

Do Not Love the World

1 John 2:15-17

Introduction

Imagine a dog with his favorite chew toy in his mouth. He hears his owner's voice calling him in, or perhaps just hears the rattling pebbles as his chow is poured into his dish. He hustles in, and stands over his dish, excited and drooling. But here he is faced with a dilemma. His mouth is still full of chew toy. And so he stands there dumbly staring at the food bowl. And so it is with us.

John has reminded his sheep of their place in Christ (2:12-14), and so now he returns again to fighting false doctrine and calling the church to walk in the light. We cannot claim fellowship with God and walk in darkness (1:6), or to know Him and not keep His commandments (2:4), or to be in the light and hate our brother (2:9). In this passage, John comes at this from another angle: you cannot love the world and have the love of the Father in you. There is only room for one love in your heart.

The World

There are two dangers to be wary of as we work to discern what John means by "the world." The first is to forget what Scripture says elsewhere. The second is to essentially explain away the command. Given these cautions, what does John mean by the world in this passage? First, consider briefly that John uses the word multiple ways within this letter. Compare 2:2, 4:9, and 4:14 with 4:1-6. In our text, it appears that John means it similarly to the latter example. *"The world' is anything that is set against the kingdom of God and the hope of the gospel. It includes things opposed to Christ from world systems and ideologies (the Roman empire and Caesars, the Judaizers, secularism, etc.) to any pleasure selfishly sought"* (Leithart). This also means that John is not using the term to mean all things material.

Compare this idea with what else Scripture says—the world was made through the Word (John 1:10), for Him (Col. 1:16), and God declared it very good (Gen. 1:31). Everything still consists in Christ (Col. 1:17). The earth, even though tainted by sin, is still the Lord's, all of it (Ps. 24:1). We also know this because Paul in one place clearly says that ascetic rules and regulations (taught and required by the Judaizers) are "of no value against the indulgence of the flesh" (Col. 2:20-23). Consider also the way John describes the world in the very next verse. John is not saying that wine or sleep or money or sex or clothing is evil. He is saying that any inordinate love of these things—any love that supersedes the love of God—is evil. You cannot love God second. He is loved first or not at all, just like we say Jesus is Lord of all or He is not Lord at all.

Rightly Ordered Love

John essentially reiterates the first and greatest commandment: love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. This love for God is all-consuming and exclusive, and yet this does not mean that it excludes all other loves entirely. We know this because of the second greatest commandment: love your neighbor as yourself. If the command to love God meant that we could not love anything else at all, then the second commandment, the second table of the Law, makes no sense. Rather, our love for God as Lord over everything, Lord over every aspect of our lives, the only object of our worship—this love enables us to rightly love in many other areas. This is what the early church father

Augustine identified as an ordinate or rightly ordered love. John is calling the church to embrace this love of God before everything else because their sins are forgiven, because God has loved them (again, 2:12-14).

All That Is In the World

John breaks down all that is in the world into three parts (2:16). The first, the lust of the flesh (“cravings of sinful man” – NIV), refers primarily to *“that pleasure with which I desire to indulge my flesh, such as adultery, fornication, gluttony, ease, and sleep”* (Luther). The second, the lust of the eyes, deals with temptations such as covetousness and greed. Third, the pride of life, is a boasting or even grasping after the security of life. It is self-dependence, self-glorification, and total autonomy. These three overlap and are closely related to each other. So the question we must ask is, “In what way do I love the world? In what way to I give in to the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, the pride of life, and set those loves in place of my love for God?” You cannot hold on to these things and hold on to Christ. The good news is that, if you are His, He holds on to you even so.

Passing Away or Abiding Forever

John identifies the foolishness of loving the world: it and its lusts are passing away (2:17; cf. Matt. 6:19-21). How many lusts and desires are buried in a graveyard? This is one of the problems with today’s church condoning modifiers to “Christian” (e.g., gay Christian). We want to tie our lusts to our identity in Christ. We want to give our lusts primacy or an equal footing with our Savior. And, we do this in more subtle ways when we cling to our lusts and pretend that we can get away with those sins when “no one is looking.”

At the same time, “he who does the will of God abides forever.” What does it mean to do the will of God? Often in Scripture, doing God’s will simply means walking in obedience (e.g., Mark 3:35, Rom. 12:2, Eph. 6:6, 1 Thess 4:3, 1 Thess. 5:16-18, 1 Pet. 2:15, 1 Pet. 4:2). Doing the will of God is walking in the light and fleeing darkness. We learn to do both by giving ourselves to the Word (Ps. 119:9-11 and 105), remembering that our Savior Jesus is the Word made flesh. We do this through the power of Spirit, relying on the grace that He brings day by day. And when we sin, we do the will of God by confessing our sins (1 John 1:9). He who does this abides forever because in doing the will of God, you abide in Him, and He is forever (cf. 2:5-6).

Conclusion

Jesus says nothing will separate you from His love for you (Rom. 8:38-39). John here calls you to imitate Jesus. Do not let anything separate you from your love for Him. This is a daily task, putting off the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, and putting on Christ (cf. Rom. 13:14). Cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light! The call is also for anyone who is not a follower of Christ. Death is a reality, and we do not know when it will come. Are you ready to face the Lord of the universe, your Maker, God Almighty? Will He say to you, well done, good and faithful servant, because you have, in the grace of Christ, done the will of God? Or will He say to you, depart from me, for I never knew you, for you loved the world and its lusts? Confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus, and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, and you will be saved.