

John tends to gravitate toward the essentials of the faith and set up absolute boundaries.

The Unbelieving

1:6—say they have fellowship with God
and yet walk in the darkness

1: 8—say that they have no sin

1:10—say that they have not sinned

2:4—say "I have come to know Him"
but do not keep His commandments

2:9—say they are in the Light and yet hate their brother
and walk in darkness

2:23—deny the Son; do not have the Father

The Believing

1:7—walk in the Light and
have fellowship with one another

1: 9—confess sins

2:1—know they will sin and depend on Christ as their Advocate

2:5, 6—keep His word, walk as He walked and
have come to know Him

2:10—love their brother and
abide in the Light

2:23—confess the Son; have the Father

In 1 John 2:1 John said that he was writing so that we would not sin. The aim of 2:12–17 is to give the motivation needed to do this. In 2:12–17 John intensifies our appreciation for what we have in Christ and deepens our assurance of eternal life. Then he warns us about those who would deceive us and urges us to have vigilance against sin (2:18–29).

In chapter 2 he articulates 3 contrasts:

- Those who talk / Those who act (2:1–11)
- Those who love the world / Those who love the Father (2:15–17)
- Those who are antichrists / Those who are Christians (2:18–29)

SUMMARY of 2:1–11 (Those who talk / Those who act)

Some claim to know God (2:4), abide in Him (2:6) and walk in the light (2:9), but do not obey His commands. John says that they are liars walking in darkness.

Of course, John is not suggesting that we attract God's mercy by being good; he assumes that we are so changed that our lives become oriented toward following Jesus. Obedience gives us assurance that we know God; "we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments" (2:3). John says, "whoever keeps His word, in him the love of God has truly been perfected" (2:5). This could mean that *God's love for us* is perfected since it is producing its fruit (i.e. as we rest in God's love we grow in obedience). Or, it could mean that our *love for God* becomes complete as it works itself out in obedience. Whichever John meant, obedience is an essential part of the Christian life.

Secondly, 1 John 2:8 says, "the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining." That is, with the coming of Christ and His gospel, a new age has dawned (the true light is exposed in the gospel of the Son). The characteristic of this new age is love among Christ's people (2:9, 10). Therefore, "the one who hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness" (2:11).

In short, the first contrast that distinguishes believers from unbelievers is behavior—obedience and love are examples of behaviors that should characterize Christians. Those who *say* they believe, but do not display any change in their actions, do not know God. Real Christianity issues in people whose thinking and conduct are changed.

The second contrast is introduced in verses 15–17, but only after a word reassuring the readers that they do indeed have eternal life (2:12–14).

2:12 *I am writing to you, little children, because your sins have been forgiven you for His name's sake.*

2:13(a) *I am writing to you, fathers, because you know Him who has been from the beginning. I am writing to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one. . .*

2:13 (b) . . . *I have written to you, children, because you know the Father.*

2:14 *I have written to you, fathers, because you know Him who has been from the beginning. I have written to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one.*

Some people see three groups of believers in verses 12–14: little children, young men, and fathers. The message for each group is different which suggests these are qualities distinctive to each stage of life (the innocence of childhood, the strength of youth, and the mature knowledge of age—Marshall, 138–139).

Others see only two groups (fathers and young men). Throughout his epistles John repeatedly refers to believers collectively as “little children” (τεκνίου *teknion*; 2:1, 12, 28; 3:1, 2, 7, 10 [2X], 18; 4:4; 5:2, 21; 2 Jn. 1, 14, 13; 3 Jn. 4) or, “children” (παίδιον *paidion*; 2:13, 18). So this is John’s normal address to his readers, not another grouping. “Fathers” and “young men” would be two levels of maturity.

It is difficult to know which is intended and it is not critical to decide since what is true of children (in either view) is true of all believers; all believers have their sins forgiven for His name’s sake. What is clear is that the reason that John is writing this is so that the readers know that he is not concluding that they are the heretics; he wants to assure them of their salvation.

If the first view is correct, “**children**” are new believers. Their joy is in knowing that they have been (and remain) forgiven. They know that they have fellowship with the Father. They can ask for forgiveness knowing that God is faithful and just to forgive them (1 Jn. 1:9). They can love each other and walk in the light (1 Jn. 1:7). “These are the earliest conscious experiences of the newborn Christian” (Stott, 97).

However, if the second view is correct “children” is simply John’s usual affectionate address to the Christian community.

Fathers (2:13a 14a) are those who have depth and stability of ripe Christian experience. The flush of joy from first knowing Christ is in the past as are the battles of the young men. These are believers who have progressed to deep communion and knowledge of God and Christ.

“*Him*” (who has been from the beginning) could be God or Christ.

Young men (2:13b, 2:14b) are maturing believers. They are actively fighting the enemy of our faith. They are seeking to conform their lives to biblical standards (Ps. 119:10–11). They have experienced the grace of God’s transforming work and have tasted some victory over sin and temptation. The source of their victory is that they are strong and the word of God abides in them.

There are two activities of Satan that the word of God enables us to overcome: accusation and temptation. Strength to triumph over the evil one comes from the word of God abiding in us.

“Satan” means accuser or adversary. John draws out this meaning in Revelation 12:10–11: “the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God.” Satan’s accusations are justified; we are guilty and deserving of condemnation. But the word of God tells us that Jesus stands by our side as our Advocate (2:1). He is the propitiation for our sins. He has put us in a favorable position before God. Through His propitiatory work on the cross, the removal of God’s wrath is secured. This is part of what John means when he writes, “The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil” (3:8). The Bible tells us that Jesus the righteous nullifies the effect of any accusation the devil brings against us. Yet, many believers stumble over this. As a result, some try to deal with the guilt of sin by minimizing its seriousness or believing that obedience is not critical because they are saved by grace (1 Jn. 1:8). Others cannot accept the forgiveness that God has promised to those in Christ because their sin is so persistent and so disgraceful. They project upon God how they would feel if they were God and live with a sense of shame and failure—some even to the point of depression or despair. But neither response to sin is correct; both are evidences that the word of God is not abiding in us.

The Bible clearly states that God does not tolerate sin nor should we treat it lightly even though our salvation is secure. It commands us not to continue in sin and warns us that continuation in sin could be evidence that our professed salvation isn’t real. But the word also constantly reminds us that Christ’s death has adequately paid for every sin. When the word abides in us we have confidence that we have a high priest who sympathizes with our weaknesses (Heb. 4:15) and who comes to our aid as an Advocate (1 Jn. 2:1). We rejoice that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Ro. 8:1); we can “draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Heb. 4:16). Thus for our part, we must let the gospel, the apostolic message, abide in us (2:14) to overcome any accusation against us.

Secondly, overcoming the evil one includes overcoming temptation.

Temptation comes in every form imaginable. It is not just temptation to immorality. When Satan tempted Job to curse God, he did so by taking his wealth, killing his children, and bringing upon him physical and emotional suffering.

Cancer could bring the temptation to question the goodness of God. The loss of loved ones, the sickness of your children, financial hardship, marriage tensions, political strife, natural disasters, crime, and mob

violence may all contribute to destroying our faith. How do we overcome such temptations? Through the word of God abiding in us.

Psalm 119:9, 11: “How can a young man keep his way pure? By keeping it according to Your word. . . Your word I have treasured in my heart, that I may not sin against You.”

2:15 Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.

2:16 For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world.

2:17 The world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God lives forever.

In verses 15–17 John introduces the second contrast between believers and unbelievers; it is a contrast between those who love the world and those who love the Father. The first contrast was in behavior (obedience and love); this is a contrast of affections.

“Do not love the world” is the only command in these three verses and is therefore the main point. Everything else in the text is an argument, or incentive, for why we should not love the world.

A command implies that switching from loving the world to loving God does not come naturally to us. We were lovers of the world before we came to Christ, and we continue to love the world after we believe. Therefore, we need to be instructed regarding the matter; we need to be reminded about where our affections should lie; we need to be commanded to set our lives in a new direction.

Secondly, the fact that we must be commanded not to love the world tells us that our love for God requires effort on our part. We need to nurture our love for Him. God does not instantly make us God-lovers and world-haters. Our love for Him grows; it can wane if neglected or it can be perfected as our minds (Ro. 12:2) and behavior change (2:5). The command and warnings in verses 15–17 should rejuvenate our efforts to be sanctified, remind us not to revert back to who we were, and set our hearts upon the right course.

“World” most commonly refers to the moral order, human beings in defiant rebellion against God, or the evil world system ruled by Satan (Stott, 101–103). Once in a while it is used neutrally (Jn. 21:25). We are not to love the world. Although John says in his Gospel that God loves the world (Jn. 3:16), the difference between that text and this one is that God loves the world or people with a desire to save them; we are not to love the world’s system and values so as to share in its sin.

John also adds that we should not love the things in the world. The “things in the world” view the individual objects in the world from an ethical perspective. Believers are not to love the world system or the specific things in it.

The first incentive that John gives for not loving the world is that “if anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in him” (2:15b). The reason we shouldn’t love the world is that we can’t love the world and God at the same time. Love for the world pushes out love for God, and love for God pushes out love for

the world (Piper). As Jesus said, “No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money” (Matthew 6:24). Those who love the world are placed in the category of God-haters whether they feel like that or not.

Verse 16 gives the support and explanation as to why the love of the Father is not in the one who loves the world: “for all that is in the world . . . is not from the Father, but is from the world.”

The three phrases in the middle of verse 16 (the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life) have drawn a lot of interest. There has been a tendency by some to make this into the process by which the believer sins (e.g. first, we desire, then we see, at last we act—Gen. 3:6) but this isn’t supported in the context. John is simply stating that the origins of these desires come from the world, not the Father. The world has nothing more to offer than what is summed up in the three phrases here.

The lust of the flesh: The lust of the flesh does not only mean sex. It is much broader than that. Lust (ἐπιθυμία *epithumia*) simply means “strong desire” whether good or evil (Matt. 13:17; Lk. 22:15; Phil. 1:23; 1 Thess. 2:17). The lust “*of the flesh*” refers to desires that emanate from us as physical people. Here it must refer to human nature which is corrupted by sin (i.e. it is evil desire) since lusts are contrasted to the “one who does the will of God” in verse 17. It is the desire of our fallen nature to seek physical pleasure. It is an outlook oriented toward self which is independent of God and pursues its own ends.

The lust of the eyes: Through the eyes, the mind is engaged in contemplation of what was seen. This makes it distinct from the flesh, but equally prone to sinful desires. “The lust of the eyes” is a focus on external things we see and desire. It is the desire to acquire things. It is covetousness which Paul calls idolatry (Col. 3:5). It is expressed in the words, “I want that.”

The boastful pride of life: The third thing that characterizes the world is the pretentiousness of life; that is, the pride of life is an overemphasis on the importance of possessions, power, or knowledge whether real or imagined. It is a fixation on the things of the world and a proudness over all the things we have or have done. In other words, it isn’t just an overemphasis on the importance of worldly things, it is boastfulness in those things as well. It is the desire to impress others, the vanity which will attempt to show itself when others are watching or listening. The world becomes a stage where I can make myself the center attraction.

In sum, worldliness is not simply related to things, but it surely includes our concentration on things.

Thus, the *first incentive* that John gave for not loving the world is that “if anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in him” (2:15b). The *second incentive* is that the world and everything in it is passing away (2:17). The world and its desires are temporary; they do not last.

- Psalm 102:25–26: “In the beginning you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. *They will perish*, but you will remain; *they will all wear out like a garment*. You will change them like a robe, and *they will pass away*.”
- Isaiah 65:17: “For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth, and *the former things shall not be remembered or come into mind*.”
- Revelation 21:1: “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; *for the first heaven and the first earth passed away*”
- 2 Peter 3:7: “by His word the present heavens and earth are being reserved for fire, kept for the Day of Judgment and destruction of ungodly men.”
- 2 Peter 3:13 “But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.”

The world has nothing in it that is lasting, so why love it? As Piper says, “Nobody sets up house in a sinking ship. No reasonable person would lay up treasure where moth and rust destroy and thieves break in and steal, would they?”

The final incentive that John gives for not loving the world is that the one who does the will of God will live forever. The present participle means “the one who continually or habitually does the will of God.” This same construction was used 5 times in 2:3–11. The stark contrast is between the lasting nature of the one who does the will of God to that which is temporary and passing. He will abide forever. “While the fabric of the world is being removed, the Christian suffers no disturbance” (Westcott, 66).

FINAL OBSERVATIONS:

We have been well taught that we are saved by grace through faith (Eph. 2:8–9). As Acts 16:31 says, “Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved!” But we have not been as well taught about what saving faith looks like.

Saving faith includes obedience to God’s commands, loving God, and as we will see, believing proper doctrine (2:18–29; 5:1, etc.). For this reason John can treat either obedience, love for God, or belief in Christ as one way of salvation.

- “I write this to you *who believe* in the name of the Son of God, *that you may know that you have eternal life*” (1 Jn. 5:13). (belief results in eternal life)
- “By this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandment” (1 Jn. 2:3); “*the one who does the will of God lives forever*” (1 Jn. 2:17). (obedience results in eternal life)
- “Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God” (1 Jn. 5:1). (correct doctrine results in eternal life)

Obedience, loving the Father, and freeing ourselves from the love of the world is not optional; they are all part of the single package we call “saving faith.”