



Lesson 4 – The World and False Teachers

1 John 2:15-29

John has worked through the greatest enemy of our joy and fellowship – sin. Fighting against this means confessing our sin and coming to God for cleansing, and then seeking to walk in the light by following God’s commandments (especially the command to love each other). While the greatest threats to our spiritual health always come from within, there are enemies without that try to sabotage us and lead us into sin. After his opening salvo on sin and a note of encouragement to the church, John turns his attention to two of these enemies that must be faced: the world and false teachers.

In what ways could regular attenders of Colonial face the challenge of the world?

In what ways could regular attenders of Colonial face the dangers of false teaching?

I. Warnings against the Loving the World (1 John 2:15-17)

Those who have grown up in conservative Christian circles have no doubt heard the warnings against loving the world. Unfortunately, these types of warnings are all too often ignored from hearing them over and over. John’s stark language here ought to wake us up, however, to realize that loving the world is no small matter. John helps us by laying out what he means by “loving the world and the things in the world” and then goes on to show us the dangerous situation we are in if that describes us.

A. Descriptions of loving the world

What is the world? What does it look like to love the world? Some define loving the world very narrowly – only the worst possible sins count as being worldly, and in practice many are hesitant to even count these as worldliness. Others define worldliness very broadly – practically anything that doesn’t happen within the confines of the church or the home is worldly.

How can we know what it looks like to be worldly?

John helps us out a little by giving three descriptions of what it looks like to love the things in the world. We will use a commonly used outline of this passage to help us think of the major ways in which the world can steal the love of a Christian.

1. Loving pleasure

John's first warning is against what he calls "the lust of the flesh." This refers generically to things that feel good. Although pleasure itself isn't wrong, living for pleasure and loving pleasure is a pathway that leads to disaster.

What are some examples of pleasure that believers can live for, even if the pleasure isn't explicitly sinful itself (i.e. immorality, drug abuse, etc.)?

2. Loving possessions

John goes on and warns secondly against "the lust of the eyes." This refers to the desire for things, or what we might call materialism. To see someone wholly given to earning more money and having more stuff is fairly common in the world. It's something many people give themselves to, but for the believer whose heart belongs to the Lord it is entirely inappropriate.

What are some of the more subtle ways that the love of possessions can poison

3. Loving prestige

The final category is the "pride of life", a phrase that refers to the status one has earned in life. Once again, it is not unusual to find people in the world who live for the applause of others, who want more than anything to be well thought of. Such a desire to fit in, be accepted, and even more to be celebrated is a natural pull for our sinful hearts. But when we live for the applause of man, we find ourselves acting like the world and therefore guilty of worldliness.

What are some ways you might be tempted to live for the approval of man rather than the approval of God?

This means that loving the world is much more about our hearts than our specific actions, although our actions do matter. We are like the world when we find ourselves living for and loving the things that the world loves and lives for.

B. Dangers of loving the world

1. Love for the world and love for God are incompatible.

John warns that if the love of the world is in us, then the love of the Father is not. You will love God, or you will love the world, but you cannot and will not love both.

Yet this transition can happen slowly and gradually if we are not careful. Little by little our hearts get pulled away from God and little by little we come to find ourselves loving the good gifts that God has given us instead of loving the good God who gave them. And John here reminds us that our hearts are not big enough for both. We are going one direction or the other. In the end, however, only one will be left. We will love God or we will love the world.

If someone examines themselves and sees that in several ways they are loving the world more than God, what should they do about that problem?

2. The world is temporal but those who love God are eternal.

The world isn't worth our time and attention, because the world will one day be dissolved and made new (2 Peter 3:11-12). If the things around us won't last but we will and our relationship with Christ and fellow Christians will, why would we live for the world? Yet although this is a basic truth many Christians know, it's a hard truth to truly live by.

How can we as believers continually remind ourselves about the temporary nature of life here on earth?

II. Warnings against Listening to False Teacher (1 John 2:18-29)

What does it mean to be a false teacher? How broad and how narrow do we want to define that category? As with worldliness, some have their sensitivity to false teachers set on ultra-high, so that anyone who disagrees with them on virtually anything is a false teacher. Others smile naively and talk about being understanding and appreciating differences when it comes to heresies that will send people to hell. Not everyone we disagree with is a heretic, but we do need to be ready to see the heretics.

A. John introduces the problem of false teachers (2:18-21)

John starts off this next section with a somewhat surprising statement – “it is the last hour.” We might be tempted to take that to mean “the end is about to happen soon.” But John wrote these words almost 2,000 years ago, so was he wrong? Or what exactly did he mean by the phrase?

What do you think John meant by using this phrase?

The “last hour” refers to the entire time period from Christ's death and ascension until his second coming. It's a long hour, but remember that time works differently for God, and that God is patiently waiting for people to repent before sending Christ to return (2 Peter 3:3-8). But during this time, we face many antichrists, or false teachers.

Many believers are familiar at least somewhat with the teaching of the antichrist, the main figure in Revelation who fights against God and sets up an earthly kingdom for a short time. But John also teachings about antichrists, plural. All those whose teachings contradict the teaching of Jesus, even if they claim to follow him, are ultimately against Christ and therefore antichrists.¹

John states that these antichrists came from within the church itself. Yet by coming out of the church they demonstrate that they had never truly been a part of it. They may have sat next to believers and sung hymns and participated in Bible studies, but they weren't truly born again.

How should we respond when we see someone leave the church and turn their back on everything there?

Is there hope for such a person? Why or why not?

B. John describes the teaching of false teachers (2:22-23).

John gives the specific issue that seems to be at stake here. In your own words, what does it seem that the false teachers are teaching?

“Christ” is another word for Messiah. These false teachers denied that Jesus was the Messiah. Later on in his letter, John will warn against those who do not teach that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh (1 John 4:2-3). It's likely that this comes from a set of teachings that would later develop into what we know as “Gnosticism.”² Although we must speculate somewhat, it seems these teachings generally taught that matter was evil while spirit was good, therefore the “Christ of God” perhaps came on the human Jesus, but they argued that the two should not be identified. Jesus was just a human, not God himself since Jesus was made of matter, and matter was evil.

What would be some modern groups that might believe and teach similarly concerning Jesus' status as a great and powerful human, but not as divine?

So what do we do with these teachings? How far can we apply these teachings? “Heresy” is a high charge. “False teacher” is a strong accusation. As believers we want to be very

¹ The term “anti” in antichrist comes from the Greek preposition *anti*. *Anti* can mean either “in the place of” or “against.” It's possible that both senses are mean in this word. The antichrist will one day take the place of Christ and stand against him. The antichrists, though, probably are not seen as taking Christ's place so much as being opposed to his true teaching.

² Gnosticism did not really exist as a full-blown system until the second century (100-200 A.D.). However, as with most intellectual movements, there were popular ideas that were already trending in that direction. Sometimes these teaching are referred to as proto-Gnosticism (early Gnosticism).

Careful who throw those words at. Genuine born-again believers can disagree on many different issues. In some areas we might be willing to simply disagree (is man made up of 2 parts – body and soul – or 3 parts – body, soul, and spirit). In some areas, we might recognize a genuine believer but be greatly bothered by what we consider dangerous teachings – baptizing babies. But there are some instances when we must clearly draw a line and say “We are not with them. They are false teachers.”

How can we be careful to differentiate between those we disagree with, those who teach dangerous doctrines, and those who teach outright heresy?

Historically, false teaching is a label that has been reserved for “damnable heresies” (i.e. heresies that result in damnation) and deviations from what has been considered Christian orthodoxy. For example, the teaching that Jesus is not God (as in this case) or a heretical view of the trinity such as modalism.³ Salvation by grace and works through a system of merit has also been rightly condemned as heretical. Those who teach that God’s grace allows for sinful behavior might also be guilty of this error (cf 2 Peter 2:10-22 Jude 4).

C. John gives hope against false teachers (2:24-27).

After warning about the danger of false teachers in their midst and giving a description of their wrong teachings, John points his congregation to the resources that will help them avoid these dangerous teachings.

1. Believers should stick to the truth of God’s Word (2:24-25).

When John talks about these Christians letting what they have heard from the beginning abide in them, he is referring back to the message he initially brought to them (cf 1:1-4). We shouldn’t apply these verses by saying “You were taught this first, therefore it is right.” Otherwise, a Muslim or a Mormon might argue that they are simply believing what they were taught from the beginning. Instead, we should tell people that they must continue to believe what *John* initially taught *his churches* and ask whether what people are believing lines up with *that* standard.

John’s point is to emphasize that these churches should trust the apostolic message that he has brought, rather than the shiny, attractive new teachings of these false teachers. We could expand this principle somewhat and say “Only believe about Christianity what the apostolic leaders of the early church taught.”

³ Modalism is the teaching that the one God simply shows up in different forms, sometimes appearing as Jesus, sometimes as Father, sometimes as Holy Spirit, but that all three characters are essentially the same. Orthodox teaching instead holds that the Father is a different person from the Son, and that both are distinct persons from the Spirit. The trinity is then one being in three persons.

How can we do this when we don't have any apostles living today?

While we may not have apostles living today, we do have a record of their teaching, writing, deeds, and lives. The New Testament gives us everything God wanted us to know from the life of Jesus and everything we need to know from the teaching of the apostles. Gospels, Acts, and the letters of the New Testament all outline for us what we should believe and what we shouldn't believe.

What are some ways today that people try to get around the authority of Scripture and put forward their own authority, even if it contradicts the written testimony of the apostles?

2. Believers should follow the leading of the Holy Spirit (2:26-27).

Finally, John tells his listeners to follow the anointing they have. This anointing which is dwelling in them is most certainly a reference to the Holy Spirit, who has already shown up once in this passage (cf 2:20, KJV "unction"). This does not merely mean that we follow whatever we feel like believing and then attribute it to the Holy Spirit. Rather, we should study the Word, through which the Spirit works, and submit ourselves to his leading rather than our own thoughts and ideas. The Holy Spirit does bring understanding, but it does so by teaching us what God's Word says and what it means for us.

Why do you think it is so important that we limit the Spirit's work of teaching to the words of Scripture?

What happens if we admit that the Spirit might teach us things outside of God's Word?

A little healthy Christian paranoia can be a good thing. We are in a battle, and we face enemies. From within, we find ourselves weighted down with sin. Yet even as we battle to live holy and righteous lives, we find ourselves also bombarded from the pull of the world and the deception of false teachers. John is looking at these second-generation Christians and wants them to beware these dangers. He gives them warnings we should all hear: the warning not to love the world and the warning not to listen to false teachers.