

THAT YOU MAY KNOW: A STUDY OF FIRST JOHN

LESSON 6: “Assurance and the Hatred of Evil”

TEXT: 1 John 2:12–17

In his timeless classic, *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, John Bunyan tells the story of a pilgrim named “Christian” on his way “from this world to that which is to come.” Christian is joined along the way by a loyal companion, named “Faithful,” who shares the same destiny—the Celestial City. Their path takes them through a town specifically founded by evil men to ensnare traveling pilgrims with the best pleasures and possessions the world has to offer. The name of the town is “Vanity,” and its key attraction is “Vanity Fair.” Bunyan writes,

Then I saw in my dream, that when Christian and Faithful had left the wilderness, they soon saw a town ahead of them named Vanity. At that town there is a fair called Vanity Fair, and it is kept open all the year long. It bears the name of Vanity Fair, because the town where it is held is lighter than vanity—and also because all that is sold there is vanity. As is the saying of the wise, “Vanity of vanities! All is vanity!”

This fair is no newly-erected business—but a thing of ancient standing. I will show you its origin: Almost five thousand years ago, there were Pilgrims journeying to the Celestial City such as these two honest people. Beelzebub, Apollyon, and Legion, along with their companions, perceived by the path which the Pilgrims made, that their way to the City lay through this town of Vanity. They therefore contrived to set up a fair here in which all sorts of vanity should be sold, and that it should last all the year long.

Therefore all kinds of merchandise are sold at this fair—such as houses, lands, trades, places, honors, preferments, titles, countries, kingdoms, lusts, pleasures; and delights of all sorts—such as harlots, wives, husbands, children, masters, servants, lives, blood, bodies, souls, silver, gold, pearls, precious stones, and what not. Moreover, at this fair are always to be seen juggling, cheats, games, plays, fools, fakes, knaves, and rogues, and that of every kind. Here are to be seen also, and without cost—thefts, murders, adulteries and liars! . . .

Now these Pilgrims, as I said, had to go through this fair—and so they did. . . .

Once inside the city, the residents notice Christian and Faithful because of their strange clothing, unusual speech, and lack of interest in the fair’s merchandise. They are arrested, a trial is convened, and both Christian and Faithful are condemned to death. Although the residents execute Faithful, Christian manages to escape from captivity, flee the town, and continue his way toward the Celestial City.

What Bunyan’s allegory portrays is the experience of every genuine Christian. He lives in the constant tension of being *in the world yet not of the world* (John 17:15–16). The challenge is not his material, creaturely existence per se. Instead, it is that of having to travel through the “Vanity Fairs” of this world—all of which have been constructed by “Beelzebub, Apollyon, and Legion.” These worldly attractions are designed to appeal to the basest things that still harass the Christian in his imperfect state, to inflame the passions from which he was liberated yet with which he still struggles. These carnivals are also filled with enemies who impress and entertain, but who ultimately intend to destroy. If the Christian gets tangled up with these charlatans, he loses the joy of his salvation. He begins to wonder if he is just like them. But if he resists and reviles them, he is able to take comfort in the fact that his true love is the Lord and His ways. He is able to enjoy his assurance.

It is understandable, then, why the apostle John turns to the issue of *the love of the world* in the letter of 1 John. To provide clarity to his readers about the assurance of salvation, John must address the issue of a professing Christian’s attitude toward “Vanity Fair.” If one who professes faith in Christ *genuinely loves this world*, he cannot be assured of his salvation. But if he finds that he does not feel at home in this world, that he *hates* its ways and *reviles* the things offered to him in its “vanity fairs,” then he should find comfort that he manifests a key distinctive of all genuine Christians.

1 John 2:12–17 – “Assurance and the Hatred of Evil”

The topic of love and hate is not new in John’s argument. He just commended love and denounced hate in the previous paragraph (2:7–11). For example, John wrote, “The one who says he is in the Light and yet hates his brother is in the darkness until now. The one who loves his brother abides in the Light and there is no cause for

stumbling in him” (vv. 9–10). But now the expectation is flipped. Putting on love and putting off hate also requires putting on hate and putting off love. The difference is all about the objects of such love and hate.

“I am writing to you, little children, because your sins have been forgiven you for His name’s sake. 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. I have written to you, children, because you know the Father. 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. 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. 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. The world is passing away, and *also* its lusts; but the one who does the will of God lives forever.” —1 John 2:12–17

The section constitutes two separate yet related paragraphs. **The first paragraph (vv. 12–14)** contains a set of addresses and affirmations. It is a striking literary interlude in the flow of the letter that intends to provide *assurance*. Exercising his pastoral skill, **John encourages his readers by expressing confidence in their identity as genuine believers**. They had very good reasons to believe they were saved!

With that assurance established, John then moves to **the second paragraph (vv. 15–17)**. Here John provides another crucial proof necessary for cultivating—or negating—assurance: **one’s aversion to the world**. John provides a simple yet resounding command, followed by three insightful reasons for it.

I. Remember Your Identity (2:12–14)

The language of 2:12–14 is unique. In fact, it has attracted more analysis than almost any other section of 1 John. The verses contain two sets of almost identical triplets: (1) the first set in vv. 12–13b; and (2) the second set in vv. 13c–14. Each of the three statements in both sets of triplets contains the same literary ingredients: (a) a statement of writing (“I am writing to you” or “I have written to you”); (b) the identification of the intended audience (“little children/children”; “fathers”; and “young men”); and (c) a reason or reasons for writing.

It is simplest to examine the language according to the three “audiences” addressed. Although some commentators see three different groups of believers addressed in these verses, it is best to see the first group—the “children”—as inclusive of all believers, and the second and third groups as subsets of that first group.

A. An Encouragement to All Christians

That **“little children”** (v. 12a) and **“children”** (v. 13c) refer to all born-again Christians can be concluded based on how John uses these same designations elsewhere in the letter. In 2:1, 2:28, 3:7, 3:18, 4:4, and 5:21, John consistently uses these same terms to refer to *his entire readership*. They are *all* John’s “children” because they are under his spiritual care and apostolic authority.

John encourages them with respect to their identity in two ways. First, he states his confidence in their salvation **“because your sins have been forgiven you”** (v. 12a). “To forgive” means “to release from legal or moral obligation,” and the nuance of the language indicates that John believed that such forgiveness was *once and for all*. Those to whom he wrote were living in a *state of forgiven-ness*. God held nothing against them! This release from the legal penalty of sin was not based on anything they deserved or achieved. Rather, John knows that they had been forgiven **“for His name’s sake”**—that is, for the sake of Jesus Christ and all that He represented. Jesus Christ had come to be the sufficient propitiation for their sins (2:2), and those to whom John writes had believed that message.

The second encouragement about their identity was that **“you know the Father”** (v. 13c). The *knowing* that John describes here is not some superficial, abstract knowledge. John was convinced that his readers *really knew* God. In other words, they knew God *savingly*. After all, John had recorded these words of Jesus in His Gospel: “This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent” (John 17:3).

B. An Encouragement to Mature Men

John then turns to a subset of Christians—to those he calls **“fathers”** (v. 12b, v. 14a). John is not referring here to those who necessarily had physical descendants, but to those who were spiritually mature Christians and influential members of the church. They were the ones who had *spiritual* descentance—just like John himself. John encourages this group by affirming—twice—that **“you know Him who has been from the beginning”** (v. 12b, v. 14a). Again, the *knowing* that John speaks of is not theoretical; it is *experiential*. The object of this knowledge is none other than *the Incarnate Christ*, the One **“who has been from the beginning”** (compare with 1:1–3). Such knowledge describes a true Christian, but here emphasizes these mature men’s deep relationship with the Son of God Himself. They had *walked with Him* in life.

C. An Encouragement to Young Men

John gives a final encouragement to a second subset of Christians—to those he calls **“young men”** (v. 13b, v. 14b). These were those who were known for their spiritual hunger and stamina, those learning to battle sin in earnest but who perhaps were not confident yet of their standing. John encourages them in three ways. First, he affirms twice that **“you have overcome the evil one”** (v. 13b, v. 14b). Certainly, the battle with the devil—the *“evil one”* (see also 3:12 and 5:18–19)—was ongoing, but the outcome was guaranteed. The language of **“overcome”** indicates *certainty*, even before it was realized (see 4:4, 5:4–5, 18–19). Second, John affirms that **“you are strong”** (v. 14b). They possessed a spiritual vitality that could come only from God. Third, John affirms the source of it all—that **“the word of God abides in you”** (v. 14b). They had embraced the life-giving, life-transforming, life-ensuring instrument—God’s word.

In sum, vv. 12–14 are filled with expressions of the apostle John’s *confidence* in the spiritual state of his audience. Having already provided a series of strict tests by which to assess whether a person’s confession was genuine or not, and on the cusp of providing more, John makes a special point to encourage his readers that *they passed these tests*. They should celebrate their identity. Moreover, it was important for them to recognize that the *ability* to fulfill what John commanded could only come from one already saved.

II. Regard Your Responsibility (2:15a)

Having encouraged his readers with a host of affirmations about their spiritual state, John turns to highlight the responsibility that flows from it. In other words, from the indicatives flow the imperatives. In fact, when the responsibility is fulfilled, the underlying identity is affirmed.

John states the responsibility as a simple yet stark prohibition: **“Do not love the world nor the things in the world”** (v. 15a). Whereas John previously prohibited hatred and called for love (vv. 9–11), he now reverses course and prohibits love while commending abhorrence.

The command **“do not love”** is strong. It could imply that John believed his readers struggled in this area (*“cease loving this world!”*), but more likely it simply communicates *a categorical prohibition*. That which they were *not* to love was **“the world.”** The basic meaning of the term κόσμος (*kosmos*)—used 6x in vv. 15–17—is *“order.”* It speaks of that which is the opposite of chaos. As such, it can refer to *the planet* or *to humanity* or to *something that beautifies* (hence the word *“cosmetics”*), but here it refers to *the domain of evil*. *“The world”* is that order, system, government, or hierarchy of darkness that stands antithetical to God (1:5–6; 5:19). *“The world”* is that which is *“ruled”* by Satan (see John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11).

So strong does John denounce love for this world that he extends his prohibition of love even to **“the things in the world.”** Of course, John is not speaking about the things God has created, but about the components that belong to this present system of evil—the things of darkness that are antithetical to the God of Light. John is not prohibiting enjoyment of the things God has designed to be enjoyed (see 1 Tim 4:1–5). John is not calling for asceticism, self-abasement, or the severe treatment of the body (see Col 2:16–23). Instead, John is calling upon his readers to reject any affection for, entertainment of, or gratification in the things that stand contrary to God and His will—the things of *“Vanity Fair.”*

III. Recognize Your Reasons (2:15b–17)

John gives three reasons why Christians are obligated to revile this world of darkness:

A. You cannot serve two masters (v. 15b).

John provides a plausible scenario: **“If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.”**

Describing what would be a *habitual, ongoing attraction*, John states that such love is incompatible with a claim to know and love God. These two “loves” cannot coexist within the same person. As Thomas Brooks has stated, “The two poles could sooner meet, than the love of Christ and the love of the world.” **See also Matthew 6:24.**

B. This is not your Father’s world (v. 16).

Again, John is not referring to the world that God created. Instead, he summarizes **“all that is in the world”** in three basic categories, of which all refer to internal corruptions rather than external, material things:

- 1) **“The lust of the flesh”** – the term “lust” speaks of “a strong, internal craving,” which in this context is for something *forbidden*. It refers not to human appetites in themselves, but to appetites darkened by evil.
- 2) **“The lust of the eyes”** – in view here is a strong, internal craving which is fed by *the sense of sight*—the eye-gate. It is a desire focused on physical things that can be viewed (money, clothes, cars, women, etc.).
- 3) **“The boastful pride of life”** – the language here refers to “a claim to something, particularly to impress others.” This component of the world is manifested in the actions one takes to congratulate self, in public or private, for one’s achievements. It is self-confidence and self-sufficiency. **See also James 4:13–16.**

These things originate not **“from the Father”** but **“from the world”**—that is, from the domain of evil.

C. This world will not stand the test of time (v. 17).

As a final reason why affection for the world is inconceivable for the Christian, John points to the world’s limited duration: **“The world is passing away, and *also* its lusts; but the one who does the will of God lives forever” (v. 17).** As Solomon learned and expressed so memorably, this world is *a vapor* (see Ecclesiastes). On the other hand, all that is done for God will last.

For Discussion

1. In 1 John 2:12–14, John provides strong words of encouragement to his readers regarding their spiritual status. How does the assurance of salvation, rightly understood, motivate and enable us toward godliness rather than toward license to sin?
2. Read 1 Timothy 4:1–5 and compare it with 1 John 2:15–17. What is the difference between these two texts? How can we rightly enjoy and have affection for the things God has created, while still reviling “the world”?
3. Consider the three categories of the sinful world in 1 John 2:16: (a) the lust of the flesh; (b) the lust of the eyes; and (c) the boastful pride of life. Where do these things commonly manifest in men’s lives today? Do you have a weakness in any particular area? Consider practical ways to increase your hatred of these things. Ask for counsel.
4. Does 1 John 2:15–17 affirm or discredit your profession of faith?

For Further Study

1. **Memorize** 1 John 2:15–16 and Romans 12:2.
2. **Read and meditate upon** Psalm 73. How does Asaph describe his struggle with the love of the world? What things attracted his affections? Where does Asaph find remedy? What does he focus on in the right mindset?
3. **Sing** “O Great God” (#35 in *Hymns of Grace*).

Audio, video, and handouts for this session are available at www.gracechurch.org/motw.

Next meeting: November 12, 7pm – “The Pillars of Marriage, Pillar 2” (Chris Hamilton)