

“Do Not Love the World” (1 John 2:12–17)

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Today, we’re celebrating a baptism. Baptism is a ceremony that has great significance. It signifies a change in a person. God has transferred the person who is being baptized out of the realm of darkness and into the kingdom of light. That person has gone from spiritual death to spiritual life. The old self has died and the new self is risen in Jesus Christ.

Baptism also signifies cleansing. The person being baptized has been washed of her sins, completely forgiven because Jesus paid the penalty for her sins and because his perfect life is credited to her.

Baptism is also a ceremony that demonstrates a commitment. I compare it to a wedding ceremony. That may seem strange at first, but they share a lot in common. They are public ceremonies held before witnesses, both God and the people who are gathered. They demonstrate a change in identity. They are outward signs of something that has already happened internally. The rite of baptism represents the internal faith that a Christian has, as well as the cleansing that person has already received. (I should be clear that the rite of baptism doesn’t impart faith or saving grace.) A wedding is a sign of a commitment that two people have already made to each other. They already love each other and have agreed to live their lives together. Now, before witnesses, they make promises. In a similar way, baptism is saying “I do” to Jesus in front of the witnesses of a local church. And I think this analogy isn’t a stretch because the Bible often likens the relationship between God and his people to a marriage. That’s why we call the church the “bride of Christ.”

As we think about baptism and the commitment it entails, we should consider what it means to be a Christian. We’ve already been doing that in recent weeks as we’ve been looking at 1 John, a letter written by one of Jesus’ initial followers, the apostle John. This week’s passage, 1 John 2:12–17, fits baptism well because it talks about the commitment that Christians make when following Jesus.

The passage is divided into two halves. The first half, verses 12–14, is a bit like a poem. John has written some tough words in the previous verses. He says that those who don’t obey God don’t know him, and that those who don’t specifically obey the commandment to love

others don't know Jesus. After such stern words, John wants to encourage his readers. This poem does that.¹ Let's read verses 12–14 to see how John addresses his readers.

- 12 I am writing to you, little children,
because your sins are forgiven for his name's sake.
- 13 I am writing to you, fathers,
because you know him who is from the beginning.
I am writing to you, young men,
because you have overcome the evil one.
I write to you, children,
because you know the Father.
- 14 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.²

I'll have to admit that in the past I have found these verses to be a bit perplexing. I didn't really understand what John meant. But after studying the passage, I understand it a lot better. First of all, notice the structure. In verses 12 and 13, John addresses "little children," "fathers," and "young men." At the very end of verse 13 in the ESV, we read of "children," and then in verse 14, we read of "fathers" and "young men."³ So, it seems that this little poem has an A-B-C, A-B-C structure. In other words, it has two halves, and each half addresses "children," "fathers," and "young men."

Now, are these supposed to be three groups of people? It seems that when John writes to "little children" or "children," he is addressing all Christians, because throughout the letter he uses this term to address all Christians (2:1, 12, 13, 18, 28; 3:7, 18; 4:4; 5:21). John says that the sins of the children of God have been forgiven "for his name's sake." This is a translation that seems to hang on to what we find in the King James Version. A better translation would be "through his name," or "on account of his name." The "his" is Jesus. His name represents his character, his identity, his person. His name literally means "God saves" or "God is salvation." Because Jesus is God incarnate, who lived the perfect life that God requires of his people and

¹ I got this insight from David Helm, on Nancy Guthrie's podcast, "Help Me Teach Me the Bible."

² Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

³ Some translations have verse 14 start with the second address to "children." This represents the versification of the United Bible Society's latest Greek New Testament.

died an atoning death, all who have a right relationship with him are forgiven of their sins. This is true of all Christians. It is also true that all Christians know the Father.

It would seem that John then addresses two groups of Christians. First, he addresses the “fathers.” This is probably a term used for older Christians. And then, he addresses “young men,” which probably refers to younger Christians. Both times, John says that the “fathers” know “him who is from the beginning.” That’s Jesus. The older Christians know Jesus. They don’t just know facts about him. They have a right relationship with him. They know who the real Jesus is, and they are united to him. Perhaps John is writing this because, as we’ll see next week, one of the problem that he addresses in this letter is false teachers. There were people in the churches he is writing to who didn’t know the real Jesus. But true Christians know, love, worship, and obey the true Jesus.

The younger Christians, the “young men,” “have overcome the evil one,” Satan. They are strong. The word of God abides in them. Putting that all together, we might they have the strength to overcome Satan because the word of God abides in them. The word of God is Jesus, but it’s also the message concerning Jesus. Jesus dwells in these believers by means of the Holy Spirit, and they have clung to the gospel message. This is the same thing that John writes in Revelation 12:11: “they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death.” The only way that anyone can overcome Satan is by knowing Jesus, having the Holy Spirit indwelling the believer, and clinging fast to God’s word.

To sum it up: “children” refer to all Christians; “fathers” refers to older Christians; and “young men” refers to younger Christians. Augustine, in one of his sermons on 1 John, sums it nicely: “In the sons, birth: in the fathers, antiquity: in the young men, strength.”⁴ All children of God are spiritually reborn. Older Christians have a more experienced knowledge of God. And younger Christians possess the strength of the young.

I don’t think we should get hung up on the fact that John uses male language of “fathers” and “young men.” When we read “brothers” in the letters of the Bible, it’s clear that women are also included. When masculine plural nouns are used in this way, they refer both to men and

⁴ Augustine of Hippo, “Ten Homilies on the First Epistle of John,” in *St. Augustine: Homilies on the Gospel of John, Homilies on the First Epistle of John, Soliloquies*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. H. Browne and Joseph H. Myers, vol. 7, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, First Series (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1888), 471.

women. Truly, all Christians, whether young or old, male or female, know God and have overcome the evil one. Older Christians should have a greater knowledge of God that they can pass on to younger generations. Younger Christians can be strong in their zeal and what they can do for Jesus, but they must find their strength in Jesus and they must hold fast to Scripture.

John's main point is that we know we are Christians if we do these things. John also uses this little poem to prepare for another strong commandment. Part of living in the light and obeying God is to give our ultimate allegiance to God. Let's read verses 15–17 to see what John says.

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. ¹⁶ For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world. ¹⁷ And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.

At first, this commandment seems impossible. If we only read, “Do not love the world or the things in the world,” we might think that we can't love other people, because, after all, they are in the world. And wouldn't that contradict what John has already written? In verse 10, John writes, “Whoever loves his brother abides in the light.”

To understand what John means, we have to look carefully at how John defines “world.” Here's one thing we need to keep in mind: Sometimes, “world” or “earth” simply refers to this planet and has a neutral meaning. And we know from other parts of the Bible that God made everything and it is his. Psalm 24:1 says,

The earth is the LORD's and the fullness thereof,
the world and those who dwell therein.

But “the world” can have another meaning. “Sometimes the world is seen as an organized system of human civilization and activity which is opposed to God and alienated from him.”⁵ First John 3:13 says, “Do not be surprised, brothers, that the world hates you.” James 4:4 says, “You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.” Clearly, John has this negative sense of “the world” in mind.

⁵ David Jackman, *The Message of John's Letters: Living in the Love of God*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 60.

Here's a second thing we need to keep in mind: When interpreting one part of Scripture, we can't pit it against other Scripture. If all Scripture is God-breathed, and is God's word, we should expect harmony. From the rest of the Bible, we know that when God made the world, he initially made it good (Genesis 1). Though the power of sin is at work in the world, we can still enjoy God's creation. Another apostle, Paul, tells his younger associate Timothy about people who forbid eating certain foods and even marrying. He says that this isn't right. Paul's reason? "For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer" (1 Tim. 4:4–5). Paul also says that God "richly provides us with everything to enjoy" (1 Tim. 6:17). I don't think John is teaching a different message than Paul. John doesn't mean we can't love other people or enjoy things that God has made.

So, here is the third thing to keep in mind: If we are going to understand what John means by "the world," we need to pay careful attention to how he defines it. We find a definition in verse 16: "For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world." The real problem isn't the things in the world. The problem is our desires and our pride. Almost anything in the world can be used in a positive way or a negative way. The things themselves are generally neutral. The real problem is our relationship to those things. When John warns us about loving the world, he means that we shouldn't love the world more than we love God, or even as much as we love God. If our love for God's creation leads us to covet and lust, and to take pride in our possessions, then we have a great problem. One commentator that I've been studying is Robert Yarbrough, who writes, "to set one's heart on the world is effectively to expel God from the heart. To attempt to love God in multitasking fashion, dedicating a portion of one's love worldward and then the remaining amount godward, is fruitless because it fails to acknowledge God as he truly is: sole, unique, sovereign, alone deserving one's core allegiance."⁶

The problem, really, is our desires. We crave things that God doesn't want us to have. Some theologians see a hint of Eve's temptation here. She craved the forbidden fruit after Satan tempted her. She saw "that it was a delight to the eyes" (Gen. 3:6). Her pride caused her to want to "be like God" (Gen. 3:5). Whether John had Eve (and Adam) in mind, we all are like Eve: We

⁶ Robert W. Yarbrough, *1–3 John*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 130.

crave what we don't have, we see things we covet, and we tend to rely on our possessions. Instead of being content with what God has given us and relying on the Giver, we make the gift ultimate and we want more and more.

Because of our sinful condition, we tend to make even good gifts ultimate things in our lives. When we do that, we ignore the Giver. I quoted Augustine, one of the church's most influential theologians, earlier. In one of his sermons on 1 John, he said that we tend to make the things of this world the objects of our worship. He said,

God does not forbid you to love these things, nevertheless, [God commands] not to set your affections upon them for blessedness, but to approve and praise them to this end, that you may love your Creator. In the same manner, my brothers, as if a bridegroom should make a ring for his bride, and she having received the ring, should love it more than she loves the bridegroom who made the ring for her: would not her soul be found guilty of adultery in the very gift of the bridegroom, however she did but love what the bridegroom gave her? By all means let her love what the bridegroom gave: yet should she say, "This ring is enough for me, I do not wish to see his face now:" what sort of woman would she be? Who would not detest such folly? who not pronounce her guilty of an adulterous mind?⁷

Wouldn't it be strange if a man proposed to his girlfriend and she took the engagement ring and said, "Thanks, but now that I have this ring, I don't require your services anymore"? Wouldn't it also be strange if she said, "You gave me *this* modest ring? Why didn't you give me a bigger diamond? Don't you know I want platinum and not gold?" Augustine says that we are like that woman. We take the good things that God has given us but we don't want a relationship with God. Or we're not content with what God has given us and we want more and more.

That's the problem with our cravings. In fact, there are several problems with loving the world in this ultimate way, as opposed to loving God. One, when we covet and lust and desire more and more, we aren't grateful. We don't really love the Giver. Instead, we take the gift and ignore the One who gave it to us. We don't thank him. We don't want a relationship with him. And we certainly don't want him to be our King. Our problem is that we don't want God to be our authority. We don't trust that he is a good King. Something or someone else fills that role of authority in our lives. Jesus said that we cannot serve two masters. We will end up hating one and loving the other, or being devoted to one and not the other (Matt. 6:24). We often think we can handle the role of King, and so we reject God. When we reject God, we think we're free.

⁷ Augustine of Hippo, "Ten Homilies on the First Epistle of John," 473. I modernized the language in this quote for ease of comprehension.

But this leads us to another problem with loving the world in the way that John write about. Two, the person who follows every urge isn't free. That person is enslaved by his or her desires. And that person is never happy and never satisfied. He's like someone who is thirsty but only has salt water to drink. The salt water never quenches his thirst. In fact, it increases his thirst.⁸

That is because the goods of the world can't satisfy us. They hold out that promise, of course, but it's all a cheat. So many of us long for things that we will never get, like riches and power and fame and the world's greatest entertainments. But even if we did get them, we would find that, though nice, they don't live up to their billing. They would leave us wanting more. They would leave us asking, "Is that all there is?"

A third problem is that, as John puts it, "the world is passing away." All the things we crave don't last. The things we take pride in aren't eternal. There are so many good things that we can misuse by making them ultimate things in our lives. We can do that with our marriages. Marriage is a good gift, but your spouse can never be your Lord and Savior. And our marriages have expiration dates. Some people make their children their idols. But our relationship with children may not last, and they certainly will disappoint us. Some people live for entertainment and pleasure, but those are the shortest-lasting things that exist. The same is true for sex. All of the things that we tend to desire the most don't last. How foolish are we to put our trust in them? Especially when our lives are short and our deaths are inevitable?

Blaise Pascal once wrote, "You do not need a greatly elevated soul to realize that in this life there is no true and firm satisfaction, that all our pleasures are simply vanity, that our afflictions are infinite, and lastly that death, which threatens us at every moment, must in a few years infallibly present us with the appalling necessity of being either annihilated or wretched for all eternity."⁹ In other words, you don't have to be particularly smart or astute to know that all our pleasures don't satisfy, that they're empty, that our pain is great, and that death threatens to put an end to us. If you're an atheist, you assume that death means annihilation, the end, full stop. But if there's a heaven and a hell, then there's something infinitely worse, a wretched

⁸ I got the salt water illustration from David Jackman, *The Message of John's Letters: Living in the Love of God*, The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester, England; Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 63: "It is like drinking salt water. Far from bringing satisfaction, the unquenchable thirst is in fact increased, and that is no way for a child of God to live."

⁹ Blaise Pascal, "Pensées," §681, in *Pensées and Other Writings*, trans Honor Levi, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 160.

experience for all eternity. This should force us to wake up, to take a more serious look at what matters in life.

Elsewhere, Pascal has the following meditation:

When I consider the short span of my life absorbed into the preceding and subsequent eternity . . . , the small space which I fill and even can see, swallowed up in the infinite immensity of spaces of which I know nothing and which knows nothing of me, I am terrified, and surprised to find myself here rather than there, for there is no reason why it should be here rather than there, why now rather than then. Who put me here? On whose orders and on whose decision have this place and this time been allotted to me?¹⁰

If we think about our lives in the grand spaces of time and of the universe, we should be terrified. Who are we? We're just specks of dust in a massive universe. What do we matter? Compared to eternity, our lives are but mists. Why should we live here and now? Why should we exist? Who put us here? The fact that our lives come and go in the vast spaces of eternity should cause us to ask questions. And, if we're wise, we should want to grab on to something eternal.

In the same sermon I quoted earlier, Augustine says that the one eternal thing we can hold onto is Jesus. He says

The river of temporal things hurries one along: but like a tree sprung up beside the river is our Lord Jesus Christ. He assumed flesh, died, rose again, ascended into heaven. It was His will to plant Himself, in a manner, beside the river of the things of time. Are you rushing down the stream to the headlong deep? Hold fast the tree. Is love of the world whirling you on? Hold fast Christ. For you He became temporal, that you might become eternal; because He also in such sort became temporal, that He remained still eternal. Something was added to Him from time, not anything went from His eternity. But you were born temporal, and by sin were made temporal: you were made temporal by sin, He was made temporal by mercy in remitting sins.¹¹

I don't know about you, but sometimes I feel like life is "rushing down the stream to the headlong deep." Time moves quickly, and it only moves in one direction. We all have the experience of having time evade our grasp. We can't hold on to the best moments and we can't go back in time to fix the bad ones. And as we get older, time seems to move more swiftly. But

¹⁰ Ibid., §102, p. 26.

¹¹ Augustine of Hippo, "Ten Homilies on the First Epistle of John," 473. Again, I modernized the language slightly in order to understand it better.

Jesus is the eternal one who entered time to make us eternal. If we hold fast to him, though the world passes away, we will not.

John tells us that whoever does the will of God abides forever. We don't get eternal life by doing the will of God, as if eternal life is something we could ever earn. That's not the gospel. Eternal life is a gift received by those who trust in Jesus. In fact, we can say that Jesus is the only one who truly loved the Father more than he loved the world. He loved the Father more than the world for the sake of the world. He is the one who was able to resist the desires of this world. Augustine says that Satan tried to tempt Jesus with the desires of the flesh, the desires of the eyes, and the pride of life. According to Augustine,

By these three was the Lord tempted of the devil. By the lust of the flesh He was tempted when it was said to Him, "If you are the Son of God, speak to these stones that they become bread," when He hungered after His fast. . . . He was tempted also by the lust of the eyes concerning a miracle, when he said to Him, "Cast yourself down: for it is written, He shall give his angels charge concerning you: and in their hands they shall bear you up, lest at any time you dash your foot against a stone." . . . By "pride of life" how was the Lord tempted? When he carried Him up to a high place, and said to Him, "All these will I give you, if you will fall down and worship me." By the loftiness of an earthly kingdom he wished to tempt the King of all worlds: but the Lord who made heaven and earth trod the devil under foot.¹²

Jesus did what we can't do, live the perfect life, for us.

Those who follow Jesus will follow in his footsteps. They don't love the world in the way that John writes about. They love God first and foremost. They can love other people and the world, but not in a way that competes with their love for God. And, as John says earlier in his letter, those who have eternal life confess their sin, are cleansed, obey God, and love others. These are all signs of a Christian.

In fact, there's a clear connection between verses 12–14 and verses 15–17. The ones whom John addresses in verses 12–14 are the ones who don't love the world more than they love God. They are the ones who do the will of God. Their love for God and their obedience to God are daily realities. But those who love the world more than they love God, who love the gift but not the Giver, are the ones who do not overcome the evil one. They will not receive eternal life because they don't walk in the light.

¹² Augustine of Hippo, "Ten Homilies on the First Epistle of John," 474–475. Again, I modernized Augustine's language.

What does this mean for us? I see two important applications from this passage, one that is implied in verses 12–14 and one that is quite clear in verses 15–17.

In his little poem, John talks about older and younger Christians. In an ideal world, older Christians would be mature and would have a great knowledge of God. In the real world, I have seen older people who have been very immature in their faith, who have been selfish and demanded that things in church be done “their way,” and who haven’t had great theological knowledge. That shouldn’t be the case. Older Christians should have great wisdom, knowledge, and experience, and they should pass that on to younger Christians. John doesn’t say that here, but that is a very biblical concept. If you take your faith seriously and are living in light of eternity, and if you’re a “father” of the church, you should mentor someone younger. Older Christians, what are you doing now to pass on your knowledge and wisdom to younger generations? If you’re not doing anything along these lines, why not? Is the love of the world stopping you?

Younger Christians, you should also pay heed to what John says. You may have physical strength, but do you have spiritual strength? Are you overcoming the evil one by clinging to the word of God? Do you *know* the word of God? It is so important to know the Bible and to hold fast to the gospel message. In John’s day, people had left the churches because they had abandoned the faith that John and the other apostles taught. If you don’t know the word of God, you may be like those people whom John describes in verse 19: “They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us.” Real Christians abide in Christ by doing the simple things like reading the Bible and praying on a daily basis and being a part of the church. False Christians have a superficial knowledge of God’s word. They won’t overcome the evil one; instead, they will be overcome.

The second application for us comes from verses 15–17. We should love God more than anything else, and we should take our faith seriously. We should live in light of eternity. So many things in this world will pass away. So much of what we waste our time on will be gone and will be forgotten. Much of what seems important right now won’t even be a footnote in the pages of history. That’s true of stories in the news. It’s true of sports and entertainment. It’s true of our hobbies. And if our love for any of these things has displaced our love for God, we’re in trouble. At the least, it harms our relationship with God and keeps us from experiencing fully his

presence, love, and blessings. It also keeps us from being effective Christians. At worst, our disordered desires and loves may be a sign that we aren't really Christians.

This passage should cause all of us to reassess our lives. Do we love the world as much we love God? Do we love the world more than we love God? If so, then the things that God has created have become idols to us. We get more joy of them than we get joy from God. We trust them to fulfill us more than we trust God. We're more committed to them than we're committed to God. Some of us are more committed to our hobbies than we are to God. If your hobby keeps you from worshiping God, from committing to the local church, then you need to repent. We must continue to worship together each Lord's Day, to serve in the church and be served. We shouldn't be like the bride who takes the ring from the groom and then ignores him.

Some of us may covet what we don't have. We may wish we had more of what others have, what the world offers. If that is the case, we should consider what God has given to us and be thankful. Enjoy what God has given you to enjoy, and let those gifts lead you to praise the Giver. Don't be like the woman who, upon receiving the engagement ring, asks, "Is this the best ring you could give me?"

Some of us may take pride in our possessions, trusting them instead of trusting in God. We may be like the woman who says, "Look at my ring" instead of "look at my husband," the one who takes pride in the gift instead of the Giver. Remember that your possessions will pass away. They won't die to pay for your sins. They won't forgive you if you don't take care of them. But Jesus did die for your sins, and he has forgiven you and will forgive you. If you've been baptized, if you professed your "I do" to Jesus, then continue to trust in him. He is the only Savior, the eternal God who entered into history to save temporal man. And if you haven't said "I do" to Jesus, I would urge you to do that today. Everything else will pass away and fade into the abyss.