

Sermon Notes

Series on First John

First John 2:15-17

“Living Holy in An Unholy World”

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Introduction: As a child, there were many things that I was not permitted to do. My parents were great and loved the Lord, however back then, it was understood that there were certain things Christians don't do in order to remain separated from the world. For instance; I wasn't allowed to play cards, we had no TV and the movie theater was definitely on the list of taboos. I recall a really sad Saturday when all my friends rode the bus to New Brunswick, New Jersey, for the opening day of Lucille Ball and Desi Arnez' movie, "The Long, Long, Trailer." Even in high school, I took a note from my parents stating that I could not go with my 3rd year Latin class to see Ben Hur at the movie theater. My parents, in love, were concerned lest I become worldly. Worldliness has meant different things to different people at different times and in different cultures such as these vignettes prove: (1) In Puritan England a woman wearing her skirt above the ankle might be considered worldly; (2) To the Amish, his neighbor plowing with a motorized tractor would be considered worldly; (3) The African polygamist in a loincloth considered the foreign missionary worldly when the missionary greeted his wife in public with a kiss; (4) Back in the 1800's, the famous evangelist D. L. Moody, after whom Moody Bible Institute in Chicago is named, discovered two friends playing a game of checkers. He grabbed the checkerboard and smashed it. Before his two stunned friends could protest, Dr. Moody was on his knees praying for them; (5) In Robert Louis Stevenson's book Kidnapped, David Balfour is invited to play cards. He thinks, 'Now this is one of the things I had been brought up to consider no good...neither the part of a Christian nor yet of a gentleman': (6) Martin Luther 'advised his followers to feast and dance on Sunday. He called card-playing a harmless diversion.' He said, 'Christians must not altogether shun plays because there are sometimes coarseness and adulteries therein; for such reasons they would have to give up the Bible, too!' Years ago messages were often preached on separation from the *world* but today there is a strange silence in many Bible believing churches regarding this vital issue. This silence has often been the product of an erroneous cry of legalism when the suggestion arises concerning certain prohibitions today. However, rather than letting the accepted Christian mores of 2008 dictate what constitutes *worldliness*, consider what God has to say about worldliness in 1st John 2:15-17. By way of review, in the previous paragraph, 2:14-16, the Apostle John focused on encouraging believers. In 1 John 2:15-27, John addresses the enemies that believers must face: (1) the world, vv.15-17; (2) the antichrists, vv. 18-27.

Three pairs (note that John also uses three pairs in 2:12-14)

Verse 15	<i>Love of the world</i>	<i>Love of the father</i>
Verse 16	<i>Is from the world</i>	<i>Is from the Father</i>
Verse 17	<i>The world is passing away</i>	<i>The one who does the will of God lives forever</i>

#1 **COMMAND: DO NOT LOVE THE WORLD, 2:15**

Verse 15: John is warning of the dangers that face believers as we seek to know the Lord Jesus Christ better, especially the danger of *loving the world*. Notice that John's prohibition is given a double statement: **First**, John commands believers; *do not love the world*. This is the first time for the Apostle John to use the word *world* in his epistle. John's command implies that *love* can be misdirected. The apostle may also be implying that his readers were *loving the world* but

must stop this practice; although his words might simply be a command to stop *loving the world*. John uses this word *world* six times in these three verses and is a favorite word of the Apostle John, which he uses with different meanings. The word *world* [Greek *κοσμος*, *cosmos*], used six times in these three verses, basically denotes order or arrangement—the total opposite of chaos. Over ½ of the occurrences of *κοσμος*, *cosmos*, in the New Testament are found in only two books, the Gospel of John (78 times) and First John (23 times). The Greek word is used a total of 186 times in the New Testament. One Bible teacher writes that an internet search of the word “cosmos/kosmos” returned approximately 17 million hits! The earliest use of this Greek word, going all the way back to Homer, is focused on order, and not on the universe or planet, however that sense is not found in the New Testament. Peter uses *κοσμος* in a similar sense where it is translated *adornment* in 1 Peter 3:3. The New Testament uses the word in at least three different ways: **(1) Planet**—the physical created earth as John means in John 21:25 (cf. also Acts 17:24; Romans 1:20). John isn't saying, ‘don't enjoy My creation!’ The Bible is not against trees, flowers, stars, etc. Does not the first chapter of Genesis record after each of the six days of creation, *and God saw that it was good*? Cf. also 1 Timothy 4:4 & 6:17. **(2) People of the planet**, the human race or mankind, which is how John uses the word *world* in John 3:16—*for God so loved the world*. God loves people and we are to love people also which is why the command to *love your neighbor as yourself* is repeated ten times in the Bible (Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 5:43; 19:19; 22:39; Mark 12:31; 33; Luke 10:27; Romans 13:9; Galatians 5:14 & James 2:8). John isn't saying, ‘don't love the people in the *world* nor is he instructing believers to withdraw from society; read Jesus' words in His High Priestly prayer, John 17:14-16. The Bible teaches believers to be *salt and light* to those around us (Matthew 5:13-16). **(3) Program of Satan**, the kingdom of Satan, which I believe is how John uses *world* in these three verses. Therefore, the word *world* as John uses it (1) represents the values, priorities and beliefs that belong to our enemy Satan; (2) is a moral and spiritual system designed to draw people away from God; (3) is so seductive that it attracts the affection and participation of believers as well as unbelievers (read John 3:16-10; James 4:4); & (4) is that invisible spiritual system opposed to God that is controlled by Satan (John 12:31 & 1 John 5:19). In Ephesians 6:11-12, Paul exposes Satan's schemes and massive army of evil spirits which do his dirty work and influence the affairs of this *world*.) Unbelievers belong to *this world*, for in Luke 16:8, Jesus calls them *sons of this age* (NASV) or *children of this world* (KJV). When Jesus was on earth the people of *this world* did not understand Him, nor do they now understand we who are the *sons of this age*. Believers are members of the human race/the human *world* and live in the physical *world* but we do not belong to the spiritual *world* that is Satan's system for opposing God (read John 15:18). Dr. Wiersbe comments on John's concept about the kind of *love* that God hates; “In more than one area of life, *love* and hate go hand in hand.” And the Apostle John reminds us to exercise the right kind of *love* and warning us that there is a wrong kind of *love*, a *love* that God hates, which the Bible calls *worldliness*. The **second** statement of John's prohibition, *nor the things in the world*, prohibits believers from having a *love* relationship with every aspect of this evil *world*. When we read that word *things*, we immediately think of material objects, which in and of themselves are not necessarily the problem as material *things* can be innocently desired and owned by us. But they may become the problem; they may become evil and *worldly* if the *thing/things* cause us to become alienated

from God. The *if* clause, a hypothetical case, assumes that some Christians will *love the world* and not *love the Father*. This 3rd class conditional clause in the Greek language, assumes the truth of the matter that some believers will *love the world* and not *love the Father*. John states that when that happens, we no longer have *love for God* within us as the two cannot coexist in the human heart. They stand in sharp opposition; recall that John is fond of using opposites (1:5, 6; 2:4 & here). That phrase, *the love of the Father* [Greek η αγαπη του πατρος] is only used here in the New Testament and should be taken as a Christian's *love* for *the Father*, understanding the Greek construction of the phrase as an objective genitive and not *the Father's love* for us which would be a subjective genitive in the Greek. The *love of the Father* and *the love for the world* are mutually exclusive. James' familiar words in James 4:4 confirm the truth that a believer cannot *love the world* and *love God* at the same time. Compare also Jesus' words in Matthew 6:24, *no one can serve two masters; either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other*. Therefore, *worldliness* is not so much a list of do's and don'ts; not so much a matter of activity as of attitude. Dr. Wiersbe writes; "Worldliness is not so much a matter of *activity* as of *attitude*. It is possible for a Christian to stay away from questionable amusements and doubtful places and still *love the world*." [Wiersbe, Warren W., Be Real; A New Testament Study, 1 John, David C. Cook, p. 68]. *Worldliness* is a spiritual heart condition that will zap our strength; keep us in diapers when we should be grown up; deaden our spirits; entangle our affections & distract our thoughts. In fact, it's possible to be sitting right here at Grace Community Church on January 20, 2008 and still be *worldly*, *Worldliness* is a matter of the heart. We live *in the world* and that can't be changed. The problem is not that we live *in the world* but it's when we let the spirit of *the world* get in us. It's not the ship in the water but the water in the ship that sinks it. *Worldliness* pretends that God is irrelevant and sin is normal. *Worldliness* is a mindset that has no room for God; where God is not at the center which is why John writes, *the love of the Father* is no longer present *within*. We really have quite a struggle as the *world* is really quite appealing.

#2 CHARACTERISTICS OF THE LOVE OF THE WORLD, 2:16

Verse 16: John summarizes the appeal of the *world* with a three-fold description of the *love* that God hates. The appeal from *all that is in the world*, according to John, comes from three sources. One Bible teacher explains these three sinful urges as: (1) gross sensual pleasures; (2) a materialistic view of values & (3) self-glorification while another teacher writes: (1) indulge my personality; (2) increase my possessions & (3) impress people. The first two speak of an unholy desire for things that we do not have. The last speaks of unholy pride in what we do have. (1) The *world's* first appeal is *the lust of the flesh* which refers to the appetite of the senses out of control; cravings that have its origin in the *flesh*; something apart from the *will of God* (cf. v. 17b). When John writes about *the lust of the flesh* he's not thinking only of sex. *Lust* [Greek is επιθυμια, epithumia] in the Bible may refer to something good or bad. It is used in the New Testament in a positive way in Luke 22:15; Philippians 1:23 & 1 Thessalonians 2:17 however it is more often used in a negative way—evil desires, inordinate out of control cravings of the fallen human nature or those things not kept within God's boundaries. In the Old Testament, the Israelites were guilty of this sin when they were dissatisfied with God's provision of the manna and *lusted* for meat (Numbers 11). In John's next two qualifying phrases, he uses the word *flesh* [Greek is σαρκος, sarkos, from σαρξ, sarz,] which is a rather complicated word to translate in

English. In general the Greek background for this term involved the most physical aspects of life such as eating, drinking and sexual activities. In the Bible *flesh* is used with a variety of nuances; **(a)** it sometimes refers to people collectively, humanity (Isaiah 40:5-6); people's skin (1 Corinthians 15:50); **(b)** sinful nature (Romans 8:8); and in Galatians 5:19, *deeds of the flesh* include sinful mental attitudes as well as the sinful physical and sensual actions. For Paul, *flesh* is a force or aspect of a person that really struggles with the Holy Spirit (read Romans 7:5). As to the problem of *the flesh*, Paul writes that the solution is 'not to let sin reign in our bodies' (Romans 6:12-13), 'put to death the deeds of the body' (Romans 8:13); **(c)** last, there is a more neutral sense of the word as used in Philippians 1:22; Ephesians 2:14 & 1 Corinthians 15:50.

Observation: Note that in these three brief verses, the Apostle John mentions the unholy trinity, *the world, the flesh and the evil one*, Satan! Someone has cited one way to detect if we are *lusting*: 'When you listen to or read the "Lord of the Rings," there's a phrase that's used when coveting the ring and its power. What do they say about it? "My precious!"' So, I ask; what is most precious to you? If it's not God, His Word or His way, then we might be living in *the flesh*. *The lust of the flesh* will dominate when the physical bodily pleasure or the physical appetites take control rather than the Holy Spirit. Paul writes in Galatians 5:23 that a Spirit controlled life will result in self-control and restraint. Paul also reminded young Timothy that the last days will be characterized by people who are *lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God* (2 Timothy 3:4). Some people live to eat; love the best restaurants; think about food all the time. In Philippians 3:19 Paul writes that there are those whose *god is their appetite* or their stomachs. Many people, including many Christians, are enslaved by sexual desires—that's the same as *the lust of the flesh*. When we fail to use our bodies for God's glory and are consumed by eating habits or sexual cravings, then we know that we are *worldly*. Therefore, who has our heart? Is God precious to us? Do we crave Him? His Word? **(2)** The *world's* 2nd appeal comes from *the lust of the eyes*, that is, from what we see, the eye-gate; temptations that assault us not from within but from without through the *eyes*. This phrase *the lust of the eyes* is found only here in the New Testament. This *lust* is basically being captivated by things that look so good but may not be what God wants us to have; not God's *will* for us (cf. v. 17b). This *worldly lust* begins when we fail to look at the true value of the thing we see with our *eyes*, then crave it, and then go for it even if it's not lawfully ours. For example when we say something like: 'If only I had that car then all my sorrows would go away!' Or, 'if only I could have the body of that man or that woman!' Or, 'I gotta have that iPod nano! I know I can't afford it but I don't care how I get it—it's mine!' Remember Eve? She had to have it (Genesis 3:6)! Remember David? He coveted Bathsheba and took her (2 Samuel 11:2-4)! Remember Achan? He had to have the spoils of war and stole them but when his sin was exposed, Achan confessed (Joshua 7:21). Dr. Van Gorder writes that *the lust of the eyes* "entices us to grasp for visible things (emphasis mine) like gold, silver, houses, lands, and possessions." [Van Gorder, Paul R., In The Family, Radio Bible Class, p.80]. Again, the question is not, 'do we have possessions and things but do the possessions and things have us?' Are we *worldly* to the point that we struggle with *the lust of the eyes*? What about our appearance? Clothes? Botox? All so that people will think better about us based merely on external appearances alone! This *lust* may be "the desire of seeing unlawful sights for the sake of the sinful pleasures to be derived from the sight; idle and prurient curiosity." [Plummer, Alfred, The Epistles of S. John, Cambridge University Press,

p.103]. When we are not satisfied and are not content, then we might need to aware of the danger that comes from *the lust of the eyes*. What do we desire to feast our *eyes* on? Who has our *eyes*? Who has our heart? Is God precious to us? Do we crave Him? His Word? Consider the words of one of my favorite hymns is #382, “Be Thou My Vision.”

“Be Thou my Vision, O Lord of my heart;
Naught be all else to me, save that Thou art.
Thou my best Thought, by day or by night,
Waking or sleeping, Thy presence my light.”
“Riches I heed not, nor man’s empty praise,
Thou mine Inheritance, now and always:
Thou and Thou only, first in my heart,
High King of Heaven, my Treasure Thou art.”

(3) The two preceding aspects of *worldliness* are inward, relating to what one wants, this third is outward, relating to what one has or professes to have. The *world’s* 3rd appeal John writes, comes from *the boastful pride of life*, which is the sin of desiring to impress. The emphasis is on the *pride* which becomes evident in downright selfishness, superiority and conceit. The noun form of the Greek word [αλαζονεία] translated *boastful*, is closely related to the Greek word [αλαζων] which literally means “braggart.” (Romans 1:30; 2 Timothy 3:2 & James 4:16). The Greek construction for the words, *of life*, is genitive, means “*life* in its present concrete manifestation, and is translated *the world’s goods* in 1 John 3:17. This person says, ‘I’ve done so well for myself that I deserve to enjoy whatever I want.’ He/she says or thinks, ‘I’m better than you because of what I’ve done for myself. I’ve climbed the latter!’ That’s bragging! That’s having an inflated opinion of oneself. That ignores God’s grace and mercy; the One who bestows blessings on us. That’s an independence from God. John categorically states that such behavior and attitude does not originate with our heavenly Father but is the product of the *world* under the control of Satan. Therefore, who has our *life*? Who has our heart? Is God precious to us? Do we crave Him? His Word? Some Bible teachers see stages of life in these three sources of *worldliness*: (1) *The lust of the flesh* primarily depicts young people struggling with sensual aspects of life; (2) *The lust of the eyes* primarily those in the middle years of life & (3) *the pride of life* the more mature people. Perhaps! But all of us, at different stages in life, struggle with all of these. Don’t we find it so easy to assess the sins in the lives of others; to sense their *lusts* and see their sins? Right? But, in Psalm 73, the Psalmist examines his own life and discovers that he *came close to stumbling* (vv. 1-3). But instead of assessing the sins of his fellowmen and women, we find him doing some spiritual self-diagnosing to determine whether he is *worldly* and concludes by writing about his intimate relationship with the God of heaven (vv.23-24). He then shares with us that God has his heart! That God is most precious to him: *Whom have I in heaven but You? And besides You, I desire nothing on earth* (v. 25). Can we also say the same—*Nothing on earth*? (Praise Chorus: Lord, You are, more precious than silver. Lord, You are, more costly than gold. Lord, You are, more beautiful than diamond and *nothing* I desire compares with You!

#3 CURE FOR CONQUERING WORLDLINESS, 2:17

Verse 17: But what are the consequences of living only for this *world*? What’s the end result? If we focus only on the desires of this *world* and have little *love of the Father*, little desire for the

things of God, where will we be in the next few years? John writes that *this world is passing away* and its *lusts* or desires as well. Don't forget to read the very next verse, *children! It is the last hour!* (v.18). That statement might be challenged by many who think *this world is forever*. But *this world* is not permanent. *The world* is like 8 track players! They're gone! *The world* is like most of the TV's in our homes which will be worthless in 2009 unless you have digital HDTV! *The world* is like whatever was and is no more to depict what is *passing away*, the present tense of the verb *παράγεται*, pointing to the process of disintegration that's happening to the *world*. It's *passing* out of existence. By implication there is also a contrast: If the present *world is* transitory and already in the process of *passing away*, there must be another *world* which is not transitory and does not *pass away*. So, John is teaching eschatology in this verse! Note that John uses this same Greek word, *passing away*, in verse 8 (read also 1 Corinthians 7:31). By their very nature, *the lusts of the world* are self-destructive; for example gluttony, homosexuality, etc. This *world* under the control of evil one, Satan, is only temporary and ephemeral (read 1 Peter 1:18-25). Satan is the prince of a temporary kingdom which will one day be gone along with *its lusts*. *This world* is fading along with all its desires. *This world* will always demand and never deliver. *This world* will always seduce and never satisfy. In contrast to that is God's promise of *living forever* to those *who do the will of God*. That's God's reward for believers *who do the will of God*; however, John is not saying that we attain eternal life by obedience because the Bible states that Christians live *forever* (read John 10:28). The Apostle John is contrasting those who desire God's eternal kingdom and those who desire Satan's *passing* kingdom. The Bible tells us a lot about *the will of God* such as what Paul writes in Colossians 1:9-12.

Conclusion:

This *living forever* is God's promise of heaven for all those who know Him as Savior; for those to whom God is most precious! That wonderful old Negro spiritual beautifully captures the truth that we are citizens of heaven and *this world* is not our home.

"This world is not my home, I'm just a' passing through.

My treasures are laid up, somewhere beyond the blue.

The angels beckon me, from heaven's open door;

And I can't feel at home, in this world anymore."

"O Lord you know I have no friend like you!

If Heaven's not my home then Lord what will I do?

The angels beckon me from Heaven's open door;

And I can't feel at home in this world anymore."

Note: It is my prayer that these printed notes will encourage serious Bible students to do further study on this passage. If you find any typos, errors or have any questions, please contact me. Thank you. Pastor John A. Eastman