

“Do Not Love the World”

The Fourth in a Series of Sermons on John’s Epistles

Texts: 1 John 2:12-17; Joshua 7:10-26

Christians don’t seem to worry about this much any more, but in the churches of my youth it was common to hear sermons on the evils of “worldliness.” “Worldliness” was always tied to certain things—cigarettes, alcohol, playing cards, women wearing pants, men with long hair, and other assorted man-made blue laws. We were taught that if you avoided these things, you would not become “worldly.” If you are old enough to remember such sermons, you know exactly what I am talking about. If you are not, count your blessings! Yes, John commands us “do not love the world, for the world is passing away.” But John is not warning us about sinful things, but a sinful attitude tied to the lusts of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, and the pride of possessions. Not only does John warn us about loving the world, he also reminds us that everything connected to this fallen world is destined to perish. Darkness will one day give way to light, because the light (and everything connected to it), will abide forever.

We are continuing our series on the Epistles of John, which give us a fascinating look at some of the serious issues facing the churches of Asia Minor toward the end of the first century. We are now in the second chapter of 1 John, working our way through John’s catalogue of the four things which should characterize those who walk in the light—those who have been given life by the word of life, who is God manifest in the flesh. According to John, those who walk in the light will confess their sins (1 John 1:5-2:2), and will strive to obey the commandments of God (2:3-11). We have covered these two distinctives on previous Lord’s days. The third thing which should characterize those who walk in the light is that they are not to love the world (2:12-17). This is our topic in this sermon. And then in verses 18-29, John warns the churches that many antichrists have already come into the world—a topic to which we’ll turn next time, Lord willing.

Recall that John is dealing with an early form of Gnosticism which stresses “secret knowledge” and which sets up a dualism between spirit (good) and matter (evil). In our previous three sermons, I’ve spent considerable time on the distinctives of this proto-Gnosticism, so I would encourage you to listen to these sermons to help you understand the circumstances and context in which John’s three epistles were written. In order to properly interpret these epistles, we need to know three things: 1). Why does John write these epistles? 2). We must understand the error John is writing to correct, and 3). We need to notice that virtually everything in these epistles echoes John’s earlier statements in his gospel.

As we have seen, the Gnostic dualism (between spirit and matter) makes our Lord’s incarnation an impossibility. In the Gnostic conception of the universe, how can Jesus be God in human flesh when pure spirit (God) cannot come into contact with matter (which is evil)? These proto-Gnostics were forced to explain Jesus’ physical appearances in the gospels by contending that while Jesus was truly God, he merely took the form (or the appearance) of a man. In other words, Jesus was God, but not human. This is the heresy known as docetism, which John ties directly to the spirit of antichrist.

The nature of this heresy explains why in the opening verses John emphatically stresses the fact that he has seen Jesus perform miracles with his own eyes, that he heard Jesus preach with his own ears, and that he even reached out and touched Jesus—who is a flesh and blood Savior, not a phantom or an apparition. John quickly moves on to warn those influenced by these false teachers, and who were now convinced that they were no longer sinful, that they are self-deceived and make God out to be a liar when they

refuse to admit that they commit sin. In chapter two, John then reminds us that Jesus offered himself up as a propitiation for our sins, turning aside the wrath of God toward those for whom he is dying. John also reminds his readers that Jesus is now in heaven as our advocate, pleading our case before the Father. All of this requires a truly human Savior who is God manifest in the flesh.

As we saw last time, in verses 3-11 of chapter John reminds his readers that “*by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments.*” Although Christians such as Wesley have misread John’s discussion as though the apostle was speaking about sanctification in terms of whether or not Christians could come to a place in their Christian lives where they could cease from sinning (i.e., “Christian perfectionism”), the context in which John writes this epistle indicates something else. If those influenced by the false teachers were claiming to be without sin, John illustrates the gravity of their error by using a simple contrast between light and darkness. Those “in know,” who claim to have insight into the secret principles of the universe, think of themselves as “enlightened.” But the reality is they walk in darkness. They are blind to the truth because they have lived in darkness for so long they can no longer tell truth from error.

Because they walk in darkness, they are easily recognizable—they are completely indifferent to the commandments of God which continually expose human sinfulness and reveal to us the will of God. Since Christ has died for us, and since he presently intercedes for us, Christians will walk in the light of God’s will as revealed in the word of God, and in that word manifest in the flesh. And because we walk in the light, the law of God exposes our sins (so that we are not-self deceived and foolishly claim to be without sin), while at the same time, the law shows us what it means to walk in the light. In this, the law is a teacher of sin and the rule of gratitude. Christians, who walk in the light, will strive to obey God’s commands, unlike those who walk in darkness and who have no interest in obeying the commandments.

All of this means that John is not concerned with the question of whether or not Christians can cease from sin. In fact, John’s declaration in 2:1 indicates otherwise—“*My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.*” John is simply making a contrast between those who are indifferent to sin, thereby demonstrating that they walk in darkness, and Christians—those who strive to obey God’s commandments because they are in Christ, who is the manifestation of God’s light in the world.

Those who walk in the light *will* strive to love their brothers and sisters, they *will* abide in Christ and bear that fruit which God has ordained them to produce (cf. John 15:16). Because they have the light of God’s word they *will not* stumble around in darkness, blind to the truth. No, those who walk in the light will strive to obey the commandments, showing themselves to be Christ’s. This is John’s primary point—the contrast between those who are truly Christ’s and those who are self-deceived is as clear as the contrast between light and darkness. The Christian faith is a public faith. God’s people walk openly in the light. Christianity is not a religion of murky secrets, or esoteric teaching, hidden in darkness.

So, with that bit of background and context in mind, we turn to John’s discussion of worldliness in verses 12-17.

It is obvious that John has a close and fatherly relationship with those to whom he is writings, as once again he speaks of them as “little” or “dear” children. “*I am writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven for his name's sake.*” Since John goes on to speak of “fathers” and “young men” in the following verses, readers of this epistle have wondered whether or not John is using these terms to

differentiate between three groups in the church (children, older men, and sons).¹ I think Augustine is on the right track here when he argues that John is speaking of the pilgrimage of every Christian man who starts off as a babe, becomes a mature son, and then finally a father of the church.² In other words, “children,” “sons,” and “fathers” is John’s equivalent of Paul’s “babes in Christ” and “mature in Christ” (1 Corinthians 3:1; Colossians 1:28). A passage like this one offers additional evidence that this epistle was written by the Apostle John, who is now an elderly man, and who offers apostolic counsel to his “beloved,” much in the same way a grandfather speaks to his grandchildren. There is a sense here of familiarity/intimacy along with a grand-fatherly sense of authority.

In any case, the declaration “*because your sins are forgiven for his name's sake*” is very important because it follows John’s exhortation that Christians gain certainty (i.e., “we know that we know”) because we obey God’s commandments. Once again, John reminds us of the importance of the relationship between the indicative and the imperative. An indicative is a statement of fact—Jesus Christ is a propitiation for our sins (as in verse 2) and in the phrase we find here—“your sins have been forgiven” (v. 12), the verb is in the perfect tense. We can paraphrase this as “your sins have been and remain forgive.”³ Why must Christians obey the commandments (the imperative)? Because their sins are presently forgiven (the indicative). The law and the gospel must be kept in proper balance so that you don’t get legalism (i.e., “those who obey God’s commandments are/become Christians through their obedience to the commandments”), or antinomianism (i.e., “since Christ has come, the commandments are no longer binding upon a Christian”). Despite the command to obey the commandments *because* this is what Christ’s people do (they walk in the light), at the same time for John, the indicative has the last word—“your sins are (and have been) forgiven.” It is vital that we keep this relation between law-gospel and the indicative-imperative in mind so that we don’t make either the perfectionist or antinomian errors.

So, having comforted his “little children” in verse 12, John speaks to “fathers” (the most mature members of the church) in verse 13. “*I am writing to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning.*” Those who have been Christians for some time, and who are mature in the faith, “know” him (Jesus Christ) who was “from the beginning.” No doubt, this is an echo from the prologue of John’s gospel (vv. 1-5) where John wrote, “*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.*” Despite the turmoil brought upon the churches to which John is writing by those who have departed from the faith and who are doing the work of antichrist, John reminds the mature that they know who Jesus is, and that the one who was “from the beginning” will certainly be able to see his people through whatever crisis the church may be presently facing.⁴ The fathers in the faith (complete with their gray hair or bald heads) have lived long enough to learn the lesson of God’s faithfulness. They know him (Jesus) who was in the beginning (God manifest in the flesh). They have no need of any “secret” information which a false teacher might impart to them.

¹ See the discussion in, Smalley, 1, 2, 3, John, 68-71.

² Stott, The Epistles of John, 101, Smalley, 1, 2, 3 John, 70.

³ Stott, The Epistles of John, 101. Cf. S. M. Baugh, A First John Reader: Intermediate Greek Reading Notes and Grammar (Phillipsburg: P & R, 1999), 29.

⁴ Contra Stott, I take John to be referring to Jesus. Cf. Smalley, 1, 2, 3 John, 73-74.

In verse 14, John refers to young men, (“sons”). *“I am writing to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one.”* To those who are not new to the faith, but still young in age, John reminds them that they “have conquered” the evil one. Although the evil one is not named, it is apparent that John is referring to Satan. This is an echo from John 17:15. During his famous high priestly prayer, Jesus prays *“I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one.”* At this point we need to purge from our minds images of the Devil we’ve drawn from popular culture, like that of the *Exorcist* or the *Omen*. Satan does not possess people so they spew out green stuff, or so that they blaspheme at the sight of a crucifix. No, Satan’s work is much more diabolical than that—he is the ultimate author of all heresy and false teaching. Behind the many antichrists who have already gone out from the church, is the evil one. We might put it this way—Satan writes the antichrist’s best material.

Recall that in John’s gospel (8:44), John has explicitly told us what Satan does. *“You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father’s desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies.”* Since the issue facing the congregations to which John is writing is false religion (proto-Gnosticism) and heresy (docetism), John is reminding the young men that since they have come to a knowledge of the truth, they have already overcome Satan. In John’s gospel, Jesus told his disciples, *“the ruler of this world is coming”* (Satan) and *“he has no claim on me.”* Therefore, those who walk in the light overcome the evil one, because they are “in Christ” over whom Satan has no claim. When we walk in the light (of God’s word) the darkness (Satan’s schemes and heresies) are driven out, just as cock-roaches flee when exposed by light. We overcome the work of Satan, by proclaiming the truth. This is, of course, keeping with John’s emphasis upon Christianity as a public religion, grounded in history, with a flesh and blood savior, and with God’s commandments published for all to see at Mount Sinai. As we walk in the light, we are delivered from the schemes of the Devil who secretly does his work while hiding in the darkness.

As for the children, John states at the end of verse 13, *“I write to you, children, because you know the Father.”* Because Christ is God manifest in the flesh, if the children know Christ, they also know the Father. John’s statement here certainly recalls to mind the discussion between Jesus and Philip as recounted in John 14. In that chapter, Jesus was informing the disciples that he must leave them, and the disciples were having a very difficult time grasping the meaning of his words. Jesus told them that *“I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you had known me, you would have known my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.”* Struggling to grasp this, Philip asks Jesus the critical question. *“Philip said to him, ‘Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us.’”* Jesus’ answer is truly remarkable. *“Jesus said to him, ‘Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.’”* This is the same point John is making here. Those who know Christ, know the Father.

In many ways, verse 14 is a rhythmic restatement of verses 12-13, recounting one more time (for the sake of emphasis) the benefits of living in the light.⁵ *“I write to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning. I write to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one.”* The fathers (mature) know Christ. The young men are strong, because they know God’s word. The light of God’s word enables all of us to overcome Satan and thwart his deceptive devices—the propagation of heresy and the work of antichrist.

⁵ S. M. Baugh, *A First John Reader*, 30; John Calvin, *The Gospel According to St. John (Part Two) and The First Epistle of John*, trans. T. H. L. Parker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 243.

In verses 15-17, John now turns to a discussion of the Christian's relationship with the world. As one commentator puts it, "Christian people have entered into a great inheritance in the forgiveness of sins, fellowship with God and the conquest of the evil one, but their temptations have not come to an end."⁶ This is the first time the apostle will mention the world, but it certainly won't be the last, as we will see as we make our way further into the epistle. When John speaks of the world (*kosmos*), he uses the term in two distinct ways. In John 1:10, the Apostle uses the term in reference to the created universe, i.e., life on earth. "*He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him.*" But John can also use the term (world) in reference to human society as it is controlled by the evil one, i.e., the world in its opposition to God. The latter sense is how John uses the term in verses 15-17.⁷

This is important to keep in mind in light of the strong imperative directed to those who walk in the light found in verse 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.*" Notice that the verse contains a contrast between the love of the world (or things in the world) and love of the Father. Those who walk in the light cannot love the Father and the world at the same time. If we miss John's point and confuse the two meanings of "world" we will make a huge mess of things.

John is not telling us to hate the created order. Not only did God create the universe, but we read in John 3:16 that "*for God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.*" C. S. Lewis was absolutely correct when he said "[God] likes matter. He invented it."⁸ If we take John to mean that we must hate the material world, John would be asking us to do the very thing the proto-Gnostics were doing (and which John is condemning). In fact, God loved his creation so much, he sent Jesus to redeem it. No, John is here speaking of the world as fallen human society as in 1 John 5:19. "*We know that we are from God, and the whole world lies in the power of the evil one.*" That is what Christians are not to love—human society, characterized by its darkness, and by the fact that it is under control of Satan. By this we don't take John to mean that Satan has absolute control, however—Satan is a creature after all and remains, as Luther so aptly put it, "God's Devil." But we do mean the world as it lies in darkness, hating the light of God's word and preferring to live in the darkness where sin can go unnoticed without being exposed and subject to God's judgment. This is what we are not to love. If we love the fallen world in its fallen condition (not as Christ loved it, desiring its redemption), then we do not love the father. The two loves, John says, are mutually exclusive.

In verse 16, John speaks in more specific terms about love of the world, or what is often called "worldliness." "*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.*" For John, worldliness is the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, and pride in possessions. It should be duly noted that in the span of three verses (vv. 14-16), John mentions the three traditional enemies of the Christian—the world (the non-Christian way of thinking and doing), the flesh (i.e., *sarx*, which is the sinful human nature which is a result of Adam's fall) and the Devil. John has already mentioned that we overcome the Devil because we walk in the light as God's truth exposes his deceptive ways. While Satan assaults us externally through the means of false doctrine, the flesh, the desire of the eyes, and our pride, spontaneously arise within us

⁶ Stott, The Epistles of John, 103.

⁷ Stott, The Epistles of John, 103, Smalley, 1, 2, 3, John, 84.

⁸ C. S. Lewis, Mere Christianity, 6.

because we are fallen and therefore sinful.

This is vital to keep in mind, so that we don't make the mistake that fundamentalists often make. They are right to warn us of the dangers of worldliness, but wrong to locate worldliness in things they consider to be sinful (cigarettes, alcohol, etc.). Not to let the Reformed off the hook, none other than the famous Dutch Reformed luminary Abraham Kuyper spoke of the Calvinist fear of worldliness manifesting itself the three Reformed taboos—the theater, dancing, and card playing.⁹ While correct to warn us of the dangers of loving the world—indeed, John commands us not to love the world—it is off target to locate the problem in things external to us. Alcohol or tobacco may never touch our lips, and yet we could still be as worldly as any Gnostic false teacher whom John is warning us about. We may have never played cards, danced, or gone to the theater, and yet we could be as worldly as we can be. The flesh, the lusts of the eyes, and pride in “things” is an attitude, it is a mind-set, it is a way of thinking (walking in darkness), which leads to sinful actions.

We see this in 2 Samuel 11 with David's lust for Bathsheba, which led to her pregnancy and to David's arranging for her husband Uriah's death in battle. We see this in Achan's desire for silver, gold, and the elegant Babylonian robe as recounted in Joshua 7:20-21 (our Old Testament lesson). Achan describes the desire of the eyes in the following terms. *“Truly I have sinned against the Lord God of Israel, and this is what I did: when I saw among the spoil a beautiful cloak from Shinar, and 200 shekels of silver, and a bar of gold weighing 50 shekels, then I coveted them and took them. And see, they are hidden in the earth inside my tent, with the silver underneath.”* Bathsheba's beauty wasn't the problem. David's lust was. Neither gold, nor silver, nor fine clothing are sinful in themselves. The problem was in Achan's own desire for goods which God prohibited Israel from possessing. Achan wanted these things so much that he put the entire nation under God's curse because of the desire of the eyes.

Let us be clear about this. For John, the cause of worldliness is found within us—not in tobacco plants, or in whiskey bottles. Worldliness is a mind-set tied to the unrestrained lust of the flesh. Worldliness is seen in the desire for ill-gotten gain, and in the pride that can go with accumulating much wealth or property. As John goes on to remind us, loving the world is the height of foolishness, because (as he says in verse 17), *“and the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.”* As light comes into the world, and darkness flees, we are given a hint of the day of final judgement. For John, the world, as it lies under the control of the evil one will pass away, because one day Christ will return and then every hint or trace of darkness will flee away in the light of Christ's coming at the end of the age. What abides forever is the light, and what remains are those who walk in the light, and who abide in Christ as they strive to obey the commandments of God.

What application can we draw then from this passage?

While our fundamentalist and Reformed fathers were absolutely right to warn us not to love the world, they should not have focused so much upon avoiding certain activities and material things (i.e. cards, tobacco, and alcohol). The motivation was correct, but the method was short-sighted. Instead, they should have told us that worldliness is an attitude of our sinful hearts. Worldliness is not necessarily tied to things outside of us. For John, worldliness is loving the world as it is under control of the evil one. In our day and age, worldliness is the desire for fame, riches, and celebrity. It is the lust for more of everything, and the self indulgent and immediate gratification of every sinful desire.

⁹ Abraham Kuyper, Lectures on Calvinism, (Eerdmans, 1931), 73.

Our love for the fallen and sinful world around us spontaneously arises within us because we have sinful natures which led us to see everything from the perspective of self, because we see things (which may be good in themselves) and then desire them even when we shouldn't (the desire of the eyes), or when we forget our dependence upon God because we have so many possessions, (the pride of possessions). Closing the bars, boycotting the tobacco companies, avoiding dancing, card-playing, and the theater, will not keep us from being worldly. In fact, we can give up all of these things all the while becoming more worldly than ever.

The only thing which can keep us from loving the world more than our heavenly Father is to walk in the light of God's word, because that word of life constantly exposes the darkness, and it repeatedly points us back to that one in whom the Father has revealed his love for us, the word of life manifest in the flesh. We fight worldliness by thinking and acting like Christians—what John calls “walking in the light.” This entails believing the right things (indicatives), and obeying the commandments of God (imperatives). As John has made plain, all of this centers around a flesh and blood Savior, who turns aside God's wrath, who is the very embodiment of what it means to love God and neighbor, and who is now in heaven interceding before us. There is nothing secret in any of this, and those who claim to know the secret principles of life have nothing to say to any of us.

John is crystal clear here. “Do not love the world, for the world is passing away.” When all is said and done, the only things that will remain are those things created and sustained by Jesus Christ, the word of life manifest in the flesh, who is the light of the world. The only way not to love the world, is to walk in the light of the Savior, who is the word of God manifest in the flesh.