

Sermon 17, Stop Loving the World, 1 John 2:15-17

Proposition: Stop loving the world, or you will pass away with it!

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we come this morning to a difficult text. We might call it difficult for two reasons. The first of these is that this text doesn't describe anybody here. No one in this room has a problem with loving the world. Right? We are well aware, in our own denominational tradition and certainly in our broader culture, of the dangers of asceticism. We don't hold with monasteries. We don't believe in flight from the world. We think sexual intercourse is a really good thing. And so on. Oh, of course we're involved with the world, but, and let me stress this, always and only in an appropriate way!

The other reason this text is a difficult text, then, is because it suggests that perhaps our involvement with the world is not squeaky clean. Maybe there's some sin in there. Maybe you and I do have an inappropriate relationship with the world.

And so, this text is difficult not because its meaning is unclear but rather because it more than suggests — indeed, it positively asserts — that you and I have a problem with worldliness. It tells us that we need to solve that problem or else we will pass away along with the world. And it points us back to Christ, the one who does God's will and who abides in God's house forever. He's the ultimate (and only) solution to the problem of worldliness.

I. Do Not Love the World

We begin by reminding ourselves of the context. John has told us about the people walking in darkness on one side of this section, and about antichrists on the other side of it. He just reminded us of the tremendous privileges that are ours in Christ. And now, he essentially says “If you want to walk in the light, if you want to be an overcomer, a strong young Christian, and not an antichrist, then you have got to get your head out of the world. You have got to separate yourself from this consuming passion for the world. You must stop loving the world. “ That's his

message here. He's telling us that if we want to be God's little children, then we have to get over our worldliness.

Well, what does it mean to love the world? In one sense, I hesitate to give an answer. Like you, I've heard many sermons that ask "What does this text/story/parable mean?" and then give an answer that sounds really plausible but is eminently forgettable. While I heard the sermon, I thought the answer was perfect. As soon as I walked out of the church, the answer left my mind and I went back to thinking what I'd always thought about the passage that was just so brilliantly explained. Maybe the defect is in me more than in the fancy explanation. But I daresay that if so, it's a defect lodging in many of you as well. Don't love the world! In one sense, this command doesn't need any explanation. It's self-evident. The world is where we live. It's what we know. It's what we work with and work in all day long. It comprises, or at least impinges on, every thought and every experience you and I have ever had. What is the world? It's everything, we might say. Its totalizing nature is highlighted by the old joke college exam: "Describe the nature of the universe. Give three examples." That's the whole point, right? There isn't any other example. This world is the world; Narnia and Middle-Earth are simply fictional images of our own world, projected onto the screen of our imagination, showing us how amazing and magical our own world is after all.

Well, of course, knowing that, privately at least, we think of the world as being or at least containing pretty much everything, good and bad, how can we approach this command not to love it? Does John mean "Don't love anything except God" — because we know that He, and basically He alone, is definitively not contained by the world? Does John mean that we must have no more regard for sunsets than we do for porn shops? Does he mean that we ought to regard the world as a total loss, as something to get away from as soon as possible and to touch as little as possible while we're here? Obviously not. In other words, he's not talking about the world in the total and totalizing sense. He's talking about the world in the sense he goes on to specify — in the illicit sense, the sense of evil desires and boasting self-sufficiency. When John says "Don't love the world," he's uttering not an absolute command, but a conditional one.

What do I mean by that? Well, essentially, there are some commands that are absolute; you can't add the word "inappropriately" to them because there is no appropriate version of the thing the command forbids. Thus, an absolute command is "Love God with all your heart." You can't say "Love God except by due process of law." Due process of law can't exempt you from loving God. It can take away life, liberty, and property — but it can't take away the command to love God. But a conditional command, like the one against theft, essentially says "Don't take others' property inappropriately." Sometimes, say after you've made a trade, it's appropriate to load up someone else's generator and haul it away. You're taking his property and making it yours, but that was mutually agreed upon. It isn't always wrong to haul away property, then. But it is always wrong to stop loving God. In the same way, it isn't always wrong to love the world or the things in it. But it is wrong to love them inappropriately.

Well then, all that said, the question arises: What's the inappropriate way to love the world?

A. The Identity of What's in the World

Well, says John, let me tell you. The inappropriate ways to love the world can be summarized under the headings "lust of the flesh, lust of the eyes, and the pride of life." Once again, you have probably heard somebody explain to you in great detail what each of these things mean. The problem with all those explanations is that they are not nearly so memorable as the apostle's own words. Everyone can remember the lust of the flesh and eyes and the pride of life. No one can remember long explanations of what each of these things is.

Let me just point out what is true of all of three of these things: They are all psychological realities. The three things that John tells us are in the world are all things that are in your heart! The importance of this fact for any frank discussion of worldliness cannot be overstated.

Brothers and sisters, some of you grew up in churches or cults that focused strongly on the sin of worldliness. Is worldliness a sin? Of course it is! But is worldliness defined by the statement "I don't drink, smoke, or chew, and I don't go with girls that do"? Is that what John says here — "All that is in the world, the demon rum, the carcinogenic tobacco, and the nasty opioids"? Are those the things that are in the world that we are called to beware of? Not for a single second. The things that are in the world, the things that are so deadly, are things resident within your heart and mine. So anyone who will tell you that worldliness is a matter of using or abstaining from what's out there, that it just means wearing certain clothes, going to movies, using alcohol and drugs, and so on, is not correct. John says that these two lusts and this boasting pride — these are the things in the world that we are not supposed to love.

Let me just say it this way: Any explanation of worldliness whose upshot is that no one in this church is worldly is a stupid and incorrect explanation. Any explanation of worldliness whose upshot is that *I* am never worldly is stupid and incorrect. The fact is that these three things that are in the world are in the world because they are in our hearts. The world in the sense that John is talking about, the anti-God system, is something that human beings built and maintain with vast infusions of resources. Why do we do it? Because we want it. We desire it. We want an anti-God world, by which we mean a world that can get on just fine without reference to God.

1. The Lust of the Flesh

And so, this "lust of the flesh" means "what the body wants." Are the desires of the body inherently sinful? Not in terms of how we were created. But let me just put it like this: If you gave your body everything it wanted all the time, would you be sinning? Of course you would. We crave ease. We crave comfort. We crave physical pleasure. We love sitting on the couch eating ice cream. And while it's possible to learn to enjoy exercising and eating no more food than you need and so on, it doesn't come natural. That's learned behavior. What's not learned is overindulgence, living for what we can get out of life, and so on. Pampering, coddling, babying your body is one of the favorite pastimes of this fallen world. Thus we see every magazine on the

rack devoted either to telling you how to make good food and find experiences that feel good, or else to showing you things that your eyes delight in seeing.

2. The Lust of the Eyes

That's the second item that John tells us is in the world because it was in our hearts first. Some things you want because they make your body feel good. But some things you want just because your eyes can see them and to see them provokes desire.

Have any of you seen the fancy, shiny glass/chrome back of the Samsung Galaxy Note 10? That thing is a perfect example of lust-of-the-eyes appeal. Is anyone ever going to see the back of your cellphone? No! If you have any sense at all, you'll shove that \$1100 phone right into a case so that it doesn't break in the first twenty minutes you have it. But still, when I look at the shiny, gorgeous back of that phone, I want it. I know I don't need it. I know it wouldn't make my body feel any better. I know that it's stupid to watch movies on a 6-inch phone screen when I could be watching them on a full-size television — and yet the very shininess and elevated status of that phone makes me crave it. This, my friends, is the lust of the eyes. It is a desire for something that can be seen. This too is part of the world.

3. The Pride of Life

The final one, the "pride of life," is the most vague of the three components of inappropriate attachment to the world. What is John talking about here? I am persuaded that he is speaking of what he brings up so often in the gospel of John — namely, an attachment to physical reality that excludes spiritual reality. Over and over in his gospel, John shows us people who take Jesus' words literally and thereby miss the spiritual meaning of what He's telling them. Thus we have Nicodemus saying "What? Go back into my mother's womb?" We have the woman at the well saying "So then I wouldn't need to come draw water anymore." We have the Pharisees saying "Are we blind also?" And so on. Brothers and sisters, the pride of life is the arrogance in living that one can have without reference to God. It's the feeling that the world is quite enough because I'm a pretty stellar kind of person. It is, in short, the feeling that all of us know well, either in its normal form or else in its inverted, "I'm no good; I don't belong here; life is not worth living" form.

John tells us that worldliness is the sin of living based on desire — the body's desires and the eyes' desires. It is the sin of living as though the world were sufficient with no reference to God or spiritual reality. That is what worldliness is. And if you tell me that you've never done that, then I will happily call you a liar.

So is it worldly to watch a movie, to smoke a cigarette, to have a beer? Quite possibly. But are those infallible signs of worldliness? Of course not. Worldliness just means living as though the world is enough, as though it's a self-contained, self-sufficient place that ultimately does not need God.

And brothers and sisters, all of us live this way, at least sometimes. The distinguishing mark of an unbeliever is merely that he always lives this way. While he may acknowledge some kind of divine agency, ultimately you will find that his "god" is within the world rather than

beyond it. I once asked my frankly non-believing neighbor what she believed in; she answered, “I believe in the power of concerted human action.” Brothers and sisters, concerted human action is a force within the world. So is karma. So are Zeus and Hera and the gods of the ancient pagans. Only the God of the Bible is truly outside the world, and the source and ruler of the world. Worldliness means living as though creation and providence aren’t true, living without regard to redemption and God’s work in the world. Worldly people, then, only care about worldly things, worldly statuses, worldly realities. You can get them to talk about the stock market, or the Neo-Babylonians, or ecclesiastical politics. But you can’t get them to take seriously the idea that God is the Father Almighty, maker of Heaven and Earth, and that life lived within the horizon of this world without reference to Him is not only pointless, but downright wicked.

So what are you not supposed to love? The world without reference to God. Ultimately, this command is about your attitude. Do you live for what your heart and eyes desire, or is your hope and reason for living fixed beyond this world in that which is to come? Are you content with Gillette, or do you seek a city with foundations?

B. The Source of What’s in the World: The World

Another clue that our definition of worldliness (regarding the world as enough) is correct comes from John’s peculiar statement about how the world is the source of what’s in the world. The two lusts and the pride are not from the Father, but from the world. How could it be that these things are in the world that God made, as John so clearly says at the beginning of His gospel, and yet they are not from God but as it were auto-generated by the world? The point here is that the three attitudes that define worldliness fit within the closed horizon of this world. The world is enough; the desires it generates are the desires that generate it. Remember, as I said in the beginning, the world that you’re not to love is a world that human beings have created. We made this God-free world because that’s what we wanted. Your cultural products, your educational system, your vision of the good, true, and beautiful — all of it exists within the immanent frame, in a God-free zone where the Freedom from Religion Foundation vigilantly patrols to ensure that the Almighty never gets officially sanctioned by anyone important.

In this sense, the world made the world. That is, fallen human beings imagined a world without God and proceeded to act like He didn’t exist. As citizens of the world, we manufactured a world in which it is possible (kind of) to be worldly and live without any need for God. So is the world the ultimate source of itself? Of course not. God is the ultimate source of the world. But we world-dwellers created a world that we could control, a world where we would not need to be reminded of God.

C. The Destination of What’s in the World

And where will that world and the lusts that drive it end up? In the same place as the darkness. The darkness is passing away, and the world created by human lust and pride is also passing away. It won’t endure because it can’t endure. God can make things permanent — but we can only make things temporary. The world is passing away; the empire of lust and pride cannot

stand forever. So brothers and sisters, don't take the world as ultimate. Don't love the world. Don't think of the world as being enough. It's not.

So what about traditional ideas of worldliness? Are alcohol, tobacco, and movies "worldly"? Well, people committed to the idea that the world is enough disagree about these things and whether you ought to use them. But ultimately, brothers and sisters, regardless of whether you end up using these things or not, they are definitely wrong if you partake of them with the idea that the world is enough, that it will meet your needs, that so long as you have what your eyes and body desire you're good.

II. If You Love the World, You Don't Love the Father

If you have that idea, you don't love God the Father. You are willing to live without Him, and if you're willing to live without Him then you can hardly be loving Him with your whole heart, mind, soul, and strength.

Yet even as Christians, people who are formally committed to trusting God and living in a way that acknowledges Him, how can we be guilty of worldliness? One obvious way is in isolating sections of our lives and saying that worldliness is perfectly acceptable there. It would be wrong to live only for what the world offers in my life as a whole, but it's just fine to live for what the world offers in terms of my entertainment, or in terms of my food, or in terms of my house, or yard, or car, or bank account, or clothing.

Now, what do I mean? That the true Christian eats otherworldly food or keeps a celestial account at the Bank of Heaven? Not literally, of course. But didn't Jesus tell us to keep a celestial account at the Bank of Heaven by doing good deeds and giving to the poor so that we would have treasure in Heaven? Didn't He say that His food and drink was the do the will of His Father who sent Him? Didn't He tell us to eat and drink His flesh and blood? Didn't He tell us that we would dwell in His house forever? Brothers and sisters, it's good and proper to eat earthly food, to keep an earthly bank account (and to keep it as full as you properly can), and to read earthly books and listen to earthly music. But to say that any of those things are enough, on their own, satisfactory on their own, sufficient for you on their own, is to fall into worldliness. Thinking "If I have a full freezer then I'm set for food" is a sin. It's the sin of the rich fool in the parable who tore down his barns and built bigger ones. Thinking "If I have a full IRA then I'm set for retirement" is a sin — the same sin. It's the sin of trusting in the world to provide what only God can provide. It's the sin of making some portion of your life off-limits from God and saying "I need God for my spiritual life, but I don't need Him for my entertainment life, my sex life, my foodie life, my work life," and so on. If you think that the world can meet even one of your needs without reference to God, then you don't love the Father as you should. If you think the world can meet all of your needs without reference to God, then you don't love God at all. That's John's message here.

III. If You Do God's Will, You Will Abide Forever

Positively speaking, then, what should you do? What test should you apply to see whether you are loving God and fleeing worldliness? The test that John gives in v. 17. Do you do the will of

God? That's the thing to ask yourself. That's the question that will infallibly reveal whether you're being worldly. "I'm fixing to enjoy this film. Am I doing the will of God? Am I obeying everything God has told me to do?" If you can say "Yes" to that question, then you are not being worldly. Now, we all know people who have been in the habit of lying to themselves for so long that they believe all kinds of things to be God's will when those things are obviously *not* God's will for them. They are doing things that violate explicit commands of God but then saying, "That wasn't a sin. That's what God wanted for me." Don't be one of those people. Those are the people who abide in darkness that we heard about earlier in this chapter.

You need to be a person who does the will of God. You need to be someone who obeys God no matter what. Why? Because that's the kind of person Jesus was. John is clearly referring here back to Jesus' statement in ch. 8 of his gospel that "the Son abides forever." Jesus did God's will, and He abides forever. If you are united to Him by faith, then you have the power of the Holy Spirit to, like Jesus, do God's will and thus abide forever.

Don't look to the world as though it were enough. It's not. James Bond is a great example of a worldly individual — but when he titled one of his movies *The World Is Not Enough*, he was right on. Only God is enough. Only doing His will can save you from the worldliness that regards this world as sufficient for all practical purposes. Jesus did that will. His death propitiates God for all your sins — even your sins of worldliness. So repent of them; turn back to Christ, the one who abides in His Father's house forever. Recognize that the manmade world of lust and pride is falling apart even now; God's glory is shining through cracks in the edifice. It can't stand; it will be overwhelmed at last by the light of God shining in upon it. When that day comes, we will all know that the world was not enough, that only God is sufficient for the longings of the human heart. Come quickly, and abide with us, our Lord, Immanuel. Amen.