

Be Sure: Confident Living from 1 John

That You Don't Love The Wrong Things

1 John 2:15-17

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¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever (1 John 2:15–17).

This week, as I was studying for this sermon, I ran across a great summary statement for the book of 1 John and the issue of spiritual confidence:

***Victory is assured, resistance required*¹**

From a spiritual standpoint, do you know what that means? It combines two key concepts that are essential to assurance or spiritual confidence:

- **Belief:** We must embrace the finished work of Christ on our behalf. We must believe that Jesus conquered sin and death, and we expectantly look to the future when He returns to complete that work. We must believe that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.
- **Battle:** We must also embrace a posture that fights against the remaining presence of sin in our lives and around us. We must understand that full forgiveness sets us free, not to do our own thing, but to honor God in this world. We must earnestly pursue more and more righteousness in our lives.

If you are a Christian, I want you to think about your previous week's experience. Where did you need the most help? Did you struggle more with belief or with the battle? Did you rehearse the truths of the finished work of Christ and believe them? Or did you struggle with unbelief, wrong thinking, and trying to do things in your own strength? How did the battle go last week? Did you fight against temptation? Did you fight against wrong thinking, wrong affections, and wrong actions?

If you failed last week, turn to Christ for cleansing and forgiveness. Thank Him that you even realized your failing. If you are tired of the battle, ask God to help you. Cry out to Him and allow His grace to fill you up today.

We started this series in 1 John on Easter Sunday. So far, we've looked at:

- Knowing you have eternal life

¹ As cited in Daniel L. Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, vol. 38, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001), 111.

- Understanding what it means to spiritually belong
- Embracing the beauty of forgiveness through confession
- Considering if our belief really works

We are learning that assurance is not necessarily static. It can ebb and flow. What we believe and how we battle are both connected to spiritual confidence. Assurance that we are real begins to diminish when either our belief or our commitment to doing battle begins to falter.

Last week we were invited to look inward to see if our belief really works. This week our attention is directed toward the environment in which we live or our posture as we live in it. Just as last week's text asked us to look at our belief and its connection to how we live, this text asks us to consider our relationship with the world in which we live. Victory assured; resistance required.

We're going to look at this text by seeing a command, four reasons to heed its instruction, and then see some specific applications.

Command: Don't Love the World

Our text for today is only three verses, but it is packed with a lot of truth. The first part of verse 15 is a simple and clear command: *"Do not love the world or the things in the world..."*

The structure of the language would indicate that this is something which must be continually practiced. In other words, John is not simply talking about a one-time decision. Rather, this is to be the lifestyle posture of the believer. Previously John talked about wonderful spiritual truths regarding what it means to belong to the community. He elevated the importance of confession and addressed the way love is to characterize a believer's life.

Now his attention is turned to the culture in which the believer lives. The word that he uses for the culture is the word "world." This is the first time John has used this word in 1 John, and he uses it here twice. It helps understand how not to "love the world." What does it mean?

Awareness

We need to start by understanding the way the word "world" is used, because John wants believers to know where we are living. Spiritual confidence comes from understanding the spiritual landscape and the potentially dangerous territory we live in.

Like most words, "world" can mean different things. The Greek word essentially means the material world, the universe God created, and the realm in which humanity lives. The word points toward the entire system that characterizes our human existence. In John's writings, "world" is particularly focused on the brokenness of humanity and our collective hostility toward God.² John uses "world" to describe what is opposed to God and His commands.

The "world" is the realm of living controlled by the devil. Jesus said the devil was the ruler of this world (John 12:31, 14:30). In 1 John 5:19 we read that "the whole world lies in the power of the evil one." In 1

² John R.W. Stott, *The Letters of John - Tyndale New Testament Commentary*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 106.

John 4:3 we hear about the spirit of the antichrist “which you heard is coming and now is in the world already.” In this respect, the world is really bad. It is the realm where an anti-God mindset is propagated and lived out. The world is the sandbox where evil plays.

That is why the believer is chosen “out of the world,” according to John 17:6, while still being “in the world,” according to 1 John 4:17. And the effect of this is a great tension:

¹⁹ If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you (John 15:19).

But while all of this is true, the followers of Jesus are sent into the world:

¹⁶ They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. ¹⁷ Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. ¹⁸ As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world (John 17:16–18).

This mission is an extension of God’s heart for “the world,” because John 3:16 tells us that God loved the world and gave His only Son. In other words, God’s posture towards the world is love, compassion, and redemption along with broken-heartedness and grief because of the brokenness and ungodliness.

Balance

The believer in Jesus must strike an important balance of being in the world but not being “of” the world. The believer cannot escape from the world but must remain in the world. While the world may hate Christians, followers of Jesus cannot hate the world. We are to have compassion *for* the world while not being conformed *to* the world. We must live in this one while looking toward the next.

Some Christians have taken this command to “not love the world” to heart, and they have over-reacted.³ For example, some people have used this command to think there is something inherently sinful or less-than-spiritual about enjoying some aspect of our human existence. They might think that a nice meal, a beautiful day, the joy of friendship, or wonderful vacation are things for which we should feel guilty. Other people have used this as a reason to draw a sharp line in regard to professions or culture. Rather than discover how to be a professional or an artist or a politician who is also a Christian, we create our own professions or our own cultures because the world is so bad. That’s usually a bad idea.

This can also translate in our tone with broken, “worldly” people. We can easily sound judgmental, even angry, with the world. We can portray an attitude that feels harsh and lacking in compassion. Or Christians, in the name of not loving the world, can seem just weird—out of touch with life and culture.

³ Grateful for this article, <https://jdgrear.com/blog/what-does-it-mean-to-not-love-the-world/>, which provided helpful insights to this section.

Some of you, I'm sure, grew up in churches or homes like that. And you learned pretty quickly, that it just didn't work. Rules without relationship leads to rebellion. Belief without balance creates a bogus faith.

Caution

Therefore, the basic posture of the Christian in the world is to be careful that we do not fall in love with the world and its system. We have to be careful with where we let our hearts go and with how far we let them go.

I think that is one of the reasons John says, "things in the world." It helps us take this concept and not allow it to be theoretical. This phrase pushes the text toward the practical. In other words, our love for the world surfaces in our love for the "things" of the world. It could be anything!

The world is filled with really good things, enjoyable things, and meaningful things. And the believer's posture needs to be one of understanding how to be sure that good things don't become "god-things." The difference is between something that is nice and something that is a necessity. It's the difference between something that is enjoyable versus something that becomes an idol. It's the difference between being sad when you don't get what you want and being in despair because you don't have it.

Now we'll see this play out more in a moment. But it is interesting that John ends this letter with a short command: "Little children, keep yourselves from idols" (1 John 5:21).

Here's how it works with a career. The world is full of opportunities to work. Part of that system involves hierarchies and promotions. With upward moves often come benefits of more authority, more money, and greater esteem. This is not fundamentally sinful or bad, but it has brokenness baked into all of it. You could want the promotion, not so that you can be a good steward of your gifts, but because you crave the esteem of others. You could seek the next job because you wonder how your friends can afford to drive the cars they have, and it bugs you. You could long for the sense of accomplishment of getting a new job and see it as something you deserve because you've worked so hard. As you talk about the job opportunity, you could position yourself in meetings or in projects to the detriment of others. You could hoard information that others need or talk poorly about them. You could exaggerate your accomplishments on your resume, while convincing yourself that you are just "putting the best foot forward." If you get the job, you could be filled with pride and self-congratulation. And if you don't get the job, you could be filled with bitterness and anger.

The problem is not the job opportunity. The problem is that we ascribe the kind of affections, worth, and weight that should mark our relationship with God, and we let those emotions become attached to something that can't hold the weight of our affection or our identity. The issue is not the job. It is what we bring to the job.

Now you could take out the word "job" or "career" and replace it with anything. In its place you could put owning a house, having children, marriage, technology, fame, sex, athletics, working out, clean eating, video games, movies, financial planning—I could on and on. I'll spare you. I think you get the point.

An important aspect of spiritual assurance is knowing how to relate to the world in which we live. And John's caution is helpful for us to heed: *Don't love the world or the things in the world.*

Four Reasons

What follows in the rest of the text are four supporting reasons for John's warning. It is almost as if he anticipates that people might give tacit agreement that loving the world is wrong, so he wants to deepen our understanding as to why this is important.

1) Competing affections do not work

The second half of verse 15 makes it very clear that love for God and love for the world cannot coexist. John says that if you love the world, the love of the Father is not in you. If you try to love both, it is evidence that you really do not love the Father.

Now John is not the only person to draw this clear line of demarcation. In Matthew 5:24 Jesus said that you cannot serve two masters. In that context He was talking about God and money. Paul, in Galatians 5:17, said that the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit . . . they are in conflict with one another (NIV). The point from Jesus, Paul, and John is simply that loving God means loving Him above everything else. Love for God and love for the world cannot coexist.⁴

Negatively, it means that this is why some of you have recently faltered spiritually. It explains why you've even begun to doubt if you really are a Christian. It's because your love of the world, its system, what it offers, what it asks of you, and what you are giving it is sucking the spiritual life right out of you. James goes so far as to call people like this "adulterers." He says, "friendship with the world is enmity with God" (James 4:4). Now there's hope for you. Perhaps today God is bringing conviction to your heart. Why not respond to Him?

Positively, it means that as you facilitate more and more love for God, that love satisfies the deepest longings and desires of your soul. We should echo the words of Psalm 73:25—"Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you." We should join in Peter's testimony as other disciples turned away from Jesus. When Jesus asked Peter, "Do you want to go away as well?" Peter said, "Lord to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed and have come to know that you are the Holy One of God" (John 6:68-69).

Being a follower of Jesus means that the directional affection of your heart has been settled.

2) Unholy desires lead you the wrong way

The next reason we find in the text is a very helpful paradigm to look at the nature of temptations and sinful desires. It is too easy to "go with the flow" of our broken world and not realize what is happening. Therefore, John lists three sinful desires that are common and dangerous:

⁴ <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/do-not-love-the-world>

- **Desires of the flesh:** These are basic and fundamental longings of sinful humans. They are the expression of our fallen natures. By our very nature, we desire the wrong things. The danger is to have sinful desires become so normalized that you forget how wrong they are.
- **Desire of the eyes:** This refers to what we do with the desires of the flesh and how we look for things that fulfill what we want. The eyes become the portal for the desires of the flesh. What we see becomes fodder for wrong actions.
- **Pride of life:** Here is the sin of boasting in what a person has or does.⁵ The problem is not the thing that a person possesses. The problem is what they believe or want that “thing” to say. The issue here is the glorification of self.

John calls us to not love the world. And these three areas are how we end up loving the world. This is the path to crowding out the love of God in our hearts. And by resisting these areas, we validate the genuineness of our faith.

Before we move on, can you take inventory of your soul? Of the three I just listed, which one is your Achilles’ heel? Do you have desires that need to be checked? Are your eyes guilty of aiding and abetting rebellion? Has pride of life gotten the better of you recently?

John reminds us that this is not from Father, but it is from the world.

3) Humanity is broken and getting worse

Loving the world is spiritual suicide. And it makes no sense. We know better, and yet we somehow forget, so John reminds us that “the world is passing away along with its desires.” Loving the world is a bad bet because the future has already been determined. It is foolish beyond measure. It would be like buying stock in a company that is bankrupt, purchasing a home that is condemned, adopting a dog that has rabies and bites people, or asking to board a sinking ship.

Followers of Jesus know where sinful desires lead. We know the cost associated with the death of Jesus. We can read the stories of people in the Bible who made tragic decisions. We know, we know, we know! But do we?

That’s the trouble with what assaulted you from the world this week. Over and over and over you were told “you need this,” “you deserve this,” “everyone’s doing this,” and “you’ll be happy if you do this.” But it’s a house of cards. A scam. Humanity is broken, and it is only getting worse.

Jesus purchased your freedom to get off that misplaced desire treadmill. He said, “Come to me all who are weary, and I will give you rest” (Matt. 11:28). Are you tired of loving the wrong things? Are you weary of being assaulted with lies from the world and its system? Run to Jesus!

4) Obedience confirms your future

⁵ Daniel L. Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, vol. 38, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001), 111.

The final reason that John gives here is both a warning and an affirmation. It is a warning in what was learned last week: Believing in Jesus means behaving like Jesus. Words are confirmed by works. In this text it sounds like “whoever does the will of God . . .” A Christian is a person whose will has been captivated by God’s grace. No one is perfect, but the orientation of the heart has been redirected. If you don’t live for the will of God, you aren’t a child of God. It’s that simple.

But there is also encouragement here, and I want you to really listen to me. When you set your heart to do the will of God, you are expressing the miracle of your conversion. Living for the will of God doesn’t make you a Christian. However, it does assure you about the genuineness of your belief.

Every time you squelch the desires of the flesh, every time you redirect the desire of your eyes, and every time you treasure Christ over yourself, you verify that the miracle of grace has invaded your heart! While victory is assured, resistance is required.

One Application for Every Christian

Let me offer one application for every Christian to consider. If you are not yet a follower of Jesus, your application is simple: You need to end your weary pursuit of the world and come to Jesus today.

But for those of you who are Christians, here’s what I’d like you to do. One challenge. I want you to think of one area in your life or one thing that is trending worldly and take a step to bring it back. Maybe it’s how you spend your money, what you choose for “entertainment,” what substances you are consuming, your choices in clothing, a purchase you are considering, the aspirations you have at work, how much value you place in your children’s behavior, how badly you want to be married, how you handle sexual desire, and what you think about in general.

Let me invite you to do a “1 John Audit.” And let me invite you to take a step back or replace something “not great” with something eternal.

I’m inviting every Christian to embrace this mindset:

Victory assured. Resistance required.

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