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CHOOSE YOUR LOVE: THE WORLD OR THE FATHER?

1 John 2:15-17

By

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1 John Lesson 9

Choose Your Love: the World or the Father?
1 John 2:15-17

Few problems have been more troublesome for believers down through the centuries than worldliness. In an effort to be "relevant" and reach our culture, there is the very real danger that we will become just like the culture and lose our distinctiveness. The apostle Paul warned of the danger in Romans 12:2, when he wrote, "And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind...." J. B. Phillips (*The New Testament in Modern English* [Geoffrey Bles], p. 332) paraphrases it, "Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mold, but let God re-mold your lives from within."

Toward the end of his life, Paul sadly wrote to Timothy (2 Tim. 4:10), "For Demas, having loved this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica." Even though he had once been a fellow-worker with the great apostle Paul (Philemon 24), Demas succumbed to the lure of the world.

I would argue that with the pervasive influence of modern media, the tug of the world is greater now than it ever has been. Daily we are bombarded with attractive people telling us that we can't be happy unless we own the product that they are selling or adopt the lifestyle that they are pursuing. We thumb through magazines that lure us with beautiful homes, new cars, luxury items, or expensive vacations that all can be ours, if we just get enough money or go into enough debt. There are plenty of credit card offers that will help us get hopelessly in debt, if we're not careful. It is lust for the things of the world that prompts Americans to spend billions on casino gambling and lottery tickets. Just one lucky hit and you will have it all!

Christian attempts to counter worldliness often have swung to the opposite direction: withdrawal from the world, along with extra rules to reign in the flesh. This is the method of the monastic movement and of isolationist groups, such as the Amish. An extreme example of the ascetic approach was Simon the Stylite (c. 390-459), who lived in extreme austerity for 36 years on top of a

platform on a 60-foot pillar. Thousands of people flocked to see this “unworldly” man and listen to his preaching. I doubt that Simon is a model of what John had in mind when he warned us not to love the world!

I grew up in Fundamentalist circles that had lists of what constituted “worldly” behavior. It usually included the “filthy five”: drinking, smoking, attending movies, playing cards, and dancing. Many Christian colleges required their students to sign pledges not to participate in these “worldly” activities. But they often went farther than that. When my dad was a student at one such Bible institute, he could not hold hands with my mother on campus, even though they were married! A student who was near graduation was publicly dismissed from the school because he put his arm around his fiancée in the back of the Institute bus, and a supporter of the school saw this “worldly” behavior and reported him!

Concerning such manmade rules, Paul wrote (Col. 2:23), “These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence.” The rules approach to the problem of worldliness doesn’t work!

Worldliness is, at its core, a matter of the heart. If your heart is captured by the world, you will love the things of the world. If your heart is captured by the love of God, you will be drawn to Him and to the things of God. The only way that our hearts can be transformed so that we love God is by the supernatural new birth.

John wrote this letter to churches that were being infected and confused by certain heretics. They claimed to have enlightenment, but John says that they were still in the darkness. They tried to draw people into their inner circle of knowledge, but their doctrine and their practice revealed that they did not truly know God. John gives three tests by which his readers could evaluate these teachers and by which they could tell whether their own faith was sound: the moral test (obedience); the relational test (love for others); and, the doctrinal test (believing the truth about Jesus Christ).

In 2:3-6, John applies the first test: authentic faith obeys God’s commandments. In 2:7-11, he applies the second test: authentic faith loves God’s people. Then he pauses (2:12-14) to

give an assuring clarification, showing his confidence that his readers do have authentic faith. Now, he resumes his application of the tests by showing that authentic faith is not of the world (2:15-17), but rather it knows and believes the truth about Jesus Christ (2:18-27). John characteristically draws a sharp line, with no middle ground: If you love the world, you do not love the Father. He shows that...

You must choose your love and then maintain your choice:
you love either the world or the Father, but not both.

He's saying the same thing that Jesus said (Luke 16:13), "You cannot serve God and Mammon." He did not say, "You *should not* serve God and Mammon," but, "you *cannot*" serve them both. You must make a basic decision in life: Will you live to know God and His eternal love, or will you live for this world and its fleeting pleasures? You can't take a little of both.

Once you've made that decision, you must fight to maintain your choice against the strong current of the world. "Do not love" is a present imperative, indicating that it is an ongoing battle. "Love" is the Greek *agape*, indicating that it is a commitment, not a feeling, that John is commanding. The only way that you can fight the love of the world is to maintain and grow in your love for the Father. The old Scottish preacher, Thomas Chalmers, has a sermon, "The Expulsive Power of a New Affection," where he argues that the only thing powerful enough to drive out our love for the world is our new love for the Father. We need to define the key term:

WHAT IS "THE WORLD" OR "WORLDLINESS"?

The Greek word for "world," *cosmos*, occurs 185 times in the New Testament. John uses it 105 of those times (78 in his Gospel, 24 in his epistles, and 3 in Revelation). It originally meant "order," and it came to refer to the universe as the well-ordered ornament of God. (Our word "cosmetics" comes from the word. Applying cosmetics is an attempt to bring order!) It may refer to the physical world (John 1:10) or to the people of the world collectively (John 3:16; 1 John 2:2). In those senses, there is nothing wrong with loving the world. We should enjoy God's creation and we should love sinful people who need to know the Savior.

But John also uses the word to refer to the evil, organized system under Satan, which operates through unbelieving people who are God's enemies. He writes (1 John 5:19), "We know that we are of God, and that the whole world lies in the power of the evil one." Jesus spoke of the world hating both Him and those who follow Him (John 15:18-19). It operates on the basis of ungodly thoughts, attitudes, motives, values, and goals (Isa. 55:8-9). It does not seek to promote God's glory or to submit to His sovereign authority. It is in this sense that we must not love the world.

When John adds that we are not to love "the things of the world," he does not mean that you must hate your house and your car, although I sometimes do hate my car! Rather, he elaborates on those "things" in 2:16 as, "the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life." In other words, worldliness is primarily an attitude that is motivated by wrong desires and the wrongful promotion of self. A poor man who does not have many possessions may be very worldly because he desires those things as the key to happiness. But, a wealthy man may not be worldly in that he uses his possessions as a steward of God and as a means of promoting God's purpose and glory.

So, to be worldly is to operate on the same principles as unregenerate people. It is to think and act out of selfishness, greed, pride, and personal ambition. It is to have a selfish desire for the things that you do not have and a sinful pride in the things that you do have. Rather than living to please God, who examines the heart, the worldly person tries to impress people, who look on things outwardly. For example, if you refrain from drinking alcoholic beverages because you want to impress others with how spiritual you are, and you take pride in your not drinking and look with contempt on those who do, you are actually being worldly by not drinking! I don't say that to encourage anyone to drink! I'm only pointing out that worldliness is not a matter of keeping some list of dos and don'ts. It is a matter of your heart motives before God.

John makes two main points:

1. Choose your love: either the world or the Father, but not both (2:15).

John states the main command: "Do not love the world nor the things in the world." Then, he gives the implication: "If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him." It is either/or, not both/and. "The love of the Father," could mean His love for us. But to be parallel to the first half of the verse, it probably refers primarily to our love for God. John means that the one who loves the world does not love God. Or, conversely, our love for God should be the ruling principle of our lives. The only way that we can overcome the strong desires of the flesh and the world is to be consumed with loving God.

John uses "Father" to describe God in 2:15 & 16, as he did in 2:13, where he said that the children had come to know the Father. It focuses us on God's tender love for us as His children (3:1). It is the Father's first love for us that motivates us to love Him in response (1 John 4:19). In light of the Father's great love in sending His own Son to be the propitiation for our sins and adopting us as His children, loving Him should be our great delight and joy.

It is significant that the Bible directs its commandments to our hearts or affections. The greatest commandment is, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind" (Matt. 22:37). Solomon wrote (Prov. 4:23), "Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life." As Jonathan Edwards argued in his "Treatise on Religious Affections" (*The Works of Jonathan Edwards* [Banner of Truth], 1:236), "True religion, in great part, consists in holy affections." If your heart is cold toward the Father and captivated by the glitz of the world, you need to ask yourself, "Do I belong to the Father or to the world?"

So John's commandment (2:15) challenges us: Choose your love. Either you love the world or you love the Father. You cannot straddle the line. The Father is a jealous lover who deserves and demands total allegiance. Loving the Father begins at the cross when you receive His supreme gift of love, the Lord Jesus Christ, as the substitute for your sins.

2. Maintain your love: Either the world or the Father, but not both (2:16-17).

Any love relationship must be maintained, and that is true of your relationship with the Father. It is especially true in that the enemy is trying to lure you from the Father's love with all of the temptations of the world, as John shows in 2:16. If you yield to them, you will maintain love for the world. In 2:17 he shows how to maintain your love for the Father.

- A. To yield to the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the boastful pride of life is to maintain love for the world (2:16).

Verse 16 is explanatory of verse 15 ("For"), showing how love for the things in the world does not come from the Father. Many have pointed out how the three aspects of temptation listed here parallel the way that Satan tempted Eve. She saw that the forbidden fruit was good for food (Gen. 3:6), which was an appeal to the lust of the flesh. She saw "that it was a delight to the eyes." This appealed to the lust of the eyes. She also saw "that the tree was desirable to make one wise." This appealed to the boastful pride of life.

The same pattern occurs in Satan's temptation of Jesus (Luke 4:1-12). Satan urged Jesus to turn the stones into bread (the lust of the flesh). He showed Him all the kingdoms of the earth, offering to give them to Him (the lust of the eyes). He encouraged Him to jump off the pinnacle of the temple, which could have been a source of pride in this miraculous accomplishment. Let's examine John's three aspects of "all that is in the world":

- (1) To yield to the lust of the flesh is not to love the Father, but the world.

"Lust" refers to a strong desire or impulse. It is used almost always in a negative sense in the New Testament. "Flesh" refers to our fallen nature, which is not eradicated at salvation. "The lust of the flesh" includes any strong desire or inclination of our fallen nature, including sexual sins, but also all activity that stems from the self-seeking, godless nature that we are born with.

Many natural desires are legitimate if they are kept under control and used in the sphere for which God designed them. The desires for food, companionship, sex, and security are legitimate when we keep them within God's limits and when we do not allow

them to usurp His rightful place in our hearts. But they become sinful when we seek to fulfill them in selfish, ungodly ways.

- (2) To yield to the lust of the eyes is not to love the Father, but the world.

This term points to the sinful desires of greed and covetousness, to want that which you do not have, but which others may have. It also refers to the desires that stem from false, superficial values. Through our eyes, the world appeals to us to find satisfaction in the superficial, which never can satisfy. "Buy this bigger, newer home and you will be happy!" "Find a beautiful woman (or a handsome man) and you will be satisfied." "Get the perfect job and have plenty of money and your inner longings will be quenched." But, as is evident by the lives of the rich and famous, none of these things deliver what they promise.

- (3) To yield to the boastful pride of life is not to love the Father, but the world.

While the lust of the flesh and lust of the eyes refer to the desire to have what you do *not* have, the boastful pride of life refers to sinful pride over what you *do* have. It is the desire to be better than others so that you can glory in yourself and your accomplishments.

There is a proper sense, of course, of doing your best in school, athletics, or at work in order to be a good steward of God's gifts and to bring glory to Him. But it's easy to forget that He gave you everything that you have (1 Cor. 4:7) and to start boasting in your achievements and possessions as if you attained these things by your own intelligence or hard work. It's easy to think like Nebuchadnezzar, who said (Dan. 4:30), "Is this not Babylon the great, which I myself have built as a royal residence by the might of my power and for the glory of my majesty?" God immediately drove him out into the fields to live as a wild beast until his heart was humbled!

We all battle these temptations daily, and we often fail. But John's point is, if you go on yielding to the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the boastful pride of life as your way of life, you are not maintaining love for the Father. Rather, you are maintaining love for the world. Worldly people wallow in these things; God's

children fight them continually. How do we maintain our love for the Father?

B. To obey the Father with our eyes on eternity is to maintain our love for Him (2:17).

To obey the Father is to maintain your love for Him. The opposite of loving the world is not only loving the Father, but also obeying Him—"doing the will of God." "The will of God" here does not refer to following His direction in your life. It refers to obeying His commandments as revealed in His Word. As Jesus said, "If you love Me, you will keep My commandments" (John 14:15). "If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love; just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love" (John 15:10).

A key reason to obey God's commandments is the transitory nature of this world and its lusts, as contrasted with the eternal promise of heaven: "The world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God abides [lit.] forever" (2:17; the original NASB correctly translates "abides," not "lives"). If you love the world or the things in the world, you will lose them all at death. All that the worldly person lives for is gone in an instant and means nothing in light of eternity. Even if you have attained your worldly desires, what good are they at death? But, if you do God's will, you will abide with Him in heaven throughout all eternity!

Conclusion

In 1989, Tom Sine wrote some insightful words that apply just as much now, as then (*Christianity Today* [3/17/89], p. 52):

Whatever commands our time, energy, and resources commands us. And if we are honest, we will admit that our lives really aren't that different from those of our secular counterparts. I suspect that one of the reasons we are so ineffective in evangelism is that we are so much like the people around us that we have very little to which we can call them. We hang around church buildings a little more. We abstain from a few things. But we simply aren't that different. We don't even do hedonism as well as the folks around us ... but we keep on trying.

As a result of this unfortunate accommodation, Christianity is reduced to little more than a spiritual crutch to help us through the minefields of the upwardly mobile life. God is there to help us get our promotions, our house in the suburbs, and our bills paid. Somehow God has become a co-conspirator in our agendas instead of our becoming a co-conspirator in His. Something is seriously amiss.

Here are a few questions to ask yourself, to evaluate whether you love the world or the Father (adapted from A. W. Pink, *Exposition of 1 John* [Associated Authors and Publishers], p. 126):

- Which do you seek with more fervor: the wealth and honors of the world, or the riches of grace and the approval of God?
- Which have the greater attraction: the pleasures of the world, which are only for a season, or those pleasures at God's right hand, which are for eternity?
- Wherein lies your confidence: in the money you have in your bank account or investments, or in the living and faithful God, who has promised to supply all your needs?
- Which causes the deeper sorrow: a temporal loss, or a break in your fellowship with God?
- Upon which do you get more joy: spending money for personal comforts and luxuries, or spending money to further the gospel?
- What most dominates your mind: thoughts and schemes after worldly advancements, or resolutions and efforts to grow in grace and in the knowledge of the Lord?

Some of you need to make the basic choice: Will you love the Father, or will you love the world? Most of us have made that choice, but we need to maintain it. Do not yield to the temptations of the world, but do the will of God. You will abide forever!

Application Questions

1. Why does John not give us the option, which seems possible, to be partially committed both to God and to the world?
2. Does “not loving the world” mean that it is wrong for a Christian to seek to succeed in business or a career? Why/why not?
3. How can we who live in affluence know when enough is enough? How do we choose a permissible level of luxury?
4. Why are asceticism and isolationism not the ways to godliness? What are the dangers of these approaches?

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