

Us & The World

I John 2:15-17

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ February 23, 2020 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church



¹⁵ **Do not love the world or the things in the world. The love of the Father is not in those who love the world; ¹⁶ for all that is in the world—the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, the pride in riches— comes not from the Father but from the world. ¹⁷ And the world and its desire are passing away, but those who do the will of God live forever.** (I John 2:15-17, NRSV)



To set the context, remember that in the last section of his letter John urges Christians to love one another. This is the heart of God's law, the way we are to be distinguished as followers of Jesus, that we love one another as he has first loved us and forgive one another as he first forgave us. If this mutual love and forgiveness characterizes the church, how we are to relate to one another, then how is the church to turn and relate to the rest of the world around us beyond us? That's the question John is going to answer next.

He summarizes his answer with one command: **“Do not love the world or the things in the world.”** It's the only command in this section. The rest of the section is John's rationale. He tells us why we need to obey this command. Before we get to those reasons, however, a couple of definitions are in order.

First, let's define the word “world”. The Greek word here is the word ‘kosmos’. It's a common word in the New Testament, but one that is used in three very distinct ways.

First, it can simply be used to describe this round planet that we live on called earth. John 1:10 says that Jesus was **“in the world...”** That just means that Jesus literally came and walked on this planet, as opposed to staying in heaven or going to Mars or Jupiter. But that's not the way John is using it here because obviously God loves this planet he made and wants us to love it as well.

Second, the word ‘kosmos’ can be used to describe the inhabitants of the world, humanity. That's the way it's used in John 3:16 when Jesus says, **“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son...”** But again, that can't be what John means here because God loves all

people and wants us to love all people as well, even the ones who don't love us.

That leaves one option. The last use of the word ‘kosmos’ in the New Testament is in reference to “the combined activities, affairs, advantages, and accumulated assets of those in the world who are turned against God and disconnected from God.”¹ One scholar named C.H. Dodd defined it as, “The life of human society as organized under the power of evil.” Basically, used in this sense the world is the part of creation which has set itself against God and God's will. This is the way John uses the word here.

Think about it this way. There are two kingdoms present in creation. There is the Kingdom of God, which Jesus talked about repeatedly, telling us that it was among us, that it was coming into the world. Essentially, everything in creation which is subject to God's rule and reign, everything which operates and exists according to his will, is a part of his Kingdom. But that leaves a large part of existence, what the Bible calls evil, which is opposed to God's will and refuses to submit to God's rule and reign. Ultimately, human beings, every one of us, submit to one or the other of these two kingdoms. As Bob Dylan famously sung, “It may be the devil or it may be the Lord, but you're gonna have to serve somebody.”

With this in mind, let's look again at John's command. **“Do not love the world or the things in the world.”** We need one more definition, right? What would it mean to *love* a kingdom that is opposed to God and God's will? Well, there are several different Greek words for ‘love’, which means John is intentional when he chooses the word ‘agape’ to warn us here. Agape is not a love of affection or emotion, but a love of the will. It suggests an intentional, ongoing action, meaning a person who loves the world in this way is constantly and deliberately taken up with all that is opposed to God rather than with God himself and God's ways. That means John's command here is essentially, “Don't commit yourself to the ways of the world. Don't invest yourself in the world's things.” That is the command here which all followers of Jesus are to follow.

¹ www.bible.org/lexicon

John gives us two reasons. The first reason to not love the world is that love for God and love for the world are completely incompatible. In his words, **“The love of the Father is not in those who love the world...”** It’s not that you shouldn’t love both; you *can’t* love both. I coach baseball and am always asking my players which Major League team is their favorite. I had a kid recently tell me that he liked the Giants *and* the Dodgers. Those were his two favorite teams. It took some effort on my part to respond in a restrained manner, but I was able to calmly explain to him that such divided devotion simply was not possible. If you love the Dodgers, fine. If you love the Giants, fine. But you can’t love both. You can’t cheer for both. I’ve seen baseball hats split down the middle with the Giants and A’s. Okay. That works, sort of. I’ve never seen one half orange and black and half Dodger blue. No such hat exists.

On a more serious note, you can’t be a committed member of both the Ku Klux Klan and the NAACP at the same time. In World War II you couldn’t fight for the Nazi’s and for the Allies all at once. And that’s John’s point. The Kingdom of God and the kingdom of this world are absolutely opposed to one another and so if you dedicate yourself to one you cannot dedicate yourself to the other.

But what does it look like to love the kingdom of this world? John gives us some examples here to help clarify. In fact, he gives what essentially amounts to three essential marks of somebody who loves the world’s ways and the world’s goods. In that person you will find, **“the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, the pride of riches”**. Let’s take them one at a time.

The desires of the flesh are simply urges within us, cravings you might say, that lead us to live according to our own terms, to look out for ourselves ahead of others. My natural instincts, urges, preferences cravings, dreams, I am going to allow those to dictate my life. And these desires seem natural because in a way they are. They are rooted in the fallen, sinful nature we have inherited. Little children don’t have to learn to think of themselves first, to put their desires first. That tendency is just in us, right from the start.

These sinful, self-focused desires manifest in two main ways. The first is in the desires of the eyes, sinful cravings that are activated by what we see. Eve sees the forbidden fruit and it is “pleasing to the eye.” King David sees Bathsheeba bathing on the rooftop and his lust consumes him. Lust, gluttony, greed, these are the ways of the world. We come to believe that the things

we see and desire are ours to consume for selfish pleasure and in their consumption, we mistakenly convince ourselves that our deepest desires will be satisfied. We forget that those desires were meant to be satisfied by God alone.

The second manifestation is the pride of riches. I think a better translation is “the pride of life”.² In addition to the desire to selfishly consume that is within us, there is also a desire to put ourselves first, to appear important or worthy in the eyes of others, to boast about our wealth, our position, or our possessions. I remember when I was a kid I would often go skiing with my family on weekends. Each time I did I would keep the lift ticket on my jacket and then wear that jacket to school on Monday. In fact, I never cut these tickets off. By the end of the season I might have accumulated 10 lift tickets hanging from one zipper. Why? They served no purpose. They were no longer valid. They were essentially trash. But I kept them because I wanted my classmates to look at me with admiration because I was the one who got to go skiing over the weekend.

I use that somewhat charming example from childhood because I’m too ashamed to tell you other examples that are more recent and less charming. You get the point. These pursuits – the desire to selfishly consume and the desire to outshine others – they are not of God and so they characterize the person in this world who loves the world instead of loving God. And you can’t love both. That’s the first reason we must not love the world and its ways.

John then gives the second reason. **“The world and its desires are passing away, but those who do the will of God live forever.”** Basically, the kingdom of this world is not long for this world! So why love it? You wouldn’t invest in a company that was about to go bankrupt. Similarly, to dedicate yourself to pursuing the world’s ways and the world’s things is an empty pursuit. Over and over Jesus himself declared that the Kingdom of Heaven was invading and that one day, the day he returns, every trace of the kingdom of this world, all that stands opposed to God’s rule and reign, will be banished forever. It’s what was behind his question when he asked, **“For what will it profit you if you gain the whole world but forfeit your life?”**³ It will profit you nothing because even if you gain the whole world, everything you have consumed or attained or become will turn to dust in the end.

² NIV and others

³ Matthew 16:26 (NRSV). Pronouns changed to 2nd person.

Which leads us back to the original question. If we, as followers of Jesus in the church, are not to love the ways and the things of this world, what is our relationship to the world supposed to look like?

Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder once wrote that the church has three options when it comes to relating to the world. I agree with his assessment and believe that all congregations and all Christians each choose one of these options. The question, of course, is which option have *you* chosen? Which option has *our congregation* chosen? And in light of what John is teaching us here, do we want to rethink our choice?⁴

First, there is the *activist church*. This is the church that is *primarily* committed to building a better society. People in these churches see God at work in social movements which often originate outside the church, and then they join these movements alongside others who are not a part of the church. You can often identify this kind of church because the preaching there is almost wholly compatible with these secular social or political movements. For instance, there are many congregations in this city whose pastors preach only sermons that would be almost entirely affirmed by progressives in the Democratic Party. To be fair, there are just as many congregations whose pastors never preach anything that would be found to be offensive or objectionable to conservatives in the Republican Party. That's a problem. I hope you can see that's a problem.

Please do not hear me saying that followers of Jesus should not vote, or support social or political movements, protest, or even become politicians themselves. Of course we should, following Christ's conscience, participate in the political process at all levels. But we do so recognizing that it is ultimately not in political or social movements where the true power for lasting change exists. Furthermore, the gospel, when rightly proclaimed, rightly embodied, and then rightly understood, is always going to offend those outside the church on all sides of the political landscape. In order for us to march lockstep with those who don't confess along with us absolute allegiance to Jesus, we have to radically compromise or silence the gospel to accommodate the partnership. The world will *never* support a gospel perspective.

In Jesus' prayer for the church in John 17, he acknowledges that though his followers remain in the world they **"do not belong to the world."**⁵ Peter later

described Christians as **"aliens and exiles"** in this world.⁶ I spent a good portion of last summer in East Africa. In Kenya white people are called *mzungus*. Everywhere I went, especially in the more remote areas of the country, I heard that word associated with me. I am not a Kenyan. I will never be a native Kenyan. I don't look like a Kenyan, talk like a Kenyan, even think like a Kenyan. I met *mzungus* in Kenya who have been there for decades and you know what, they are still *mzungus*. In the same way, if our lives are largely indistinguishable from the lives around us in the world – same lifestyles, same spending habits, same way of doing politics, same understanding of sexuality and marriage, same treatment of enemies – we are right to ask ourselves whether we really are aliens and exiles or whether we have switched out citizenship and fallen in love with the world's ways and the world's things. The activist church is not Jesus' calling for us.

The second option, according to Yoder, is that we become what he calls a *conversionist church*. This is the perspective often adopted by congregations that says the world is basically going to hell in a handbasket and there is really nothing we can or should do about it. Instead, we should draw into ourselves, a bit like Noah huddling his family on the ark as the rest of the world was about to drown. Our focus should be on individual and personal piety, not societal change. Let's work on *our* Bible study, *our* marriages, *our* kids, *our* fellowship, *our* prayer life. If others want to join us, fine, but our focus will remain primarily upward and inward, rarely outward.

The problem with this option, of course, is that while Jesus clearly taught his followers not to be *of* the world, he also told them, and led them by example, to be *in* the world. In fact, Jesus sends his disciples out into the world, into all nations. We must care for this planet God made and loves. We must care for the poor, whether they share our faith or not. We must work for the betterment of the society around us. In Jeremiah 29:7 God tells the Israelites who have just been conquered and carried off into exile in Babylon that they must **"seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile."**⁷ This has always been God's heart, and his people are to share his heart. We must not become a conversionist church, cut off from the world around us.

Yoder's third option then is not a compromise, but a radical alternative to the first two. He believes that we are called to be a *confessing church*. Our main goal –

⁴ Cited by Stanley Hauerwas & William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens* (Abingdon Press, 1989), 44–45.

⁵ John 17:14 (NRSV)

⁶ 1 Peter 2:11 (NRSV)

⁷ NIV

listen carefully – is not the transformation of the society or the individual, but the worship of Christ, to *confess* that he alone is Lord and Savior, the one who alone can transform both individuals and societies. As we then center our lives together around Christ, he begins to work out his kingdom among us and through us. In other words, in our life together in the church the world around us begins to see a visible demonstration of the rule and reign of God, heaven on earth. Specifically, we love each other in the church in the way God loves us, loving across differences that often divide the rest of the world. We are progressively empowered, by God’s grace, to ignore the sinful cravings of the flesh. We don’t allow ourselves to selfishly consume what we see. We learn to lift up others instead of lifting up ourselves. As Jesus taught us to pray, the Kingdom of God comes into our midst, on earth as it is heaven.

We live in a distressingly tribal world. Do you agree? It always has been this way and it always will be this way, people dividing along lines of race, religion, nationality, gender, and politics. By contrast the church, when it is being the body of Christ it was meant to be, is the least tribal community on earth, truly global, truly trans-national, and truly trans-cultural. But if the church sequesters itself in isolation, how can the world ever see displayed the life that is possible through Christ in the Kingdom of God. We must be radically distinct, yes, but also radically distinct in plain view of a watching world *for the sake of the world!* In Jesus’ words, we are to be the “**salt of the earth**” and the “**light of the world.**”⁸ Karl Barth, one of the most prominent theologians of the 20th century, put it this way: “The church exists to set up in the world a new sign which is radically dissimilar to the world’s own manner and which contradicts it in a way which is full of promise.”⁹ I pray that vision captivates you as it captivates me.

There is an ancient legend about a monk who once found a precious stone, a priceless jewel, and then decided to keep it secretly tucked away in his bag. A short time later, however, he met a poor beggar on the road who was penniless and hungry. The man asked the monk if he would share some of his provisions. When the monk opened his bag the beggar looked in and saw the precious stone and, on an impulse, asked if he could have it. To his surprise, the monk, without hesitation, gave the beggar the stone.

The beggar departed at once, overjoyed at his good fortune. He had become the rich man he always dreamed he might become. Only a week later, however,

as the monk was traveling the same road, he met the same man again. Apparently the beggar had been searching all over the countryside, asking everybody he met where he might find the generous monk who often traveled through these parts. Immediately upon their reunion, the beggar handed the priceless jewel back to the monk and asked if he might have something else instead. The monk was astounded. What in the world did he possess of greater value than this stone? “Sir,” the beggar explained, “I have come to realize that it is not the stone that I truly desire but instead whatever it is in you that enabled you to give it to me so freely.”¹⁰

Is the world asking these questions of us? What enables you to live in peace in the midst of such turmoil? How can you face death without fear? Who are you that you can forgive somebody who has done such terrible things to you? What enables you to experience joy in the very midst of suffering? You live without worry, even when you don’t know if you’ll have enough for tomorrow – how is that possible? Who has taught you to share so generously? What is the reason for the hope that we see in you? Why doesn’t politics divide you like it divides the rest of us? Or race? Or age? Or anything, really? How in the world have you learned to hold so loosely to the things of this world which captivate everybody else?

I want to encourage you. I am so grateful for this congregation. We are a community of imperfect people who wrestle each day with desires and cravings which pull us towards the things of this world. At the same time, by the grace of God, Jesus is teaching us to live together in a different way. You love each other in ways that don’t make sense to the world. At least you’re trying to. I’m trying to. You are teaching me how to love. As we gather together week after week, here in worship, in homes as families and Life Groups, morning after morning alone on our knees, always around God’s Word and God’s tables, he is teaching us to think like he thinks, to live like he lives, and to love like he loves. God is doing a work here in this place, as he is in many other places, shaping his people into communities that stands as a radical alternative of hope in a hopeless world.

What exactly do we have to offer the world around us that the world does not already have or know? Are we distinct enough in our life together that others will even notice the difference? John reminds us, “**The world and its desires are passing away, but those who do the will of God live forever.**” May we love God. May we love God together. May we love the things that God

⁸ See Matthew 5:13-16

⁹ Hauerwas & Willimon, 83.

¹⁰ Adapted from <https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/aliens-and-strangers-guy-caley-sermon-on-evangelism-how-to-11851>

loves. May we love one another as God has loved us. And may the world take notice and, by God's grace, come to share this love as well.

Amen.

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The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read I John 1:15-17 again. What stands out to you from this passage?
2. Why does John caution us against loving the world or the things of this world? What exactly does that mean?
3. Why can't a person love God and love the world at the same time? Why is this impossible?
4. I Peter 2:11 says that we are to be "aliens and strangers" in this world. What do you think this means? In what ways does your faith in Christ leave you feeling like you just don't fit with the rest of the world?
5. Consider again this quote from theologian Karl Barth: "The church exists to set up in the world a new sign which is radically dissimilar to the world's own manner and which contradicts it in a way which is full of promise." Do you agree? What does this say about how the church is meant to relate to the world around us?
6. What is one thing Jesus is showing you or teaching you through this passage and message?
7. And ... What is one way you have determined to live differently as a result?

Suggested Scriptures for the Week, as we offer God 1% of our day (15 minutes or more) focused on His Word.

Monday:	II Samuel 5/Psalm 112
Tuesday:	II Samuel 6/Psalm 113
Wednesday:	II Samuel 7/Psalm 114
Thursday:	II Samuel 8/Psalm 115
Friday:	II Samuel 9/Psalm 116
Saturday:	II Samuel 10/Psalm 117
Sunday:	II Samuel 11/Psalm 118

Table to Table Question

A question for kids and adults to answer together

Once people start following Jesus, how do they start looking different from other people who aren't following Jesus?