
The Epistles of John

“The World, The Flesh, and The Devil

1 John 2:12-17

When Eve saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it” (Genesis 3:6).

The woman listened to the words. Certainly she loved the Creator. He came and talked to her husband. He loved them. But the words gave her a strange feeling. She felt a longing she had never before experienced. Maybe there was something more than the life she knew.

The creature was beautiful and his voice was honeyed. He confused her. What exactly had the creator said about the tree anyway? As she gazed upon the fruit she seemed to know it would taste wonderful. She was almost hypnotized by its beauty. Something that beautiful was meant to be enjoyed, to be tasted. Additionally, it would give her wisdom. And wouldn't the man be impressed with her if she was the one to bring them wisdom?

Maybe the creature was right. The Creator was trying to prevent them from becoming all they could be. It would be good to know the difference between good and evil. And then she would understand what good and evil were. She decided it was best to take and taste the fruit...

I Introduction

II I Write to You ...

Verses 2-14

III I Warn You ...

Verses 15-17

IV Conclusion

I Introduction: The difference between children of God and children of the devil, is whom they serve, whom they listen to. Jesus made this clear when speaking to those rejecting him:

*“ You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desire”
(John 8:44).*

The battle for Christians is always against the World, the Flesh and the Devil. If we are to stand firm for the Lord, we must recognize that we are constantly fighting on all fronts.

John wants to make sure his readers understand that he isn't questioning their faith. Consequently, he makes comparisons between the reality of the lives of believers in contrast with the fruit of the false teachers. In the first section, 12-14, John focuses on the believer. In 15-17 he turns to the fruit of the unbelievers.

John identifies three specific groups in these passages. He names the children, young men and fathers. These are representative of the body as a whole and therefore encompass both

men and women. There are a number of views as to why he identifies these three groups. Some hold that he is giving different messages which are actually age based. Others believe these identifications relate to levels of spiritual maturity. One can make a good argument for either of these positions. Another view, one that seems weak, is John is talking about Deacons, Elders and Bishops. This doesn't make sense because, according to Paul, Elders and Bishops are different titles for the same office.

Actually, I appreciate Hodges' position which seems to overlap the spiritual maturity view:

"It seems best (with C.H. Dodd and I.H. Marshall) to view the terms of address as referring to all the readers in each case. Then each experience ascribed to them is appropriate to the category named.

*Thus, thought of as "children," the readers had experienced the forgiveness that their heavenly Father grants to His own."*¹

Actually no one know exactly why John uses this method of breaking down this section. But, we do know God deals with us based on where we are in our walk and the level at which we are capable of operating with the empowering of the Holy Spirit. And at times I suspect each of us demonstrates attributes of the child, young person and the mature believer.

The other stylistic factor in the passage, which also can't be explained satisfactorily, is why John repeats himself here. Except for the tense change from "I write" to "I have written" the thrust is the same. Elsewhere in Scripture, especially in the Psalms, we find that writers repeat words, phrases, sentences for emphasis, and that may be what John is doing here.

What is clear though, is John was reminding his readers of the truths they have already learned and experienced so they will not be led astray by the false teachers who were striving to undermine their faith.

II I Write to You ...: Verse 12: *What is John's message to new, young and mature believers? What is his message to you?* First, John writes to those he identifies as children. The unbeliever, under the leading of the Holy Spirit, accepts the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. Consequently the new believer is forgiven for all sins, past, present and future. The Christian life begins at salvation.

Verse 13: Believers, described here as fathers, having received the gift of salvation have a relationship with the eternal God.

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made" (John 1:1-3).

Consider this, as finite creatures we have a personal relationship with the infinite eternal God. The depth of our knowledge grows over time and is shown in the quality of our walk.

Remember, false teachers were saying that informational knowledge of God was maturity. But God teaches it is obedience over time that demonstrates the believer's maturity.

¹ Hodges, Zane C., The Bible Knowledge Commentary, New Testament, Victor Books, 1987, p. 890.

Next John speaks to those he identifies as young men. Walking with the Lord means fighting the spiritual fight. Knowledge is a product of walking with God. And walking requires obedience lived out in battle. The young express their walk in the energy used in the midst of the battle. The battle here is against the evil one. Who is the evil one? Satan. These believers had stood firm in the past against Satan. Now they need to stand firm against false teachers.

Even new believers know God. Maybe they don't have a lifetime experience of walking with Him. Maybe they haven't had any real battles yet. But they know the most important truth of all. They are saved, therefore they know God.

Verse 14: Here John reinforces the truths that should be the foundation on which the believers could stand firm under the attack of the false teachers. Again, they have experienced the reality of God in their lives, and stood for him against Satan. In dependency on God, they can once again stand firm, in this case against doctrinal attacks.

III I Warn You ...; Verses 15-17: *What does it mean to love the things of the world? Why does John switch his comments from believers walk to comments regarding love of the world? Loving the world isn't the pattern of the believer. Loving the world typifies the life of the unbeliever. John may also be saying the views put forth by the false teachers are actually calls to love the world in disguise.*

We need to be clear on what John means by world. In the book of John he states, ***“God so loved the world...”*** Here John is expressing God's love for all people and His willingness to die for them. But the world John is warning against in these verses is the worldly system, the system that Satan rules. Jesus identifies Satan as this world's ruler when He said:

“I will not speak with you much longer, for the prince of this world is coming. He has no hold on me” (John 14:30).

We are to reach out to the people who are part of the system, but we are not to become entangled with it. It is this world that hates the believer.

“Do not be surprised, my brothers, if the world hates you” (1 John 3:13).

When John warns against loving the world, he is cautioning us against being motivated by worldly things. There is nothing wrong with appreciating things in the world that have worth, but the motivator of our walk is to be our love of God and the desire to please Him.

The specific qualities John identifies as worldly are lust of the flesh, lust of the eyes, and pride. The first, lust of the flesh, would be sensuality. The world expresses this position saying; “If it feels good, do it.” Remember part of the false teaching was that because we are saved and our sin is paid for, what we do with our body is irrelevant. The false teaching would say, “You can indulge your fleshly desires and not be in sin.” This is really sin from within. — This is the flesh.

The second lust was of the eyes. This is a warning against being attracted by the things we see in the world. This can be lust for things, everything from keeping up with the Jones, to a literal lust that comes from viewing others as objects versus people. — This is the world.

Pride is what led to the fall of Satan. He desired to bring himself to the level of God. A lot of teaching was intended to lead people to believe they could become their own gods. People are encouraged to believe that the world revolves around them. This is pride, and in a true sense — This is the devil.

John is therefore warning believers against falling into the trap of the World, the Flesh and the Devil all three of which are referred to in versus 14 through 16. As people are entrapped in this system, they can't have a relationship with the Lord.

And all the “benefits” of giving into self, or the world, or even the devil are tenuous at best, because the day is coming when the Lord will return and all unrighteousness will pass away. To these believers John is saying, don't be tempted by the false teachers. Stand firm before the Lord because it is only your relationship with Him that will last.

IV Conclusion: Lives of believers and unbelievers are contrasted by where their relationships are. As believers our basic relationship is with the Lord. It is grounded on our salvation through the shed blood of Christ. It is lived out in walking in obedience, loving God and others. And the Christian life is one of struggle.

“For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Ephesians 6:12).

We are in this battle because we are children of our Father, and as we depend on Him to carry us through the struggle. And it is in the midst of the struggle, that the depth of our relationship with Him continues to grow and deepen.

So, there is to be a difference in lives of believers and non-believers. And often this difference is hard to identify. Sometimes as believers we confuse what these differences are to be. Historically Christians have focused on outward issues as the basis of these differences.

And, certainly John tells us we aren't to be enamored with the things of the world. Christians should be identifiable by the differences in their walk, issues of life-style are legitimate. But too often we are more concerned with behavior patterns than with attitudes.

We can fall into the trap of judging the maturity of believers by how they dress, what they do for recreation, and who they keep company with. This can be so extreme that even the Lord would be rejected. And emphasis on legalism and appearances can lead to Phariseism.

The danger with an outward focus is we become judgmental and lose sight of the maturity level of our brothers and sisters. Too frequently we put the same expectations for quality of walk on all believers. We sometimes forget individual believers are at different levels of maturity. We should not expect the new believer's walk to be in line with the old saint of the Lord. The other thing to keep in mind is people mature at different rates, and God is the only one who really knows at what level we should be living.

We are to encourage one another to grow in our walk. But we are not called to judge whether or not the individual is living up to his or her potential. Let us just make sure that we are depending on the Lord to live up to ours.

“But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness” (Hebrews 3:13).

What does John identify as the basis of the distinction between the believer and unbeliever? It is who or what one loves. If we love God, we will live in a way that pleases Him. If we love the world, our walk will be motivated by what gives us pleasure, or power, or some sense of fulfillment, separate from the true fulfillment, relationship with God.

The world, the flesh and the Devil are constantly striving to drag us away from our first love of God. We are not always even aware of this. We need to ask the Holy Spirit to help us step back and see where something other than the Lord is becoming the prime motivator for our behavior. We need to examine the attitudes and activities in our lives in light of the need for them to honor the Lord.

“So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10:31).

Our motivation for our choices must be to please the Lord. If our concern is to appear to be a believer according to other peoples standards our walk is selfishly motivated, because our primary concern becomes pleasing men, not God.

“Am I now trying to win the approval of men, or of God? Or am I trying to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ.” (Galatians 1:10).

So, let us step back from our lives. Let us being willing to examine our choice in light of the desire to please God. And where we find we have love the world too well, let us repent and return to our first love. Let us pray with the psalmist:

“Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting” (Psalm 139:23-24).

*Search me, O God, and know my heart today;
Try me, O Savior, know my thoughts, I pray.
See if there be some wicked way in me;
Cleans me from ev’ry sin and set me free.*

*Lord, take my life and make it wholly thine;
Fill my poor heart with thy great love divine.
Take all my will, my passion, self, and pride;
I now surrender; Lord, in me abide.*

*I praise thee, Lord, for cleansing me from sin;
Fulfill thy Word and make me pure within.
Fill me with fire where once I burned with shame;
Grant my desire to magnify thy name.*

*O Holy Spirit, revival comes from thee;
Send a revival, start the work in me.
Thy Word declares thou wilt supply our need;
For blessings now, O Lord, I humbly plead.
Amen.²*

² Orr, J. Edwin, “Psalm 139:23,” Public Domain

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I Introduction:

(Genesis 3:6; John 8:44)

II I Write to You ...: Verse 12:

Verse 13:

(John 1:1-3)

Verse 14:

III I Warn You ...; Verses 15-17:
(John 14:30; 1 John 3:13)

IV Conclusion:
(Ephesians 6:12; Hebrews 3:13; 1 Corinthians 10:31; Galatians 1:10; Psalm 139:23-24)

Personal Application: To see if we are entangled with the world is hard. It's a bit like being a fish, trying to step outside of the bowl to examine the water. So, we need to ask the Lord to help us to the examination.

Prayer for the Week: Lord, help me be willing to risk searching my heart to make sure I haven't fallen in love with the world, without realizing it. In Christ's name, amen.