

THE BOOK OF I JOHN

2. Do Not Love The World

I John 2:1-17

PENTECOST 13

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*“She loves me, she loves me not.
She loves me, she loves me not.
She loves me, she loves me not.”*

We all know the words and the cadence of that familiar lover’s game, in which the petals of a flower fall to the ground until there remains but one.

That one remaining providential petal supposedly reveals whether or not the person for whom you have set your heart feels the same way about you.

Love.

The theme of love is addressed throughout the Bible, but nowhere more than the letter we are presently reading — **I John**.

In this little letter, the word **LOVE** is used fifty-one times, and all those uses are positive, except one.

The only place we are told **“love not”** appears in today’s text in verse 15.

Here and only here, we hear that great negative exhortation or command:

“Do not love the world or things in the world.”

What does this elderly, beloved Apostle mean when he cautions Christians living in the latter part of the First Century not to love this world and the things in it?

Doesn’t Genesis teach that God created the world and everything in it?

In an earlier work, didn’t John write in his Gospel that God so loved the world that He sent His Son to save it?

I John follows Jesus’ own teaching that His followers are to love other people in the world.

So, we the readers of this love letter from John wonder about the meaning of NOT loving the world.

In John’s writings, the word, **world**, has a wide range of meanings. On the one hand, the **world** was made by God and is loved by God

through Christ.

On the other hand, the *world* lies in the grasp of the Prince of Darkness, and contains powers and people who oppose or ignore God, seeking to live without God in their lives.

It soon becomes obvious that this second '*world*' is what John has in mind.

So, "*the world*" in this morning's passage does not mean the *world* in general.

Rather, it means the *world* that has abandoned its Creator and lives apart from God.

It is the godless *world* that is totally at variance with God and God's will.

It is the Babylon described in Revelation,

"the sensual, materialistic pagan society that Christianity had to overcome."

It is a group of people who are part of a system that is, as one commentator puts it, **"organized on wrong principles, and characterized by base desires, false values, and egotism."**

Simply put, the "*world*" means "*worldliness*," the kind of life that most people seem to live today.

The Second Chapter of John's First Letter is one of the most influential passages in the entire New Testament.

In his famous **CONFESSIONS**, St. Augustine used verses from it to organize his thoughts about the seductions and temptations of the world.

Having known them on a personal basis before his own conversion and, later, ordination, for Augustine, the lust of the eyes not only included the temptation of beauty that distracts us from the beauty of God, but also our strange fascination with horrible and bizarre things.

The lust of the eyes is at work when we slow down and 'rubberneck' at a car accident, as much as it is when our eyes linger on a centerfold or an on-line come-on.

Augustine, living in the Fourth Century, describes the pride of life as the desire to be the object of attention.

He writes:

"The temptation is to wish to be feared or loved by people for no reason other than the joy from such power, which is not joy at all.

It is a wretched life, and vanity is repulsive . . .

When we try to amass such approval, we are caught off our guard.

It becomes our pleasure to be loved and feared, not for your sake, but instead of you."

Eight centuries after Augustine, when answering the question, "Why do

we sin,” St. Thomas Aquinas cited I John 2:16.

His answer was that evil desire brings about sin.

Some desires are natural and legitimate, such as desires for food, drink, and even sex, but we should not idolize such things, making them driving forces for our lives.

Following Augustine, Aquinas concludes that:

“All passions that are a cause of sin can be reduced to these three — the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, and the boastful pride of life.”

These meditations have permanent relevance to us.

What Aquinas says about “pride of life” involves, for him and probably for John, the love of celebrity, of attention, of approval.

Aren’t cell phones and social media the ideal means of such gratification?

Someone motivated by the pride of life strives for fame and even notoriety. She wants to be on every magazine cover, and he wants everyone to know his name.

We live in a culture of celebrity that would have left both Augustine and Aquinas speechless.

A celebrity, as historian Daniel Boorstin put it, is someone famous for being famous — not for any contribution or achievement.

A celebrity’s life’s goal is to retain public attention, to satisfy pride of life.

Can you say Paris Hilton or Kim Kardashian?

We would never want that kind of life, would we?

Nooo!

We are too pious!

But haven’t we been tempted to think, *“It would be sooo cool to be famous.*

It would be awesome having people approach us for an autograph.”

Have you never stolen a glance at *People* magazine or “scandal sheets” while waiting in the check-out line at the grocery store, not to mock them, but because you’re curious about the lifestyles (sex lives) of the rich and famous?

Much of the advertising industry, and our mass media as well, promote celebrity in order to entice us to pattern our lives after these people.

This is an industry devoted to promoting **“pride of life.”**

If anything, John’s warning is more important in our day than it was in his, because the *‘world’* is so much with us, penetrating our lives in ways that it couldn’t before modern communications and technologies.

John’s warnings, of course, continue to be relevant to us.

However, the *world*, as John speaks of it, is different from the one we are living in today.

In John’s *world*, Christianity was questioned and persecuted, first, by Jews, who were upset at the loss of family members and friends to this new ‘sect’ or ‘heresy,’ and second, by the Roman authorities, who misunderstood it to be a form of godless atheism, because it did not

believe in the numerous Roman deities.

In today's secular age, Christianity has become one of many ways people can believe and find significance and meaning for their lives.

Recently, I have been returning to Charles Taylor's **A Secular Age**, the first philosophical book written in the Twenty-first Century that will be read in the Twenty-second.

In it, Taylor says that '*secular*' means not a world without religion, but an age in which ALL belief systems are contestable, and any claim of the divine is questionable.

Unlike the Apostle, John, Charles Taylor, himself a practicing Roman Catholic, does not regard the shift we have experienced in this new century in an exclusively negative light.

The turn that we Christians have regarded as one of self-indulgence and self-absorption Taylor calls the ethic of '*authenticity*,' which he traces back to the tumultuous 1960's.

In his take on authenticity, Taylor says that the post 1960 world assumes each person has his or her own right to define for HIMSELF or HERSELF what it means to be human.

The search for authenticity has, in itself, produced a glorification of the spirit of youthfulness, which has become the power or force that drives our world, and especially our Western culture today.

A person who saw this coming was the German Lutheran theologian and martyr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who sounded like a prophet when he wrote:

“Since the days of the youth movement, church youth work has often lacked the element of Christian sobriety that alone might enable it to recognize that the spirit of youth is not the Holy Spirit, and that the true future of the Church is not youth itself, but rather the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Bonhoeffer wasn't saying that the youth were the problem.

He spent much of his adult life and ministry pushing the Church to make the youth central to its life.

Remember, Bonhoeffer lived when German youth were being mesmerized and indoctrinated by Nazi propaganda and the promise of its Third Reich.

Actually, Bonhoeffer saw the faithful Church as the Church that carried children.

For him, the Church's practical form can be little more than loving, embracing, and supporting the young.

Bonhoeffer would never call for the Church to “grow up.”

Rather, he'd call us all to return to childhood.

And doesn't John call us “children,” as Jesus did?

We need to be honest and ask ourselves whether the desires that John names about the *world* are the desires our faith encourages. Paul says that we should think on, meditate on, desire things that are lovely, true, honorable, right, and excellent. Our desires should be desire for fellowship with God in Christ, hunger and thirst for righteousness, desire to grow in wisdom and maturity, a posture of grace and mercy. Before you indulge in your next pleasure, purchase your next ticket, video, or CD, before you choose how you're going to spend the next weekend, ask whether the choice encourages these desires, or the desires that come from the *world*.

When we are honest, we recognize that in our worldly ways, we don't want to be uncool. We don't want to stand out and look odd, like an Amish farmer or a Hasidic Jew. We want to do whatever feels good, whatever makes us happy, whatever keeps us within the boundaries of the mainstream of the world. Yet, that's precisely the attitude that John tells us to avoid. We have often flirted with the *world*, conforming to its expectations, instead of living with steady devotion to God. Flirtation might be the right word for it. In his singular epistle, James says:

“You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility to God? Therefore, whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes oneself an enemy of God” (4:4).

Beloved people of God, against all our rationalizations, justifications and flirtations, John's warning is stark:

“Do not love the world.”

He adds that those who do love the *world* don't have the love of the Father. It does not mean that they are not loved by God, but they do not love like God loves.

John poses an either/or:

Your love can be oriented in one of two directions — toward God or toward the *world*.

There is, for John, no third way.

We must determine what John means by “*world*.”

However, we must also resist the temptation to rationalize John's warning out of existence.

In today's new, secular age, we must resist the temptation to turn “*do not love the world*” into “**do it your way.**”

AMEN

