

“TWO INCOMPATIBLE LOVES”

It has been about a month since our last sermon in this series on 1 John, so I want to take a few moments to briefly review what we have seen so far in this study. We have said that the key theme of this letter is the assurance of salvation, as John sets forth three tests of true Christianity in his letter. We have also noted that the letter is structured more like a symphony than a logical argument, so that themes are introduced and then revisited throughout the letter. As a result, the tone of the letter frequently shifts back and forth between a tone of warning and a tone of comfort. In the previous passage, verses 12-14, John provided assurance to Christians at different levels of spiritual maturity by pointing out the different ways in which we can see the grace of God at work through the various stages of the Christian life. Those who are new converts, or who are youngsters in the faith, find comfort in the gospel's most basic truths: the forgiveness of their sins and their adoption as God's children. Those who are a bit further along in the Christian life can take comfort in the fact that they experience a measure of victory as they fight the good fight of the faith. And those whose profession of faith has been confirmed by a longer experience of God's grace can take comfort in the fact that, though their days in this world are drawing to a close, they know the eternal God and have the hope of everlasting life with him.

As we turn to the passage that is before us today, we see that John's tone shifts from one of encouragement to one of warning. There are threats to Christian faith, and John wants us to be on guard against these threats. The church has traditionally identified

three principle enemies to the life of faith: the world, the flesh, and the devil. It is worth noting that John mentions all three of these enemies within the span of just three verses: he referred the devil (“the evil one”) back in verse 14, and he speaks of the world and the flesh in verses 15 and 16. In this passage, John provides us with a concise description of the world as well as straightforward teaching about the attitude that a Christian should have towards the world. As we study this text today, we will look at it in three main parts: first, we will consider the command that John issues at the beginning of the passage; and then we will consider the two reasons that he gives in support of this command.

We begin by looking at the command that is given in the first part of verse 15: “Do not love the world or the things in the world.” We need to give careful thought to what John means when he speaks of “the world” here. The term ‘world’ is used frequently in the New Testament, and not always in the same way. Sometimes it refers to the entire created order in a general sense. Sometimes it refers to all of mankind, the inhabitants of the world. But in John’s writings, it is usually used to describe a world-system that stands opposed to God. In the words of one commentator, John typically uses the word ‘world’ to describe “the life of human society as organized under the power of evil.” [Dodd] In John’s writings we are told that the world is under the control of the devil [1 Jn. 5:19], that Satan is in a sense “the ruler of this world” [Jn. 12:31], that Christians have been chosen out of the world [Jn. 17:6], and that Christians should expect to be hated by the world [1 Jn. 3:13].

Of course, the Bible also speaks of the world in a different sense. The world is the object of God's love and the sphere of his saving activity. The best known example of this is found in John 3:16, where we are told, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." And John tells us later on in this letter that Jesus was sent into the world in order that he might be the Savior of the world. [1 Jn. 4:14] In a similar manner, God sends his people into the world in order to proclaim the good news of salvation. God does not want us to withdraw from the world. Jesus made this clear in his great high-priestly prayer in John 17, where he prayed, "I do not ask that you take them out of the world;" and "As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world." Christ calls us to love the people of this world and to share the gospel with them, even those whom we might regard as our enemies.

It is also true that the Lord does not want us to utterly reject the good things that can be enjoyed in this world. God created the world as good. He is the source of all that is good in this world. We should receive such things as gifts from God. We need to be careful not to misuse them, but it is right for us to enjoy them with gratitude to God. This is important, because it helps us to see that when John instructs us not to love the world or the things in the world he is not denouncing the created order altogether. As I said before, he is speaking of the world as a system that stands opposed to God.

This also helps us to understand the other part of what Jesus said about the Christian's relationship to the world in his prayer in John 17. In speaking of his followers, Jesus

prayed, "They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world." When we place our trust in Jesus Christ, we are transferred out of the kingdom of this world and into the kingdom of God. Though we still live in the world, we no longer belong to it. Our true citizenship is in heaven. The reason why Christians are not to love the world is because the world is a system that is at war with our true homeland, the kingdom of God.

I want to call your attention to the significance of the fact that John felt that he had to instruct us not to love the world. Remember, this letter was written to Christians, not non-Christians. In the preceding passage John assured Christians of their salvation by calling attention to God's saving activity in their lives. But John knows that it is a grave mistake for a professed Christian to think that he does not have to worry about the allure of the world. The world is still enticing to us after we are born again. There is much in the world that remains attractive to us. Our old, fleshly nature continues to reside alongside of our new nature, and the world makes its appeal to that old nature. We have to be on guard, or else we will be ensnared by the enticements of the world. Even when we outwardly express our opposition to the world and its ways, it is still very easy for us to be secretly attracted to it in our hearts. We always need to remember that the world is our sworn enemy if we belong to Jesus Christ. You cannot be a friend of the world and a friend of God. You have to choose one or the other. John Owen puts it so well when he writes,

“Cursed is the person who encourages you to come to Christ and allows you to think that you can still indulge one sin in your life... Your choice of Christ must be wholehearted with no thought of turning back to some favourite sin. It is either God or the world, Christ or Satan, holiness or sin. They cannot be reconciled.” [*The Glory of Christ*, 139]

As we turn now to the second half of verse 15, we see the first reason that John gives in support of the command to not love the world. He says, “If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.” One question that this statement raises is what John means by the phrase “the love of the Father.” Is he talking about the love that God has for us, or is he talking about the love that we have for God? As you can see by the way it is translated by the ESV, both senses are possible. And this probably suggests that John had both senses in mind when he wrote this verse. The “love of the Father” refers to both the love that God has for us and the love that we have for him. This makes good sense because, as John will tell us later on in this letter, the only reason why a Christian can love God is because God first loved him. [see 4:19] God’s love for us produces our love for him.

John tells us that love for God and love for the world are mutually exclusive. True love for God is wholehearted. It has no rivals. Of course, this does not mean that the person who loves God cannot love anything else. It simply means that all of our other loves are to be subordinated to our love for God. The Christian’s other loves are not to be

rivals to his love for God, but various ways of expressing his love for God. To love the world in the sense that John is speaking of here is to give our supreme allegiance to the world and its mindset, instead of to God and his will. As John Stott puts it, "If we are engrossed in the outlook and pursuits of the world which rejects Christ, it is evident that we have no love for the Father." [104]

The mutually exclusive nature of these two loves indicates that they will not tolerate the presence of each other in a person's heart. If a person is controlled by the love of the world, then the love of God will be driven out of his heart. And the opposite is also true: if a person is controlled by the love of God, then the love of the world will be driven out of his heart. One old commentator described this phenomenon by saying that "There is an expulsive power in all true affection." In other words, our ultimate love, the thing that we love the most, expels all of its rivals from our heart. This is really the same thing that Jesus was talking about when he said, "No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other." [Mt. 6:24] You cannot love the world and God. If the love of the Father is truly in you, then you will want to break with the world and its desires.

In verse 16, John provides a further explanation of what he means when he speaks of the things of the world. He names three things in particular: the desires of the flesh; the desires of the eyes; and pride in possessions. These things do not originate from God but from the rebelliousness of this fallen world. The "desires of the flesh" are the sinful cravings and lusts that come from within us. John is using the term "flesh" in the same

way that the apostle Paul often uses it in his letters. In the words of Alexander Whyte, this use of the term 'flesh' refers to "human nature poisoned at its very source by sin... human nature become the seat of sin and the stronghold of Satan." [*The Walk, Conversation and Character of Jesus Christ Our Lord*, 128] The 'desires of the flesh' are the sinful desires that come from our sinful hearts.

The phrase "desires of the eyes" seems to refer to temptations that come to us from the outside. It is a description of what takes place when we look at things and are aroused to think greedy and lustful thoughts. Internet pornography would be a good contemporary example of what John means by the desires of the eyes. And so is the way in which our consumer culture seeks to incite dissatisfaction and desire within us in order to get us to purchase more and more of its products.

The phrase "pride in possessions" is a little more difficult to interpret, as we can see by the fact that other Bible versions translate it as the "pride of life." The general idea, though, is fairly clear. This is referring to our tendency to boast in the things that we have and the things that we accomplish. Fallen man finds his identity and significance in his accomplishments and possessions. The world is characterized by these three things: the desires of the flesh, the desires of the eyes, and pride in possessions. They are things with which we are all intimately familiar, because we all have to struggle against them each and every day of our lives.

As we turn now to verse 17, we see the second reason that John gives in support of the command to not love the world. Christians should not love the world because it "is

passing away along with its desires.” Notice the tense of the verb here. “Passing away” is in the present tense. John is describing something that is happening right now. This world is already beginning to fall apart. The new creation, the kingdom of God, is already at hand. Or, as John puts it in the passage we will study next week, “it is the last hour.” The end has already begun. This should give us a sense of urgency. It confronts us with the question of where our true allegiance lies: is our allegiance to the world, or is it to Christ? We have to choose. We cannot have it both ways. John makes this point very clear in this passage. The one who loves the world and its desires will pass away with the world. But the one who loves God, and who demonstrates his love for God by doing the will of God, that person will live forever. This calls for Christian obedience and Christian self-denial. It is not a call to a works-oriented approach to salvation. But it is a call to the obedience of faith, the obedience that is the fruit of true faith in Christ.

Another way of putting this is to say that your desires are indicative of your destiny. The things that dominate your desires now are indicative of your eternal destiny. What then do you desire? If you love the world, if your desires are set on the things of the world, then your destiny is the destruction that awaits this world. But if you love God, if you desire to do the will of God, then your destiny is with God in his eternal kingdom.

There is a serious warning for us in this passage. The love of the world will drive the love of God out of your heart. In the words of John Owen,

“if [the world] can fill the minds, the thoughts, and affections of men with itself, it will, to some, fortify the soul against faith and obedience, and in others, weaken all grace, and endanger eternal ruin...when the world fills our thoughts, it will entangle our affections.” [*The Grace and Duty of Being Spiritually-Minded*, viii-ix]

There really is an expulsive power in all true affection. The only thing that is strong enough to drive the love of the world out of your heart is love for God. It stands to reason, then, that you should do all that you can, then, in reliance upon God's grace and strength, to cultivate your love for God. Remember that the world is your sworn enemy if you belong to Jesus Christ. Friendship with the world is enmity with God. Be on guard as you go out into the world each day. If you love the world, you will share in its fate, and it is already passing away. But if you love God, if you desire to do the will of God, you will live with him forever.