who are originally from Iowa. These Iowans get together, likely wearing their Hawkeye gear, and they savor Iowa sweet corn. “Oh, this corn! It reminds me of home.” They love corn from Iowa.

This works the same way if you love someone. Perhaps this past week you got a Valentine's Day card. If you're a dad, it may have only been crayon scribbles. But if it's from your daughter, you love it. Why? You love your daughter. Our loves work that way. When you love the source, you love what comes from it.

John says, love the world and you love what comes from the world. Love the Father and you love what comes from the Father. You cannot love the one and yet love what comes from the other.

The desires of (for) the world are NOT from God

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 2:16)

John describes them in three categories, the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life.

The lust(s) of the flesh

"Flesh" here is not physical flesh but the corrupted sinful nature of man. When God made us, he made us with desires. Good desires. Holy desires. Desires with satisfactions that he created to correlate to those desires. C.S. Lewis said as much:

"Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for these desires exists. A baby feels hunger; well, there is such a thing as food. A duckling wants to swim; well, there is such a thing as water. Men feel sexual desire; well, there is such a thing as sex. If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world." (C.S. Lewis, Mere Christianity, Bk. III, chap. 10, "Hope")

Good desires have good God-intended satisfactions and God-intended results. Thanksgiving to him. Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. (1 Corinthians 10:31). The lust of the flesh is an orientation toward self and the satisfying of desires apart from and outside of God's will. It does not enjoy these blessings as good gifts from God. This is Bart Simpson who prayed before the meal, "God, we paid for this food so thanks for nothing." As Paul writes in Romans 1:21, They did not honor Him as God or give thanks to him. Our sin nature, in rebellion against God and determined to find some alternative to God from which to find meaning, turns the good desire and satisfaction into an obsession—a kind of god; an idol.

The good desire for food becomes an obsession that turns into gluttony. The good desire for Sabbath is turned into an obsession for ease and comfort. The desire for sex is turned into an obsession for personal gratification or pornography or any number of sexual expressions outside of God's plan for marriage. Pick any good desire God gave to us and man has figured out how to corrupt it, profane it, idolize it, and worship it.

Desire is good. Obsession for anything but God is from the world. Does that mean we shouldn't enjoy the things of this world? No! But we must fight living for these things and somehow thinking that if we have them, then we will be happy. It never works that way. A little Iowa sweet corn is a savory experience. If my sister and her family eat Iowa sweet corn every day for a month, they may never visit the state again.

Remember, John isn't writing a treatise against the world, he is writing a treatise against self-deceived professing Christians who think they can claim to love God yet live for anything but God.

Obsession for God is a good thing; we call that worship. Obsession for anything but God is an idol and if you love idols, your idols will take you to hell.

The lust(s) of the eyes

These categories are interrelated and the distinctions are fuzzy. Yet, we most associate lust with the eyes. The eyes are the gate through which our obsessions flow. Think of Eve as an example. So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate. (Genesis 3:6)

So often our eyes are the gate through which obsession begins. David saw Bathsheba bathing and that sight stirred sinful desire in him. Our eyes themselves don't lust. What we see goes through our eyes and down to our hearts. If our hearts love the world and the things in the world, the desire to possess what is seen erupts. Eye lust is really the visual component of heart lust. The eyes desire whatever the heart craves.

An easy example of this is sexual lust. If I may make an observation as a man (and I have only been a man so it's the only perspective I can give), forgive me, sisters: I can be flipping through a magazine or flying down a webpage and my eyes will attach to something that looks like it might be female. A shape or face. You men know what I'm talking about. Then your eyes focus and, lo and behold! it's not a woman at all but an article about fruit or some other thing. The eyes are on a hair trigger, ready to pounce on whatever the heart desires.

It could be anything. If you obsess over Corvettes, you see every Corvette on the road. If you covet coffee, you can spot a Starbucks sign a mile away. Don't go grocery shopping when you are hungry, or you'll buy everything you see. What we desire in our hearts, we see with our eyes.

Why is this a problem? The eyes only see the surface of things. They see things superficially. When I am living superficially, I only value things for their appearance or how they pleasure the eyes. This is the voyeur. The gazer. The pornographer. A human being made for worship of a spiritual God bowing at the feet of a physical thing. I think of the old ad campaign, Image is everything. Lust of the Eyes.

Pride in possessions

This doesn't need much explanation. It literally reads, the boastfulness of life. The NIV goes with "The boasting of what he has and does." This is the carnal person who is filled with self-importance because of the status symbols he possesses. He wants others to be convinced of his importance and so he boasts about who he is and what he owns and what he has done. This is the materialist whose identity is wrapped up in his house or car or bank account or really anything that might make him seem above others.

As one writer said, "It's not the desire to keep up with the Joneses but the desire to exceed them." Boastfulness. The word literally means a presumptuous braggart. He wants everyone to know how successful he is!

Possessions are not the problem, pride in them is. How can we know if we have pride in our possessions? How easily do we give them up? How do we feel when we lose them?

You may have heard what happened when the stock market crashed in 1929. Businessmen were walking to the top of buildings and simply jumping off to their death. Why would people do that? When your personal identity is in money, to lose it is to lose everything. To give it away is ludicrous. Why give up the security and status and personal fulfillment it provides?

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 2:16)

When I love the world, then I am dominated by the desires of this world, my eyes rove for worldly satisfaction, and my heart covets and boasts in what I have and what I do and who I am. John says, all that is not from the Father. So when the course of my life is toward identity and security in this world, it reveals the true love in my heart. Love the world, love what the world loves. Love the Father, love what comes from the Father.

The World and All its Cravings are Passing Away

And the world is passing away along with its desires. (1 John 2:17)

We are so engrossed in this world and its desires, the rich seem so secure and the beautiful seem so beautiful and the powerful seem like they will always be powerful. Yet what does history show? Everything and everyone passes away. Death comes to the rich and the poor, the powerful and the weak, the beautiful and the ordinary. History is filled with people who gained so much of this world, yet where are they? Where are the monarchs of England, the Pharaohs of Egypt, famous beauties like Cleopatra and Marilyn Monroe, titans of business like Rockefeller and Carnegie, musicians, artists, philosophers, politicians? All of them are dead and what has happened to all their lustings and cravings and possessions? Where did they go? Those are gone as well.

What should that tell us about living for this fleeting world? I have thought about this over the years as I have occasionally watched the Oscars. If there's any place where the lust of the flesh and the eyes and the pride of life are on display, it's the Academy Awards. Most of it is forgettable, but each year they have a feature where they show all the major stars that died the previous year. In the pictures they are young and beautiful. All of them are very popular and admired the world over.

I wonder if the stars of today stop and think, You know, they were all once young and sitting right here where I am. Now they're dead. Why am I living this way? This won't last. What is life really all about?

The same thing could be said over the homes and colleges and the businesses and the marketplaces of our community. People, why live for what doesn't last?

This is a depressing message. You're saying that the things I have found my significance in are sourced in a fallen world that is passing away. Thank you. John ends on a redemptive note. Is there a better way? Is there a life and are there desires that have lasting value and meaning?

The life and love that lasts

And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever. (1 John 2:17)

In a world that is passing away, there is a life that can be lived that has lasting significance. It doesn't come by building monuments to yourself or writing your name in stone. It also doesn't require any greatness by human standards. It is greatness that is accessible to everyone.

Whoever does the will of God abides forever. (Verse 17) What does that mean? It means the same thing that Jesus meant when he said this:

And calling the crowd to him with his disciples, he said to them, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? (Mark 8:34-36)

Gain the whole world but lose your soul? This is the irony of the gospel. To become a Christian means the apparent loss of what this world says life is all about. How? To become a Christian is to turn from the desires and the sins of this world; to surrender my right to my own life. It is to place the God of the Bible on the throne of my heart through faith in Jesus. I surrender to his right to rule my life. It is to live a life for the will of God.

The world thinks that's crazy. Who is really crazy? The guy who invests his entire life in things that don't last or the guy who lives his life in this world investing for the eternal one? I say the world is crazy...respectfully.

Whoever does the will of God abides forever. (Verse 17) There is a life that can be lived and investments of time, talent, and treasure that can be made which even death cannot and will not destroy. Don't live for what is fleeting; live for what is forever. The desire to do the will of God is a gift from God. Obedience is a fruit of genuine salvation so there is no room for pride on our part.

The takeaway here is a series of questions, which world am I loving? Which world am I living for? Which world dominates my thinking, cravings, and search for significance? What do my pursuits and obsessions say about whether I have a genuine love for God or not?

Look at the love of God. He wants to free us from attaching ourselves to a fleeting world. Look at those people on that Carnival ship. While they were drifting, how many of them would have bought stock in Carnival? "Why would I buy stock in this ship? It isn't going anywhere."

This world is adrift, powerless, and ultimately going down. But the child of God who doesn't love the world but loves God and lives to fulfill his will, that is a life that will have eternal significance in a world that lasts forever. Love and live for God.

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