“LOVE NOT THE WORLD”
by Dr. D. W. Ekstrand

The apostle John writes, “Do not to love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.” Why? “Because 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 of the world. And the world is passing away, and all that it craves; but he who does the will of God abides forever” (1 Jn 2:15-17). In the first chapter of his letter, John tells us it is not possible to “claim fellowship with God” and pattern our lives after the world. He repeats this theme throughout his letter. He tells us we must “walk in the light” (1 Jn 1:7), and that we cannot simultaneously walk in the light and walk in darkness. As believers, we are not to love the world’s ways or the world’s goods. To John, the “world” represents everything that is contrary to a life of faith in God.

The world obviously has a different view of how we should live. The postmodern culture in which we live believes that all ideas are equally valid, and that we are all free to believe and practice whatever we desire, in the name of diversity and tolerance. Thus in our broadminded world more and more people have gravitated toward a “hedonistic view” of life — “Eat, drink, and be merry” (Lk 12:19), for tomorrow we die. It is easy for the Christian, in this environment, to embrace a humanistic view of the world rather than a biblical view. To love and enjoy the society of the world is to have a heart “destitute of grace” – be aware of it; the world is a bitter foe to grace; it is an enemy to God, and if you befriend it, you make yourself an enemy of God (Jam 4:4).

Conversely, being a friend to the world is to help it along in some sense, to encourage its spirit, to add to its credibility in the world, and to abet it in some way.

What is this “world” that we are not to love? John tells us it is characterized by three things — the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life. The first two refer to desires for what we don’t have, and the third refers to the pride in what we do have. The world is driven by a passion for pleasure and pride in possessions. The passion for pleasure involves either bodily pleasures or aesthetic and intellectual pleasures – there is the lust of the gutter and the lust of the gourmet… the lust of the Penthouse and the lust of Picasso… and the lust of revelry and the lust of classical music. The apostle John ends his letter with this command: “KEEP YOURSELVES FROM IDOLS!” — whether they are crude or whether they are cultured. Anything in this world that is “not of God” can rob your heart of the love of God, and draw you away from God. By the way, the world can never completely satisfy the one who indulges in it (cross ref Gal 5:19-21 and 5:22-23). Man must live by every word that proceeds from God (Mt 4:4), and that is what truly satisfies.

The reason we struggle with this injunction is because we have so little understanding of who we really are. For the most part, we still see ourselves as “creatures of this world,” even though the Bible says we are not of the world. Our day-by-day identification is still more with the world than with heaven. However, the more we continue meditating on the Word our comprehension of the fact that we are “born from above” increases, and we find ourselves saying, “I am not on earth for the purpose of simply enjoying all of its toys… I am not on the earth for the purpose of seeing what kind of an estate I can build… I’m on the earth to serve the One who redeemed me and walk intimately with Him. Progressively, I am identifying more with heaven and less with this world… I find that my affections are increasingly becoming set on things above, not on the things here.
below (Col 3:2-3). You see, we are “on assignment” from heaven to show forth the will of the Father, and the life of Christ, in our mortal bodies. We only need the “material things of this world” as they are required to fulfill that assignment. We no longer identify with this world, and have no covetous lust for all the things that are in it. The truth of the matter is, we don’t feel at home on earth anymore. This environment of sin, sickness, war, politics and poverty does not seem “natural” to us anymore — neither does the deceitfulness of riches and the craving for other things.

To spend our lives on a quest to satisfy the “lust of the flesh,” the “lust of the eyes,” and the “pride of life” seems totally foreign to us now… because these things are no longer a part of our nature — they are not of the Father, and they have nothing to do with our assignment from heaven. To set our affection on those things is to abandon our assignment from heaven and divert us from the Father’s will for our lives. Our nature now is to please the Father and the Lord Jesus — that is the motivational driving force that gives us pleasure. The older we get in Christ the more we realize how “impermanent” the things of this world are — isn’t it amazing what a few short years can do to change our thinking about what is really important? The apostle John identifies three different categories to describe this godless world system in which we live —

1. The Lust of the Flesh — The word “lust” is the usual term we use to describe an inordinate desire. It may be used to describe any attempt to gratify the senses. Often, but not exclusively, it refers to sinful sexual desire (Eph 5:3; 1 Th 4:3-5; 1 Pet 2:11). Lust of the flesh includes all unchaste desires, thoughts, words, jesting, profanity, and actions, carousing, impurity, sensuality, fornication, rape, adultery, incest, sodomy, and all unnatural lusts — also intemperance in eating and drinking, gluttony and drunkenness, excess of wine, rioting, and revellings, and all the sensual pleasures of life, by which the carnal mind, and the lusts of it, are gratified. Such things make up a significant part of all the sinful behavior that characterizes the world. Matthew Henry put it this way: “The lust of the flesh is, subjectively, the humor and appetite of indulging fleshly pleasures; and objectively, all those things that excite and inflame the pleasures of the flesh.”

2. The Lust of the Eyes — The eyes are delighted with treasure and riches; rich possessions are craved by an extravagant eye, the objects of which are visible things, like gold, silver, houses, lands, and possessions, with which the eyes of men are never satisfied. A covetous man has little more satisfaction than the mere beholding of such substance with his eyes, and in which he takes such sinful pleasure. Says Matthew Henry, “This is the lust of covetousness.”

3. The Pride of Life — The pride of life has to do with “how we live” in this body as the natural man. It includes the ambition of power, of chief positions and high titles (as was the case with the Scribes and Pharisees), of grand living, living in a sumptuous, luxurious and pompous manner, in rich diet, costly apparel, having fine seats, palaces, and stately buildings — all which is but vanity and vexation of spirit. A vain mind craves all the grandeur, equipage, and pomp of a vain-glorious life; this is ambition, and thirst after honor and applause; in part, this is also the disease of the ear — it must be flattered with adulation, admiration and praise.

The “pride of life” seems to be the norm for the majority of Christian America — they devote the majority of their energies to “building their estates” and “keeping up with societal standards.” The same attitude runs rampant among many Christian ministries. It is at the heart of competition and “one-upmanship.” It comes from the deep-rooted desire to be thought “better” than others. This motivational driving force is not from above, but from the world system here below. As Christians, we have embraced the very things the world has placed such a premium upon —
degrees, accomplishment, position, stature, influence, achievement, power, physical beauty, possessions, houses, recreational vehicles, boats, airplanes, clothes, aspirations, and societal respect — much of it the result of societal pressure. [Think very carefully about the importance of the things listed above that run your life]. The apostle Paul told Timothy about the “backsliding” of a friend of theirs named “Demas” — “Demas, having loved this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica” (2 Tim 4:10). It is quite sobering to discover how much we value the things of this world — simply reflect upon how much of your time and wealth you invest in the Lord’s work — the vast majority of Christian America has forsaken its mission for the pleasures of this world. Just because our friends love to travel the roads the world finds grand and glorious, doesn’t mean we must do the same. Prayerfully consider “your allegiance” to the One who gave His life for you — without comparing yourself to others (which is sheer hypocritical nonsense). Remember, when you chose to believe in Christ, you chose to die to your old way of life and unite yourself with Christ (Rom 6:4-6).

The apostle John assures us of the transience of all three of these systems, actions & desires. The reason for this warning is simply that “the world draws down the heart from God; and so the more the love of the world prevails [in us], the more the love of God dwindles and decays,” says Matthew Henry. Together — the Flesh, the Eyes, and Life — they involve sexual uncleanness, covetousness and pride which are all enemies of a healthy spiritual life, and then the world becomes a usurper of our affections. We are not to love these things because they are contemptible and unworthy of our love and they do not last. Matthew Henry asks: “What has become of all the pomp and pleasure of all those who now lie mouldering in the grave?” Every lustful desire cries out for more but that itself has a dreadful end. The affections we all have should be swayed and influenced by the divine word and our relationship to the Lord of all things. The media today demand respect and tolerance for every group in this world system — except Christians. The airwaves, internet, Hollywood, and printed media can’t do enough it seems to show their derision for Christians. Should we be surprised? Not at all. The Lord Jesus told us why: “If you were of the world, the world would love you; but because you are not of the world, for I have chosen you out of this world, the world will hate you” (Jn 15:19). Remember, the world loves darkness rather than light (Jn 3:19). The Lord’s brother James tells us, “Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? that whoever wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God” (Jam 4:4-5). Thinking, looking, acting, dressing, talking, and responding like the world are not the marks of the followers of Christ — why do we try so hard to emulate the world? In the passage before us, John gives us three reasons why we should not love the world —

Three Reasons Why We Should Not Love the World

First, love for the world is antithetical to loving God. Writes John, “If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him” (v.15). When we love the world it actually pushes out our love for God; conversely, when we love God it pushes out our love for the world. Jesus said, “No one can serve two masters; he will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other” (Mt 6:24). The reason love for the world pushes out love for God is that “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;” so loving the world excludes loving God; loving the world cannot coexist with
loving God. By the way, “The Messiah gave Himself for our sins, that He might deliver us from this present evil world, according to the will of the only true God, our Father” (Gal 1:4).

Perhaps a clear definition of “love” will make this concept more understandable — love by definition means to be “fully committed to someone or something.” For instance, you cannot truly love your wife and cohabitate with another woman — how can one say he loves his wife with all his heart (that is, he is fully committed to her), and yet give himself to another woman? The principle idea of “100 percent allegiance” is taught throughout scripture (Mt 6:24; 2 Tim 2:4) — one cannot have one foot in the world and the other foot in heaven. The apostle Paul uses the illustration of what it means to be a “world class athlete” — “he does not win the prize unless he competes according to the rules” (2 Tim 2:5). In the Greek games, which continued for centuries under Roman rule, every participant had to meet three qualifications: 1) He had to be a true-born Greek; 2) He had to go through a training regimen at least ten months before participating in the games; and 3) He had to compete within the specific rules for a given event. Every event had its rules, and every event had its prize, but no athlete, no matter how brilliant, was crowned unless he had competed according to the rules. In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul asked rhetorically, “Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win. Everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things” (1 Cor 9:24-25). If a “world class athlete” expects to excel above all others, he voluntarily, and severely restricts his liberty — his sleep, his diet, and his exercise regimen all come into play. The concept to being a “fully committed” athlete is antithetical to living on junk food, smoking, drinking, partying, staying up all night, not working out, and lust laying around and enjoying the “fat life.” Conversely, the world class athlete’s disciplined self-control is a rebuke of half-hearted, out-of-shape Christians who put forth almost no effort into living a sanctified-life of holiness. In the same way, the husband must be “fully committed” to his wife if he is to experience a loving, happy marriage. So how can one expect to enjoy the fruit of his salvation when his lifestyle is antithetical to that salvation? Paul’s victory in the realm of ministry was dependent on his body, with its lusts and impulses, not being in control of him, but rather he being in control of them (1 Cor 9:26-27).

Loving the world is antithetical to loving God — being fully committed to the things of this world is the antithesis of being fully committed to the things of Christ. Don’t try to convince yourself that you are “fully committed to Christ” if you are not, because if you have a “high level of commitment to the things of this world,” you are not fully committed to Christ.

Second, the World and its Lusts are Passing Away (v. 17a). Nobody purposely builds his house on a river bottom; nobody invests his life savings in a company that is going bankrupt; nobody boards a sinking ship; and nobody jumps out of an airplane without first checking his parachute. Conversely, to invest your life in a world that is passing away, will only end in misery and heartache. Why would a believer be so foolish as to continue investing his life in it, when the undeniable truth is, “this world and all its toys and cravings is passing away”? Are you really willing to exchange the eternal reward for some foolish temporal gain? (Mt 16:24-26).

Third, those who do the Will of the Father will Live Forever (v. 17b). The opposite of loving the world is not only “loving God” (v.15), but also “doing the will of God” (v.17b). Jesus said, “If you love Me you will keep My commandments” (Jn 14:15; 1 Jn 5:3) — so loving God and doing His will are one and the same. One cannot say he loves God and yet refuses to obey Him — the two positions are contrary. The writer to the Hebrews said, “Without faith it is impossible to please
God” (Heb 11:6). An understanding of what “faith” brings light to the meaning of this statement — essentially, faith means to “believe God;” therefore how can one expect to “please God” when he doesn’t “believe God”? If you told your wife that “you did not believe her” regarding a matter in which she was really being truthful, would you expect her to be “pleased” with you? In a sense, you’re calling her a liar, so why in the world would you expect her to be pleased with you? If you are calling God a liar, why would you expect Him to be pleased with you? By the way, “faith without works is dead” (Jam 2:17) — so if God asks you do “do something,” and you “don’t do it,” you are not pleasing Him. Remember, when you “love the world” (its toys and its thinking) you are not pleasing God; you are actually loving the very thing that God hates. “If you love the world you will perish with the world; but if you love God, you will do His will and live with Him forever” (1 Jn 2:17). To what are you truly “fully committed”? Christ or this world? Let me expand on the definition of faith here – the author of Hebrews tells us that faith is “the assurance of things hoped for” (Heb 11:1). The reason so many believers “lack assurance” in their Christian life, is that they are “compromising with the world” — that is, they are “loving the world” (to a significant degree). No believer can expect to have a deep, abiding assurance of salvation without being “fully committed to Christ.” Again, the two go hand in hand — without FAITH (loving God and doing His will) you will not have a confident assurance of salvation — you may be genuinely saved, but you will never find a deep, abiding peace that that is indeed the case. Stop flirting with the world! turn from it! it is time to get serious about your faith! you have left your first love! remember from where you have fallen! repent and do the deeds you did at first! (Rev 2:4-5, 7; Mt 5;14-16; 24:10-13; Phil 2:15; 1 Tim 4:1; 6:9-12; 2 Tim 2:15; 3:1-5; 4:10).

If you don’t feel much love for God you are either “not born of God,” or your “love has grown cold.” It is possible that your are a “cultural Christian” or a “hereditary Christian,” and have developed patterns of religious talk and behavior because of its social influence upon your life. The other possibility is that you have been “born again” and have tasted of what it means to have a heart for God, but now you are a “dimly burning wick” (Is 42:3) in love with the things of this world. The prescription for your ailment is not much different from the prescription for seeking the new birth in the first place — the same Word that ignites the fire of love in your heart in the first place, also rekindles that love… so yield yourself to the Holy Spirit and immerse yourself in the Word of God. Cry out to Christ for a new vision of the glory of His grace. Pursue a new passion for Christ.

Remember, love for the world and love for God cannot coexist. Every heart loves something. The very essence of our nature is “desire.” There is nobody alive on planet earth who does not want something. At the center of our being is a spring of longing, a craving, a desire, a want, a need… at the center of our heart we are endlessly thirsty. God wants to satisfy your thirsty soul (cf. Ps 42; Is 5:13; 29:8, 13; Jn 4:14).

Read the following letter by an “apostate Christian” — it starts on the next page.
Letter by an “Apostate Christian” on the Christian Teaching
“Love Not the World”

This letter is located at — http://articles.exchristian.net/2003/06/love-not-world.php

The following letter was written by an “ex-Christian,” or should we say, by someone who professed years ago to be a follower of Christ. The frustrations he experienced as a “so-called” follower of Christ are quite revealing. The reason for my including this letter in this study, is that many Christians struggle with very similar questions. Here is this “apostate” Christian’s letter —

I really love being alive. I love everything about it. I like it when I feel good and everything is going my way, and I find a certain pleasure in overcoming the various difficulties that challenge me as the years roll past. I like being a man. I think being born in the USA where my security is not threatened and where my freedoms are protected is awesome. I love the age I live in. The technological gizmos and gadgets that I enjoy fill my day with wonder and fun. You might say that I "love the world."

The Christian message touts itself as being "good news." The message is hopelessly mixed. While claiming to be a positive force, in reality it is riddled with negative pessimism. I was a Christian for 30 years, I know the rhetoric. God sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. We have eternal life through His name. We deserve the punishment of eternal damnation in Hell for our rebellion against GOD, but in his amazing love and mercy HE developed a plan to rescue us from our fate.

The gospel is positive, so the Christian says. The gospel is positive, so I also said when I counted myself among the "elect." The core of Christianity is a story of dark foreboding. It tells us that life on earth is nothing, or less than nothing. "Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world." "For Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present world." "He that loveth father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of me." "Teaching us that, denying... worldly lusts."

Family is to be abandoned if it interferes with devotion to the God. Physical pleasure is to be shunned. This life is nothing but a staging ground for eternal bliss in the afterlife. Nothing you do here on earth is of any importance if it is not somehow related to spreading the gospel or glorifying the Christian deity. Inventors, explorers, scientists, psychologists, or anyone else that attempts to understand the world with the goal of enhancing or bettering human lives on this terrestrial ball are looked on with distrust and condemned if their world view reflects a lack of belief that their lives are in the hands of an angry god.

Christians are taught to be in wonder of creation. They are taught to be grateful to the Lord above for the gifts he so freely bestows on each of them. They are told to mimic the patience of Job when adversity strikes, because GOD, in his incomprehensible wisdom, is testing them for so greater of an unexplained reason. They are also taught to be afraid, to be very afraid: heaven for the elect; hell for the damned.
While I will admit that Christianity provides a nice mental escape from some of the harsh realities of life, if your life is going good, it offers nothing but criticisms. "Woe to the rich." "Woe unto you that are full!" "Woe, woe, woe, to the inhabitants of the earth."

I am sitting on the porch of my house as I type this rant. My shirt is open and the heat of the sun feels magnificent. Life is grand. My wife loves me and I love her. Two of my children are on the honor roll, and I have one son serving in the Marines. I never miss a day of work, and I am good at what I do. I pay my bills early and I have nearly no debt at all. I am not rich, by American standards, but I live and eat very well. My health and the health of my family is good. I am appreciative that I have such a pleasant situation. I am also an apostate and therefore worse than pond scum in Christian theology. I realize that adversity will come. My health, or the health of my loved ones will fail one day. I will die. This is reality. But to say that the life I lead now is of no value, simply because it is "mortal" is pathetic. I know I won't live forever, but I also know that my life, although short, is a wonderful thing.

Christianity tells me that life on earth sucks and then you die. If you don't believe in Jesus, life sucks and then you roast in hell forever and ever and ever and ever and ever.... Christianity also tells me that life on earth sucks, but, if you believe and obey Jesus you get to live forever, and that's the only way to keep it from sucking. That's right, believe and obey is what I said. How else will you demonstrate that you believe unless you obey? Saved by faith? Sure, but without obedience, there is no real evidence of belief.

Christianity claims to offer freedom, a positive outlook and a life after death, when in reality it requires bondage to a religious dogma, a functional hate of the only life we have, a terrible separation from loved ones who don't agree, and a fantasy of some sort of after life that will make real life pale to inconsequence in comparison. If you are a Christian, you will be happy forever in paradise, so the promise goes. If your loved ones don't believe, they will be tortured for eternity. Regardless of that, you will be mindlessly happy for ever and ever and ever, even with the knowledge that they are in horrible and never ending torment at the hands of your loving (angry) god.

If your life is filled with nothing but impossible poverty, disease or death, then I can understand the need to escape your reality with the promise of a future life where every tear will be wiped from your eyes, but if you love life, be assured you are making the right decision by leaving the false hope of Christianity far behind.

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That's a fairly provocative letter. This fellow addressed a number of very common objections as to why he no longer wanted to identify with Christianity. A good assignment for each of us might be to write a "letter of response" to counter his objections. As a professor of Religious Studies I would give this assignment to each one of my students who truly embraces Christ as their Savior, because I believe it is essential that believers be able to a good defense for their faith and the reasons why they are "fully committed" to Christ — if they cannot articulate a strong argument against these basic objections, they will vacillate in their faith when times really get tough. 2 Timothy 2:15; 4:10.