

Flirting with The World 1 John 2:15-17

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Traditionally one of the big insults a Christian could make would be to call another believer “worldly.” If you didn’t like someone else in the church you might say, “He is such a worldly person.” In recent years, however, many people, even Christians, don’t seem to view “worldly” as anything negative. To say someone is “a man of the world” often refers to being sophisticated. You might even be thinking, “Of course I am of this world, I am not from Venus or Mars.” Yet, the Bible, as we will see in our text today, commands us to “not love the world” and to avoid “worldliness.” But, what does that really mean? The Amish believe using electricity or wearing bright colored clothing makes someone “worldly.” When I was growing up, the list of worldly things a Christian should avoid included, drinking, smoking, dancing, going to movies, playing cards and wearing lipstick. Paul Little, who was with Inter-Varsity, once asked, “My dog doesn’t do any of those things. Does that mean he is a Christian?” Now, my point is not to endorse any of those activities, but to simply note that many non-believers, worldly people, don’t do those things either, so a list like that doesn’t really describe “worldliness.”

Folks, our text today is 1 John 2:15-17. Through this passage, I think the Lord will help us realize that worldliness still presents a real danger to our souls, but involves much more than not doing certain things. Let’s pause and pray the Lord would use His word to help us see why we should strive to avoid worldliness, and how to make that happen.

John begins this paragraph with a very terse command. **2:15a** *Do not love the world or the things in the world.* That seems a bit extreme, but John sees this as a very serious issue. **2:15b** *If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.* Last week we examined the first part of this chapter and noted that someone who professes to be a Christian, but doesn’t seek to obey God nor have any love for other Christians, may not be a real believer in Jesus. John might put it a little stronger, like “cannot be,” but I am content to let God be the judge. Here John makes the same point. If you claim to be a Christian, but you love the world, there is something very wrong. Either your profession of faith is not

genuine and you are not really born of God, or you are one very messed up Christian. To “not have the love of the Father in you,” is a huge problem. Jesus once said, Matthew 6:24, “You cannot serve both God and money.” John makes a similar point, “You cannot love, be committed to, both God and the world. I remember watching a talk show where the guest was a bigamist. He had two wives and claimed to love them both equally. Most in the audience were skeptical about that. This was a few years ago. I am afraid people do know that spiritual bigamy, or spiritual polygamy, is impossible. If I truly love God, I cannot be in love with the world.

But, what does John mean when he says, “Don’t love the world?” That might seem a little confusing because John 3:16 tells us God “so loved the world.” If God loves the world, shouldn’t we imitate Him? There is nothing magic about knowing Greek here. The same words for “love” (agape) and “world” (cosmos) are used in both texts. But, like many words, the term “world” or “cosmos” has a variety of meanings. It can mean the universe God created. Karl Sagan used to talk a lot about “the cosmos,” though he was rather confused, because he thought the universe, rather than created, was self-generating. Not exactly scientific a theory. Cosmos or world can also, as we said, John 3:16, refer to the human race.

One interpretation of this passage is that John is simply saying that our love for the planet and for people should be less than our love for God. When Jesus said those who follow Him must hate their family, He did not mean “hate” in any literal way. Jesus simply wanted His disciples to realize that their love for Him needed to be even greater than the love they had for their own families. Some Bible teachers, including, Augustine, 1500 years ago, claim John was doing the same thing as Jesus, using hyperbole, intended exaggeration, to emphasize that our love for God must be greater than our love for the cosmos, the planet and people. Folks, that is certainly true, but I think John is saying something more than this.

Throughout this letter, John uses “world” as the opposite of “God.” Some suggest “world” equals “devil,” but I don’t think that is

the case. A definition I like is this: “The world for John, is the life of human society organized in opposition to God.” The word “world” is similar to the word “Germany.” Today, if I say Germany, you probably think of the people, a language, the Black Forest, or maybe bratwurst. Many folks, including some in this room, might say, “I love Germany.” Yet, in 1942, if someone would have said, “I love Germany,” our reaction would have been very different. Seventy-five years ago the people in Germany spoke the same language and ate brats, but it was a society organized under the evil power of the Third Reich. Friends, though the world was created by God, and was good, it is now an evil empire, just like Nazi Germany was. It is now a world in rebellion against God. Political, economic, educational, social and religious structures, all refuse to honor Jesus as Lord. It is for this reason we must not love the world.

In **2:16**, John clarifies what is involved in loving the world. *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 first characteristic, the desires of the flesh or the NIV puts it, “The cravings of sinful man” primarily involves our constant desire for pleasure. We want things, or at least I often do, that will make life more comfortable, more convenient and less dull. That leads, folks, to the epidemic of covetousness for which there seems to be no cure. Whether it is high-tech gadgets or recreational vehicles, we want the latest and the greatest. Yet, we never seem to be satisfied with what we have. We always want an upgrade, want something just a little bit better. This is the sin of avarice, which means greed or materialism. It always involves an idolatry, worshipping something other than God. It is usually not really the stuff which is worshipped, but our own comfort or pleasure. When a desire to have fun drives our entire life, and we think it is what life is all about, that is a worldly desire.

The second characteristic of the world to which John refers is the desires or lusts of the eyes. John is apparently thinking of sexual lust here. Modern American culture has really latched on to this one. On television, commercials often feature scantily and provocatively clad women and even men, whether the advertiser is trying to persuade us to buy an automobile or aftershave lotion. Why? Because these advertisers are convinced that sexual lust is one of the most

powerful motivators there is. In recent years cybersex has become pervasive in our culture, involving not only internet pornography, but virtual reality and robotic sexual experiences. The preoccupation with sex in our culture is a symptom of worldliness. It involves taking a wonderful gift from the Lord, sexuality, and twisting, perverting and abusing it in a way that reflects our rebellion against Him.

The third characteristic, John says, is the pride of life. The HCSB says, “The pride of one’s lifestyle.” Or the NIV says, “Boasting of what he has or does.” We see that pride in our lives when we exaggerate our accomplishments so that others think more highly of us than they should. We sometimes puff our resumes so they describe more what we would like our background to have been, rather than what it actually was. This attitude can be seen clearly in professional-athletes sometimes. A friend who was tired of hearing Muhammad Ali say, “I am the greatest,” asked him how he did at golf. Ali replied, “I am the best at that too, I just haven’t played it, yet.” Then there is my favorite story of the flight attendant who told Ali he needed to put on his seatbelt before the plane took off. He said, “Superman didn’t need no seatbelt.” She replied, “Superman did not need no airplane either.”

Though most folks do not embrace such blatant boasting, we often embrace worldly attitudes as we focus on building our self-esteem. When we tell children to draw a self-portrait under the theme, “Me, the most wonderful thing in the world,” we are encouraging “the pride of life.” Yes, all of us need to recognize that we, like every human being, have inherent value simply because we are created in God’s image. Those of us who are believers in Jesus should be extremely confident as we face each day. However, but it should not be a self-confidence, but a Christ-confidence. The worldly attitude is “I can do all things because I am special, I am a wonderful person.” The world tells people to try to convince themselves that is the case. The Bible’s meme is **Philippians 4:13** *I can all do things through Christ, who gives me strength.*

Friends, materialistic cravings, sexual lust, and self-promoting pride characterize our world and make our culture a very worldly one. This is what we are not to love. These things should not characterize our lives. But far too often they do. Twenty years ago, John White

wrote a marvelous book on this topic, called “Flirting with The World.” He borrowed that from my sermon title. No, it is the other way around. He said, “Flirting with the world” is something of which modern Christians are often guilty. The Bible says the church is the bride of Christ. Jesus Christ is our husband. Many of us will say, “Yes, I am a believer in Jesus.” However, when the world makes a pass at us, tries to seduce us, we don’t slam the door. We don’t just say, “No.” Instead, we flirt. We pretend it is possible to love both God and the world.

It happens when we give into materialistic cravings. We fall into the trap of greed. Rather than being generous with the money God has entrusted to us, we hang on to it, so we can use it to buy new gadgets and toys to make our lives more convenient and fun. We flirt with the world when we become amused by sexual immorality being portrayed on television, rather than being repulsed by it. Whenever we tell or laugh at jokes which are “off color” we are flirting with the world. We begin to flirt with the world whenever we do our best to make sure everyone knows about our accomplishments, but never find out about our failures. We are trying to convince others we are a wonderful person or a wonderful Christian. Now, maybe you are thinking, “Boy, Pastor Dan, I am glad I never do any of those things.” Well, that is great, if you don’t. But you might want to take a little closer look in the mirror. I doubt any of us in this room are immune from developing a worldly attitude. If you think you are not “worldly,” like so many other Christians are, you are especially prone to falling into that trap of pride. Remember, humility is the virtue that once you think you have it, you have already lost it.

Friends, it seems many Christians think there can be a peaceful co-existence between God and the world. We often fail to see the contradiction of trying to please both. John gives us a reminder we need to hear: The world system in rebellion against God is our enemy. No, our enemy is not the people of the world. The atheist college professor, the woman at work who is a new ager, the party animal at school who loves to mock Christians, the lesbian down the street, those people are not our enemies. Not really. The world system opposed to Christ is the true enemy, and those folks I just mentioned are really victims of that world system. They are people, human beings made in God’s image,

whose minds and hearts have been warped by the propaganda which the world system pumps out. We are not fighting against people, but battling for their hearts and minds. The enemy is the system which refuses to give God the honor He is due. A very important part of our battle strategy is to make sure the enemy has not infiltrated our own ranks and that we have not become Christians who love the world. We need to make sure we recognize materialistic cravings, sexual lust, and self-promoting pride as enemies of our souls. We need to understand how to avoid and how to free ourselves from these deadly traps.

Friends, maybe as you have been listening this morning, you have been wondering, “Pastor Dan, is this really that big of a deal? Yes, I know it is important to be a Christian and trust in Jesus, but I don’t want to be some ‘Jesus freak’. I want to just live my life and be a normal person. This talk of ‘worldliness’ reminds me of the days when Christians wouldn’t play cards or wear lipstick.” Well folks, God calls us to “be in the world, but not of the world.” And being in the world means we might play cards sometimes, and even wear lipstick—if you are female, anyway. Because the Lord calls us to be in the world we will, in many ways, look like a “normal” person. But because God says we must not be “of the world,” we cannot be like everyone else, we cannot be just a “normal” person on the inside. Listen again to verse *2:17* *And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.*

The choice between loving God and loving the world is a very important one. If I choose to love the things of the world, I will be disappointed, because some day it is all going to rot, rust or turn to ashes. Subaru used to boast that 90% of their cars are still on the road ten years after they are sold. Yet, 100 years from now that will be totally irrelevant. 99% of those cars will be nothing but rust, and only antique dealers will care a handful are still around.

This is something which Jim Elliot realized when he was still in college. I know many of you are familiar with his story, but I also know that some of you have never heard it. I don’t want you to miss out. At Wheaton College in the early 1950s, Jim Elliot was the BMOC, “Big Man On Campus.” Every girl at the school would have loved to have a date with him. The consensus among both students and faculty was that Jim would be a success. He was likely to become both

rich and famous. He was expected to have a brilliant career, probably in business, or politics, or maybe even in a church, as a great pastor. Fame and fortune were not Jim Elliot's concerns, however. He chose instead to be a missionary to the Auca Indians in Ecuador, and along with four of his coworkers was killed by those Indians just a few years later. He died at age twenty-nine. It maybe seems very tragic for someone so gifted to die so young. But Jim Elliot knew it was not. He loved God, not the world. At age twenty-two he had written these prophetic words in his journal, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose." It makes great sense to give up the things of the world, to gain the things of God. I can guarantee that today, Jim Elliot has absolutely no regrets that he chose to obey God rather than seek the things of the world.

Okay, so with this in mind, what do we need to do? Some of you may be thinking, "Pastor Dan, I don't really understand everything you have said, but I realize I love this world a lot more than I love God. Yes, I believe in God, but I have never thought of Him as someone I would love." Friend, if that is the case, I believe you have never really experienced His grace and love in your life. You may be a nice person, you may have gone to church many times, but you have never become a child of God through faith in Jesus Christ. The answer for you is not to simply determine that you are going to try harder to stop loving the world and start loving God. None of us are capable of doing that on our own. Rather, what you need to do is turn away from trusting in yourself, away from your sinful pride, and put your faith in Jesus Christ. When Jesus died on the cross almost two thousand years ago, He paid the penalty for all the times we have ignored God and have chased after the world. Only when we receive the forgiveness He freely offers are we ready to truly start loving God. Friend, if you are not trusting in Jesus Christ as your Savior, I urge you to turn to Him today. If you are not sure what

that means, or if you are really doing that, please talk to me later.

Friends, most of us here are already believers in Jesus, people who truly love God. Yet, I know some of us have been flirting with the world. If that is the case, it is time to stop. It is time to realize that compared to the Lord Jesus, the world has nothing to offer. A business man was asked if he was sexually tempted by a beautiful young woman who worked in his office. He answered, "No. One is not tempted to steal a Ford Fiesta parked on the street, when there is a Lincoln Continental at home in your garage." In other words, he valued his marriage far too much to risk it on another relationship.

Friends, I could repeat over and over the danger of flirting with the world. I could remind you again and again of God's command, "Do not love the world." But I think it is far more effective to encourage you to dwell on that new Lincoln Continental in the garage. Far too often Christians will exchange one form of worldliness for another. One week someone might be spending way too many hours watching television, and then the next week he is bragging about how he gave away his television and doesn't waste his time that way anymore. Friends, the way to combat worldliness, the way to avoid getting ensnared by those desires and pride, is to focus on Jesus. Don't spend all your time and energy thinking and talking about why you don't want to do certain things. Spend your time and energy on Jesus. Make it your aim to be growing in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. Focus your mind's attention and heart's affection on the priceless treasure we have in Jesus Christ. You will then realize there is no reason to be flirting with the world. Everything you will ever need, everything you could want, will ultimately be found through Him. May the Lord help us to realize how foolish it would be to forsake Him for anything of this world.