

January 5/6, 2008

## **Torn Between Two Lovers**

**1 John 2:15-17**

Pastor Bryan Clark

If December is the month for giving, January is the month for paying. Those things that seem so great in December often seem like “What have we done?” in January. So, every January we take a couple of weeks to talk about what God has to say about money.

If you're visiting with us this morning, no, we don't always talk about money but we usually do a couple of weeks in January, typically one week in August. And we do so unapologetically because we think people need to hear what God has to say about money and because we think that a lot of people are in crisis as it relates to what they do with their money.

This week we called the Consumer Credit Counseling Office here in Lincoln just to get some statistics about families that live right here in Lincoln. We learned that 43% of our families spend more than they make every year. The average family here has \$8,000 plus dollars on credit cards. Personal bankruptcies have doubled in the last ten years and the average individual in our community has 13 different credit obligations. Most of those tend to be credit cards, the rest are house and car and things like that.

One of the good things that we have to offer in this area no matter what your financial situation is, is financial counseling. If you find yourself at some level of crisis, we can assign you a financial coach that will work with you for several months and help you get your finances back in order. If it's budgeting, if it's anything having to do with finances we can help. We have a number of classes that are coming up and those are listed in the Atlas. The easiest thing is just to talk to someone at the Stewardship booth right across from the Coffee House. So, be aware of that.

I would also say, by and large, what those numbers, what those statistics represent is not a money management problem, it's not a math problem, it's not a budgeting problem, it's a value problem. People that have bought into a value system that is ultimately destructive. And until that changes deep at the core, no amount of budgeting or math classes is really going to help.

If you have a Bible this morning, turn with me to 1 John chapter two. Yes, this is a rerun. I did, preach this message four years ago. But, in my opinion it's one of those messages we need to hear on a regular basis. I would say for me personally, what we're going to talk about today is something I need to think about and be reminded of on a regular basis because it's very easy to drift back into the world's value system and it gets us into all kinds of trouble. 1 John 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.** (\*NASB, 1 John 2:15)

John opens with this reminder that we cannot have two lovers, you cannot love the world and also love God at the same time. Now I think we understand this concept. It's a reality in the world in which we live. For example, if I was to go home today and say to Patti, my wife, “Honey, I want you to know I really love you. It's been great being married to you these 26 years but I've found someone else. And I love her too and I've decided I'd like to have two lovers.” Once I regained consciousness (laughter) I would be aware that that's a bad plan. There is no way she's going to tolerate that nor should she.

We understand you can't have two lovers. Well then, why would God be any different from that? The reality is we cannot love both God and this world. We need to define what John means when he says "the world". James 4:4 says that if we make ourselves friends with the world then we have made ourselves an enemy of God. That's pretty strong language so we need to know what does he mean?

The Bible uses the term "**world**" three different ways. One is the idea of *the world* of people, John 3:16 "For God so loved the world." The second way is the idea of the cosmos, the sun, the moon, the stars, *the world* which God has made. But most commonly, the Bible refers to *the world* as a world system, a value system that defines this world. And that's what John's talking about here. You cannot love the value system of this world and still love God.

Now to really understand what he means by that you have to go back in your minds to the first three chapters of Genesis. In Genesis chapters 1 and 2, we learned that we as people are made in the image of God and the ultimate celebration of that image is to live in relationship with God. And being rightly related to God we find our significance, we find our value, we find our worth, we find our purpose in God and we live our lives out of that.

So, God is the center, God is the core and our lives flow out of that relationship. In Genesis chapter three, Adam and Eve sin against God and the result of sin is they are separated from God pictured by them being ushered out of the paradise that God had created. Which raises the question, if significance and value and purpose flowed out of being rightly related to God, what happens when you're now cut off from God?

And the answer is you have to become your own God. And you have to somehow determine your own significance. You have to determine your own value and worth, you have to determine your own purpose in life. That's why the two value systems are not compatible. One is completely built around the idea of being separated from God. And one is built around the idea of God at the core. Therefore, they're not compatible, you can't embrace them both.

Now when you think about creating a value system separated from God, how then do we determine our significance? How do we determine our worth if God's not in the picture? Well, it has to be on the basis of our own performance. I have to then demonstrate to you that I have significance, I have to demonstrate to you that I have value so that has to be on the basis of my ability to perform. And that is the essence of the world's value system. It is a performance driven system. *I am what I do* and that determines whether I have high value or low value.

Now still, how do we determine our value on the basis of our performance? Well, to do that we have to compare ourselves. We compare ourselves with one another. Life becomes a competition. Who are my competitors? Everybody else. And so, I determine my value based on my performance compared to you.

Therefore, on any given day my self-esteem can go way up and can go way down. I compare myself with one person that I think I compare favorably so I feel good about myself. But, an hour later I bump into somebody else and I don't compare so favorably so my sense of value goes down. It's this rollercoaster ride that is up and down and up and down.

So, you might ask me this morning, are you fast or are you slow? Are you smart or are you not so smart? Are you good looking or are you goofy looking? Are you successful, are you not successful? The only way I can answer your question is, compared to whom? It all depends upon who I'm comparing myself with. And that's the way the game is played, that's the essence of the value system of this world. It is driven by performance.

But even on my best days when I feel the best about myself I know that is temporary at best. Because I know around the corner is going to come somebody better. So, I know even on my best days that I have to keep pressing in order to get better and so there's this pressure to perform and this stress to push and push and push and push because what's at stake is my sense of worth, my sense of value.

Well, take that back to what John is talking about then in 1 John chapter two. He's going to help us define **the world** further, verse 16.

**For all that is in the world, [in other words he's going to define it for us] the lust of the flesh** (vs. 16a)

The core of the world's system is the **lust of the flesh**. Now lots of people when they hear that phrase immediately think of things like sexual, sensual, immoral behaviors. And even though that's a part of it, it's actually a very small part of it. If that's how we define the **lust of the flesh**, most people would say, yes, that's worldly behavior but I'm not guilty of that, therefore, I'm not worldly. But when we define the terms correctly, we begin to see that this worldliness creeps into all of our lives. Flesh is one of those terms that we talk about a lot but it's often defined incorrectly. I think for me personally, it wasn't until just several years ago when we went through Galatians that I feel like I landed on what the Bible means by the term **flesh**.

The idea of **flesh** is simply *that which I can do apart from God*. The flesh includes many good things. I can worship in the flesh, I can serve in the church in the flesh. Most of religion is built on the flesh. I can preach in the flesh, the flesh doesn't have to be bad, immoral behavior; it's simply what I can do in my own power and in my own strength. One of the great Old Testament pictures of this would be the ritual of circumcision, the mark of the covenant of the Hebrew people. If you've ever wondered, why is that the mark of the covenant? What a strange mark that is.

Well, the idea was this. God told Abraham that *through you would ultimately come the Messiah; God in the flesh who would be the Savior of the world*. And the mark of the covenant, marking your commitment to believe the promise, is circumcision. The symbolism was this; even though you as a people can have relations and produce offspring or produce children, that's what you can do in the flesh. The reality is you cannot produce a Messiah. You cannot produce the Savior of the world, that's something I will have to do for you.

So, the removal of the flesh of the foreskin was a way of saying that you may be able to reproduce children through this organ but what you will not be able to do is produce a Messiah. You can't do that in your flesh, I will do that by my power and that was the symbolism of that. And it really helps us define the term flesh. Flesh is what I can do myself. You go to the New Testament, I think the best book to understand this is the book of Galatians. I used to think the contrast in Galatians was really legalism and grace. But the contrast is really the flesh and the spirit. Legalism is a manifestation of the flesh and grace is the operating procedure of the spirit. But the contrast is *that*

***which I can do in my own strength*** versus ***that which is only possible through the grace and the spirit of God.***

So, what does he mean by the lust of the flesh? The lust of the flesh is simply that which I can do in my own strength or in my own power. The idea of lust is this desire within us to be my own God; my desire to run my own show, to determine my significance, to determine my own value on the basis of my performance. So, the world system says I am what I do, I am my profession, I am my title. So, my performance determines my significance, my performance determines my worth.

This is the value system that by and large drives our culture. It's a very difficult value system to avoid. Those of us that are parents need to think long and hard about how we are communicating to our children. Let me ask you a question. Are you more excited about your son when he scores 20 points in the basketball game than you were when he sat on the bench the entire game? And what does your son hear in that? What your son hears is I am valuable when I perform, I'm not valuable when I don't perform.

Are you as excited about your child who gets straight C's as you are about your child that gets straight A's if they're both doing their best? What we communicate says a lot about our value system. Could you be just as proud of your son the janitor as you are about your son the doctor? See, the reality is the world's system creeps into our thinking all the time. And as parents when we celebrate performance more than character we're setting our children up for a very painful fall.

So, the question arises, okay, if that's true, let's say this is the game, the world system is the game, how is the game scored? If this is a football game then what constitutes a touchdown? What is a field goal? What is a safety? How do we put points on the board? Well, John tells us,

**and the lust of the eyes** (vs. 16b)

In both the old and New Testament the concept of the eyes refers to covetness. The idea that I covet stuff, I want more stuff. That's why he says, ***Do not love the world nor the things in the world.*** The world is the value system, the things are the way the value system is expressed, that's the way we keep score. We keep score on the basis of money and stuff. So, how do I demonstrate to you that I am performing well? How do I demonstrate to you that I am significant, that I do have worth? And the answer is, by the stuff I accumulate. In our culture it's by the size of my house, it's by the type of car I drive, it's by the amount of stuff I can accumulate, that puts points on the scoreboard and it causes you to be impressed with me. It's my way of saying, *hey I am competing well. I'm somebody.*

This is the reason why people buy houses they can't afford and they buy vehicles they can't afford, it's not about a budgeting problem, it's not about a money management problem, what's at stake is their self-esteem and they feel poorly about themselves so they need more points on the board so it's not really a money issue at all. It's a self worth issue and this is my way of trying to get points on the board to try to say to you, *hey I am worth something.*

Which is the way it works in our culture and the fact of the matter is, it does work in our culture. If you live in a bigger house in a nicer neighborhood, people in our culture are impressed with that. If you drive up to church in a brand new Lexus instead of an old rusted out mini-van, the reality is people are impressed with that, that's the culture in which we live.

Now, I have to be really careful here so please listen to what I'm about to say. I am not saying that if you live in a nice house or you drive a brand new car that you are worldly. I'm not saying that at all. I'm not saying that if you have a big beautiful home and drive a nice car and have stuff that you have embraced the world's value system rather than God's. I'm not saying that. Be very careful that you're not judging somebody else and saying, "*Oh, look, they've got a new car they must be worldly*".

This is an issue of the heart and every one of us has to examine our heart. This isn't really information to be judging other people. If you are in a house you cannot afford, if you are driving a vehicle you cannot afford, yes, you are worldly in your value system. That's a bit of a slam dunk. But, having nice things according to 1 Timothy 6:17, if God has blessed you and you can afford those things there's nothing wrong with that, appreciate them, enjoy them, be generous with them, share them. There's nothing wrong with that.

But the reality is in the culture in which we live, people set their self-worth on the basis of their net worth. Now how does this affect this whole idea of giving to God? When you figured out this morning that this weekend's message was about money, some of you were immediately defensive in your own heart. Some of you even to the point of being resentful.

You're thinking deep inside, "*I wish we would have gone somewhere else this morning*". Why does that emotion churn inside of you? The answer is because you resent the fact that I'm asking you on behalf of God, in essence to take points off the scoreboard and instead to give those resources to God. Because deep in your heart you know you're not competing well and you can't afford to take points off the scoreboard. If you take points off the scoreboard, you're already not keeping up and that's not just money you're giving to God, that's a chunk of your self-esteem, that's a chunk of your significance, that's a chunk of your self-worth.

So, it's really not a money management issue, it's not how much money you make issue. At the end of the day you will never experience the joy of giving, you will never really believe that it's more blessed to give than to receive. You will never know the deep joy of generosity as long as you are embracing the world's value system because for you to give, is to take points off the scoreboard. And you simply cannot afford to do that. You don't have extra points to give.

This isn't an issue of how much money you make, this issue is just as prevalent among the poor as it is among the rich. For example, if you have an old beat up house and you drive an old rusty minivan and because of that you feel less about yourself, then you are worldly to the core because you bought into a value system that simply isn't true. Those things have nothing to do with your value.

One of the things I hear today is that this generation of young people have rejected their parent's materialism. I have to tell you I don't see it. They like their stuff and they like their toys. What I do see is this, they have figured out this is the way the game's played. They have figured out the level of performance necessary to feel good about themselves and deep in their heart there's a lot of fear that they're never going to perform at that level and they resent the fact that this is the way the game's played. Because it creates so much insecurity and fear deep within them but they realize this is the only game in town and pretty soon they're living the same lifestyle as they resented.

I guess the question that arises out of all of this is, *does it work? Does this lifestyle work?* Well, John tells us that too:

**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.**  
(vs. 16b-17)

The reality is this value system cannot ever work, it creates this relentless pressure to perform and I've got to be better and I've got to be better and I've got to keep pushing, I can't rest for a minute, I got to keep putting points on the scoreboard and eventually that's just going to create a crash and burn. If I feel good about myself today there's only one basis by which I do and that is *I've compared myself with you and I think I'm better*. So, that's the boastful pride of life. The only way you can learn in this system is to be filled with arrogance and pride and that is ultimately the step before destruction.

The other alternative is, *I've compared myself with you and I don't think I compare favorably at all so I feel very poorly about myself*. Either way the system can't deliver, either way there's no way to win. As a matter of fact, what the text says is not that the world **will pass away** but it **is passing away**; present tense. Which is saying, it isn't something that works today that you'll pay for later, it's something that isn't working today!

If people were to be honest, they're pushing and they're pressing and on the outside they're trying to pretend they have the American dream and everything's going just fine, but inside they're churning, they're empty, they're miserable, they're anxious, they're stressed out, there isn't enough time to even enjoy life, they're just pressing and pressing and pressing and at some point you have to say if it isn't working now, what makes you think that more of the same will eventually deliver the goods? At some point you have to wake up and say this is not working.

Several years ago there was a book that came out called *The Progress Paradox*.<sup>1</sup> It's written by Gregg Easterbrook, and to my knowledge he is not a believer. He was simply, as a sociologist assessing the fact that we, as Americans, live better than any generation ever has in the history of the world and he seeks to document that. And then he turns it around and says, yes, statistics show we are more miserable, we're more unhappy, we're more depressed than any generation in history.

And he raises the question, why? And his conclusion is maybe we need to think of a new value system. One of the most interesting parts of the book is when he says they used to go out on the street and they would interview people and they would ask them this question, "*Are you happy?*" And the overwhelming majority of the people said "*Yes, we're happy*". So, they would ask a follow-up question, "*Are you truly happy or are you just saying that to try and mask the pain deep inside?*" And he said after a while we stopped asking the question because so many people burst into tears.

The reality is deep at the core, people are not happy; this value system simply isn't working. Which raises the question, is there an alternative? Is there another way to live? Well, the answer is, yes, there is, you find it just at the end of verse 17.

**but the one who does the will of God lives forever.** (vs. 17b)

Of course, the whole book of 1 John is talking about the will of God and God's salvation and all that that means. The reality is, there is an alternative to this performance based value system and that is this thing we call grace. Grace is our understanding that we could not perform well enough for God. The danger of religion is religion seeks to convince you that you can perform well enough

for God that God's going to say someday, *okay, you made the curve, you're in!* And we assess that on the basis of comparison, am I good compared to you? On that basis we determine if we think we're getting in or not.

But God tells us, no, the standard isn't how you compare to one another, the standard is God Himself and anything short of perfection is condemnation. So, experiencing God's salvation is recognizing I cannot perform well enough for God. There's nothing I can do that's going to impress God, there's nothing I can do to address my sin problem, therefore, I understand that God Himself became flesh and He in essence performed for me, lived a perfect life and was nailed to the cross in payment for my sin.

He did for me what I could not do for myself. There has to come a time of brokenness where you recognize I cannot do this myself, I cannot perform for God, ultimately I simply receive as a gift on the basis of God's grace His salvation and recognize that on the basis of God's grace I have my sins forgiven. On the basis of God's grace I am now rightly related to God. And now that I'm rightly related to God, I get my significance, I get my worth, I get my purpose, I get my value by being rightly related to God and I live my live out of that.

When you truly begin to understand this economy of grace, when you begin to understand this other value system, it absolutely sets you free. To understand on a daily basis, I don't have to compete with you. I really don't care how I compare with you. It's not a competition anymore. I don't need you for my value and my worth and my significance and because of that I am set free, I don't have to compete with you, I'm free now to love you. I'm free to celebrate you, I'm free to cheerlead you, I'm free to live life at a whole different level.

Because my significance, my value, my worth is connected to One who never changes, One who's grace never changes. So, my sense of esteem and worth doesn't have to go up and down on a daily basis but it can be constant because it is connected to the One who is constant. It's a whole new way of life.

It doesn't mean that we as Christians aren't competitive; it doesn't mean that we don't perform well. Think of it this way, let's imagine that there were two young men on the Nebraska basketball team and before the biggest game of the year, one father sits down with his son and says, *"Son, I want you to know that everything's riding on this game and we've worked our whole lives for this and I don't want you to go out there and embarrass me, you go out there and you had better play well and you better have the best game of your life because if you go out there and blow it, don't even bother coming home, I don't even want to talk to you."*

The second father says, *"Son, I want you to know I love you. I love you because you're my son and I love you because of the person that you are and I'm proud of you for this day and you go out there and you play your heart out. But, I want you to know if you have the greatest game of your life or if you have the worst game of your life, I love you and I'm proud of you and I look forward to when you come back home."*

Which of those two do you think are going to play better? The one who's playing out of an inner strength and a tremendous amount of security or the one's who's playing out of his insecurity and a tremendous amount of fear? The reality is understanding God's value system sets us free to operate at the highest level we possibly could to maximize everything God's given us for God's purposes.

The reality is as long as you embrace the value system of this world, as long as you are convinced that your significance and your value and your worth is determined on the basis of your performance, you're going to live a miserable life and you will never understand the joy of giving. Oh, you may give out of obligation but you resent it because it's taken points off the board that you can't afford to give away.

You'll never really experience that it is true, it is more blessed to give than to receive, you'll never experience the joy of generosity and you'll never really experience the freedom that God offers in this wonderful value system of grace. So, I would beg you this morning, **do not love the world! Nor the things of the world for if anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.**

*Our Father, we are thankful this morning that you are such a gracious God. Lord, how often we are torn between two lovers, Lord, I know this is true in my own life, that the world value system begins to creep into my own life and my own heart. Lord, help us to understand this remarkable value system of grace that is centered upon You. That our significance and our value and worth would come by being rightly related to you and out of that we would live our lives, that we would be set free from the pressure and the stress and the fear and the destruction of the value system of this world. Lord, I pray this in Jesus' name, Amen.*

<sup>1</sup> *The Progress Paradox* by Gregg Easterbrook, (Random House: New York), 2003.

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**Study Questions**  
**Torn Between Two Lovers**  
**1 John 2: 15-17**  
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**Opening Discussion**

1. What is the value system of the world? How does this world define success? How is success displayed in this value system?
2. What is God's value system? How is it alike or different from the value system of this world?
3. Given your definition of these two value systems, is it possible to live out both value systems simultaneously? Why or why not?

**Bible Study**

1. Read 1 John 2:15-17. Compare 3:1, 5:19, James 4:4, Eph. 2:1,2. From these texts define what John means by "world" in 1 John 2:15?

2. What does John mean when he states, "If anyone loves the world the love of the Father is not in him"? What does it mean to love the world?

What does it mean to love the "things" of this world?

3. Define the "lust of the flesh." Compare how Paul uses the term "flesh" in Galatians 3:3.

What does it mean to define yourself by the statement: "I am what I do"?

4. To define yourself by the statement, "I am what I do" is to reduce life to a comparison and competition. How does this play out in our culture?

5. Define the "lust of the eyes." How does this correlate with loving the "things" of this world?

What does it mean to define yourself by the statement, "I am what I possess"?

6. If success is defined by what I do, then possessions become the means by which I communicate my success. How does this play out in our culture? How do the marketers of the culture tap into this value system?

7. Define the "boastful pride of life."

How does this "boasting" explain why people have these huge credit card debts and simply spend more money than they make?

8. Why is it so hard to give money to God if you love the world?

The problem is not that we can't afford to give. The problem is we can't afford to give if we buy into the value system of the world. Do you agree or disagree with this statement and why?

9. What is the alternative to loving this world and the things of this world?

What does this mean in everyday practice? How will this be evident in the management of our resources?

10. What is the benefit of loving the Father?

## **Application**

1. Which value system are you living out each day? What is the evidence of your conclusion?

Does how you spend your money support your conclusion?

2. Which value system do you *want* to live out each day?

What will be necessary for this to happen or continue to happen?

3. What is the biggest challenge to loving the Father and living out His eternal value system?

What can your group do together to help address this challenge?