

Recognising the World

1 John 2:15-17 Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world -- the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life -- is not of the Father but is of the world. And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever.

If you have looked up into the sky over Johannesburg at night, on a clear night, you can see a few stars. Once you travel out to less populated areas, the sky seems bursting with stars at night. Why do we see so few stars in the city? While some think it is smoke and air pollution, it is actually what could be called light pollution. The presence of so much light emanating from a city, actually brightens the sky enough to make it hard to see the stars. Just like a torch seems dim during the day, so the stars seem less bright, and in many cases, completely invisible, when the city's lights crowd them out. City-glow makes it very hard to see the stars.

Something similar happens in our hearts, according to this passage. There is something that is to loving God, what city glow is to seeing starlight. There is something which crowds out, and dims the thoughts of God, the love of God with its own brightness. And the brighter it seems to us, the dimmer God seems to us. It is these things which John calls *the world*. The world and the things in the world, as described here, will crowd out and blind a person to knowing and believing in God, as surely as the glow of a big city blots out most stars.

There is a very clear commandment not to love the world, with dire consequences if such a commandment is not true in us: we don't know the Father. However, before we are able to respond positively to this command, we have to be able to identify the world. We must be able to recognise what it is we're not supposed to love. What does John mean by *the world* and *the things in the world*?

It's important that we do so, because the sad tendency amongst Christians has been to identify the world with one or two things, avoid those things, and then miss the huge worldliness remaining in the heart. For example, in some circles, the world was considered to be smoking, drinking and going to the movies. So Christians in those circles avoided those things, contented themselves that they were not worldly, and did not notice the vicious materialism in their hearts. Some considered worldliness to be certain questionable amusements, and having shunned those, they did not realise how worldliness was still very much in their lives in terms of being comfort-oriented, living playfully from one sensual experience to another. Some considered worldliness to be synonymous with certain places, and did not see how worldly they were in their views on family, marriage, children, money, work, retirement. So it is very important that we first understand what John is talking about, before we deal with our responsibility. We must first learn to recognise the world, before we can respond to the world.

There are three ways that the Bible uses the word *world*. The first way is when the Bible is speaking about the created order.

Acts 17:24 "God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands.

The world is God's creation. In this sense, the world is not something to be shunned, but something to be enjoyed.

1 Timothy 4:4 For every creature of God is good, and nothing is to be refused if it is received with thanksgiving;

James 1:17 Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning.

Ecclesiastes teaches us to eat and drink and rejoice in the good of our labour. This is not the sense in which John uses the term in 1 John 2:15-17.

The second way the word *world* is used is to refer to humanity in general. Well-known John 3:16 says:

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.

This is not the sense that John uses it in 1 John 2:15-17. After all, how could God love something, and then tell us not to love it? No, God loves people, and tells us to love them too.

The third way that *world* is used suggests something in opposition to God and to His people. It is this sense of world that John tells believers not to love. Consider some verses in 1 John.

1 John 3:1 Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God! Therefore the world does not know us, because it did not know Him.

1 John 3:13 Do not marvel, my brethren, if the world hates you.

1 John 4:5 They are of the world. Therefore they speak as of the world, and the world hears them.

1 John 5:4 For whatever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world -- our faith. Who is he who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?

1 John 5:19 We know that we are of God, and the whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one.

Here the Bible means something very different to the creation or to mankind. You notice the opposites: the world does not know us. The world hates you. He who is of God overcomes the world. They are of the world.

Whatever this third way of speaking about the world means, it clearly refers to something which is in opposition to God. John tells us that much in verse 15 – whoever loves the world does not have the love of the Father in him. In verse 16, he tells us that the things in the world – the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, the pride of life, do not find their origin in the Father, but in the world itself.

So if the world is not the planet, if the world is not the people, what is this 'world' which so opposes and fights against God?

I. The Description of the World

The world is the system of thinking and acting and living which is in rebellion to God. It is not so much a place, or a person, as an overall way of thinking. Worldliness is a kind of idea of reality, a picture of what really is, with its own ambitions, goals, priorities, desires, aims, wishes. It is a way of thinking and believing and acting, a mindset which is fundamentally opposed to God.

Sometimes we talk about systems in this way. We say, the world of finance, or the world of sport, and we simply mean a whole system of things. So when the Bible speaks about the world in this

way, it means the whole way of life which supports and transmits values and beliefs which are evil.

Worldliness is found in the heart of man. Man, apart from God, has a way of acting and thinking which wants God at the very periphery of his life. He wants God to be there in times of crisis, and in times of psychological need, but for the rest of the time, God should be a weightless concern.

Ephesians 2:2 in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience,

For the most part, man wants to pursue a life where his own physical comforts are met; his own status in the eyes of others is fairly respectable, and his own ego is satisfied with its own achievements. In other words, a life wholly devoted to the here and now; a life entirely given to maximising your plus-minus seventy year sojourn on this planet. Worldliness is concerned only with a life in this world. Where do you go to find this worldliness? Look no further than your own heart.

Verse 16 gives us the answer. The lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, the pride of life. What are lusts? They are desires. Where do you experience desires? In your heart. Where do we experience pride? In the heart. In other words, worldliness is not a place, worldliness is a belief system. Worldliness is found in the heart. In fact, John here describes the three core values of worldliness: the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life.

The lust of the flesh. *Lust* refers to strong desires. The flesh refers not so much to the body, but to the sinful nature which takes bodily needs and pleasures and abuses them. The lust of the flesh is what the sinful heart does with many of God's gifts. Food and drink are gifts of God, but the flesh turns them into idols. The flesh turns these into things we crave and fantasise about and covet and long for. The flesh turns eating and drinking into gluttony and drunkenness.

Sex within marriage is a gift of God, but the flesh perverts it in numerous ways. I don't have to elaborate. Look at the ads. Look at the magazine covers. Look at the billboards. Watch the TV programs. What is meant to be enjoyed within marriage is now something to be enjoyed any way by anyone, anyhow, any time. This bodily pleasure is exalted beyond all bounds of reason, and becomes a fiery pursuit of selfish pleasure, ever increasing pursuit, with ever decreasing returns. So here the lust of the flesh perverts and twists what God intended for good.

Rest and relaxation are gifts of God, but the flesh perverts those things into lazy self-indulgence. Resting, relaxing, going on holiday become the true aim of our lives, while work is some kind of necessary evil, so as to have enough money to do those things. And again, you can see the way the world idolises luxury holidays, getaways, holiday homes, early retirement. Why? Because rest and ease are loved for their own sake, and become idols, twisted perversions of what God intended.

This attitude is in the world, because it is in the heart of man. When men get together and form a society, they create things which magnify this value of the lust of the flesh. Industries thrive on it. Smoking, drinking is just the tip of the iceberg. The beating heart of the lust of the flesh is the idea that indulging your senses is the best way to spend your life. "You only live once, right?" So pleasure your body, pamper your body, titillate your body to extremes – since that's all you really are – an animal with five senses, right?

The lust of the eyes becomes a little more subtle. The eyes obviously refer to what can be seen, and so this becomes a strong craving to appear a certain way, to be seen a certain way. This is the world's strong craving for the appearance of looking rich, or beautiful or wealthy, or powerful, or

popular. It's that attitude that judges by appearances, that is mesmerised by the outward show. It loves the pomp and splendour of shiny new cars, name-brand expensive clothes and accessories. It loves manicured, pedicured, steroid-buffed up, sun-bed browned, plastic-'surgerised' appearances. It loves the splendour of the big party, the large crowd, the first-class aeroplane ticket, the double-storey house in the poshest area. While this is still physical, it is now something of a mind game. It's moved from the body to the soul. I want people to be impressed, to admire, respect, and even envy me.

Do you find this attitude fleshed out around us? Witness the TV programs that transform the plain looking person into the fabulous looking model. Look at the ads which insinuate that you will be embarrassed if all you have is your current wardrobe, or cell phone, or car. See the effect of such programs which show us the luxurious lives of the rich and famous.

Then we come to the most subtle of all – the pride of life.

If the lust of the flesh is worldliness of the body, and lust of the eyes is worldliness of the soul, then the pride of life is worldliness of the spirit. Here is the deepest, and most sinful heart of worldliness. It is the desire to be glorified and worshipped by others. It is the desire to be known, respected, cheered, loved, envied and honoured. It comes in two ways. First in the way that we boast in ourselves – we boast in our heritage, our race, our intelligence, our achievements, our personality, our toughness, our smartness. We boast in our success, in our material possession, in our academic pedigree, in our wide travels. We boast in the circles in which we move, and the people that we know. Witness the powerful effect such words as VIP, exclusive, first-class, by invitation only, red-carpet treatment have on us.

The second way is how we show contempt for others, if we suspect they might be outshining us, outdoing us, getting the attention, gaining the recognition, getting the fame, that the spotlight might be moving off me and onto them, and so I must give reasons why such a person does not deserve the attention he or she is getting.

You see Satan using these three rights in the beginning with Eve:

Genesis 3:6 So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desirable to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate. She also gave to her husband with her, and he ate.

Notice – 'good for food' – there's the temptation to the body, pleasant to the eyes – there's the temptation to the mind, the appearances, and a tree desirable to make one wise – there's the temptation to the spirit, to be glorified.

Again, when he tempted Jesus Christ, he used the same three tactics:

Luke 4:1-14 Then Jesus, being filled with the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, being tempted for forty days by the devil. And in those days He ate nothing, and afterward, when they had ended, He was hungry. And the devil said to Him, "If You are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread." But Jesus answered him, saying, "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word of God.' " Then the devil, taking Him up on a high mountain, showed Him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time. And the devil said to Him, "All this authority I will give You, and their glory; for this has been delivered to me, and I give it to whomever I wish. "Therefore, if You will worship before me, all will be Yours." And Jesus answered and said to him, "Get behind Me, Satan! For it is written, 'You shall worship the LORD your God, and Him only you shall serve.' " Then he brought Him to Jerusalem, set Him on the pinnacle of the temple, and said to Him, "If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down from here. "For it is written: 'He shall give His angels charge over you, To keep you,' "and, 'In their

hands they shall bear you up, Lest you dash your foot against a stone.' " And Jesus answered and said to him, "It has been said, 'You shall not tempt the LORD your God.' " Now when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from Him until an opportune time. ¶ Then Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit to Galilee, and news of Him went out through all the surrounding region.

The bread – temptation to enjoy food more than seeking God – lust of the flesh.

The kingdoms of this world – temptation to enjoy splendour and the appearance of power, but without the cross – lust of the eyes.

Throw yourself off the temple – temptation to gather attention to Himself, apart from the Father's will – pride of life.

We know this too well, don't we? That's because it is still in our hearts. See, the reason the external expressions of worldliness, like certain forms of entertainment and amusement, certain places, certain activities are so tempting to us is because worldliness is not just out there, it's in here! The worldliness out there is simply the combined expression of the hearts of millions of humans who reject God. It's to be expected that it will in some way resonate with you, as every believer still has something remaining of the old life.

But that's not to say that there aren't things which teach and reinforce worldliness. There certainly are. We used to live in towns, where our culture was transmitted from family down to family, and we got news of the world from travellers. That changed with the invention of the newspaper, and the development of mass culture. Now you had various media developing – first newspaper, then radio, then film, then TV, and then Internet, which spread information widely. So today, our town crier is pretty much the media. And since the media depends on advertising revenue, and since advertisers want large numbers of people to listen or read or watch, the content is driven down to the lowest, basest level – whatever is most popular.

But the media isn't the only place where worldliness finds an expression. You see it in our shops and malls, you see it in our businesses, our gyms, our places of recreation. And of course, you experience it any time you have some kind of extended conversation with an unbeliever, and they speak of their understanding of reality, which is usually some kind of defence of the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life.

John tells us that once we have identified this world system, we ought not to love it. He then gives us two reasons why we ought not to love it:

II. The Origin of the World

Notice John says, all of these things, are not of the Father, but are of the world. That is, such attitudes, such beliefs and ways do not find their origin in God. God did not design or create this kind of thing. And if it is not from God, then where does it come from?

Well, who was it that tempted Eve with the lust of the flesh, lust of the eyes and pride of life?

Three times, Jesus spoke about the 'ruler of this world'.

John 12:31 "Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be cast out.

John 14:30 "I will no longer talk much with you, for the ruler of this world is coming, and he has nothing in Me.

John 16:11 "of judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged.

2 Corinthians 4:4 whose minds the god of this age has blinded, who do not believe, lest the light of the

gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them.

John Bunyan wrote about worldliness in *Pilgrim's Progress*. He pictured it as Vanity Fair, a town where a fair is kept all year long, doing nothing but things that are empty, or vain, hence the name, "Vanity Fair". And Bunyan describes the origin of Vanity Fair by saying over five thousand years ago, Satan realised the pilgrims, that is, believers, had to walk this way to get to the Celestial City, so he set up Vanity Fair in the middle of that path, to try to entice pilgrims to stop travelling.

Satan is the mastermind behind this system. Satan masterminds a system which seems to make the things of God seem strange, and a life devoted to this world and this life seem normal. Because the system reflects something of our natural, fallen view of life, it seems to confirm it. The world system is simply a way of putting a face on those desires, and making them seem normal, and making the claims of God and the Bible seem weird, wrong and out of place.

Now, all he has to do is to stir up desires that are already present in the human heart, and deceive you into thinking that they are right and good and legitimate, and without negative consequences. He simply has to tell you that your conscience is wrong, and God is holding out on you, and that it is fair-minded and practical, and good and beneficial for you to follow those three pillars of worldliness. And since there is an ally in the human heart, if you chose to love those things, then Satan has made a worldling of you. He is naturalising you to his system.

Since Satan is, by nature, the opposer of all God loves, to love what Satan loves is to hate what God loves. To love what God loves, is to hate what he hates. And God hates this false world system. because in the final analysis, it will turn out to be a sugar-coated web, which pacifies people from all different walks of life, all different minds and races and religions, to neglect their souls, live for their bodies, their appearance and their own glorification, They then find out upon their death that they owe their Creator a massive debt of worship, which they can now never pay back.

Satan doesn't use one tactic for all people. For some he mixes those three ingredients and it comes out as pure hedonism. For others, he mixes it up and it comes out in materialism. For others, he uses a kind of moralism. For others it is Darwinism or naturalism. For others, a bit of Freudianism. For others, there is religious pluralism. For some, it is religious fanaticism or forms of fundamentalism. For many it is the meaninglessness of post-modernism. Lately, there is a kind of militant atheism. Different strokes for different folks, you might hear Satan and his cohorts humming, as they work to blend the three ingredients of worldliness in some new flavour, fitting for the particular time, culture and people they are dealing with.

But the way to recognise worldliness is to see where the belief ends up: with man squarely at the centre, with his own comforts and needs and pride catered for, with God at the periphery or non-existent, and the focus being life lived for the here and now, apart from a reconciled relationship with God, through His Son.

III. The Duration of the World

And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever.

Not only is worldliness loving what God hates, it is pinning your life on what is passing away. The world is passing away, John says. In both the Old and New Testaments, the Bible predicts the coming of a New Heaven and a New Earth. This world system will one day be a distant memory.

This system of smoke and mirrors that makes God seem invisible, irrelevant and weightless will

one day be swept away, and the grand and terrible reality of God Himself will once again be centre stage. And on that day, it will be a painful thing to have attached your hopes and your whole life to something now relegated to the wreckage of history. To live for this world system, is to truly bet on the wrong horse. It is to put all you have and are on the Titanic and hope for a good end. It is to do exactly what Jesus warned about at the close of the Sermon on the Mount.

Matthew 7:24-27 " Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock: "and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it did not fall, for it was founded on the rock. "But everyone who hears these sayings of Mine, and does not do them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand: "and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it fell. And great was its fall."

I think the world is painfully reminded of this with the death of one of the pop stars. These icons of worldliness, symbols of beauty and power, and fame and glory and prestige, living lives where there is seemingly no limit to the lust of the flesh, lust of the eyes and pride of life, these icons die. And when they do, for a few moments, the world notices that you can't take it with you, that all that fame and fortune has ended and meant very little. And yet, rising from a few hypocritical platitudes spoken at the funeral, the world returns to pursue its agenda with gusto, seeking another icon to represent the pursuit of worldliness.

Its origin is earthy, and its duration is temporary. Don't love what God hates, and don't love what God is going to wipe off the scene. The challenge is to recognise that worldliness is firstly, in your own heart. Secondly, realise how external places and things and belief systems resonate with the worldliness within, how they reinforce and seem to confirm the remaining worldliness within. Stop thinking of worldliness as a few taboos, and start seeing how its beliefs are preached in many, many things. Start seeing how innocent and good things, can be abused and turned into evil things by the worldliness in our own hearts.

Our greatest defence against the world is good offence. That is, we must love something or someone else more than we love the world. That's what we'll examine next week.