

October 6/7, 2001

Will You Choose God or the World?

1 John 2:12-17

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Let's imagine that you have been given an all-expense-paid trip to an island paradise somewhere across the world. You have two transportation options; one is the option to fly on the Concorde jet. This is about as luxurious as you can imagine. It has live entertainment, unimaginable food, and all this room and space to move. It is the most luxurious travel possible. The other alternative is to take a cargo ship—not a cruise ship, but a cargo ship. You'll stay down where the crew stays in little quarters that are pretty small, but adequate, and you'll eat down there with the crew. It will take about two weeks to arrive by ship; or it will take a matter of hours to arrive on the Concorde. Which would you choose?

But, I did forget one slight detail: we have the ability to know the future and we know for a fact that the Concorde is going to crash in the Pacific, and that there will be no survivors. *Now* which one would you choose? You say, "Well, that's kind of a silly question." I know it's a silly question. The choice does seem obvious, yet every day thousands of people get onboard that "plane" that they think is headed for paradise. But we know for a fact it won't make it. It will crash. We also know that it isn't just filled with pagans. That plane is carrying far too many Christians. As a matter of fact, I'm convinced that some of you are on that plane. You are on that plane, thinking it's headed for paradise, but it *is* going to crash. And there are some of you who are strongly considering boarding that plane.

In 1 John 2 we see that John is very concerned about that. In our study so far, we have been learning about authentic Christian community. We have been learning what it is and why it is so important. In fact, John has been hitting it pretty hard, because he is trying to expose the false teaching of the Gnostics and trying to affirm the true direction of the church. Now he moves into a discussion that is really targeted *not* toward false teachers, but specifically toward the family of God—toward the true believers. He wants to affirm their faith. He wants to affirm this journey they're on spiritually, and he wants to warn them of something about which he is concerned.

Verses 12, 13, and 14 are organized around six statements. Three of the statements are present tense: "I am writing..." Three of them are past tense: "I have written..." John is saying, "What I'm writing now and will write to the end of the letter..." and "...what I've already written in the previous chapters..." Basically he is saying, "All that I have written...all that I'm going to write...this is the reason for that." He is going to talk about three different categories, or groupings, of Christians.

He uses metaphors, or images, when he says they are children, young men, and fathers. In the first century, it would have been customary to use the male gender, but John is not limiting this discussion to men, by any means. He is simply using "men" as a metaphor. He is talking about new believers, growing Christians, and very mature Christians.

Verse 12: "I am writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven you for His name's sake." This word for children is the same word that is used in chapter 2, verse 1. It is a word that means "to bring forth, to come from." It is a word that specifically would focus on the fact that a child comes from his or her parent—meaning they are family. In this

particular case, he is using the word the same way he used it in chapter 2, verse 1, meaning “all of us.” All of us are God’s spiritual children, and the emphasis is on the fact that we all come from the same spiritual parent, meaning all of our sins are forgiven. That is the basis upon which we claim to be the children of God, the very thing that we celebrate through communion.

There is also an emphasis in that, that we are family—we belong together—which is going to be a very important part of this discussion. When he says “for His name’s sake” it is a reference to all that God is—all that Jesus is. We have had several names for Jesus in our study already. He has been called the *Word of Life*. He has been called *the Advocate*. He has been called the *Propitiation*. He has been called *Jesus Christ, the Righteous*. But, really, what John is talking about is what we learned early in the letter about the person and work of Jesus Christ—all that would be summed up in His name. He is reminding us the very cornerstone of Christian community is the person and work of Jesus Christ, and it is on the basis of that, that we are tied together as family.

Verse 13: “I am writing to you, fathers, because you know Him who has been from the beginning.” *Fathers* is a reference to the spiritually mature men and women. It is interesting how he defines maturity. He doesn’t define spiritual maturity as those who have been Christians for a long time. While that is a part of it, that is no guarantee that someone is spiritually mature. I’ve known people who have been Christians for 40 years, and they are not spiritually mature. It also is not defined by people who have a lot of Bible information, who would do great in a game of Bible trivia. That doesn’t make them spiritually mature.

John says what makes them spiritually mature is that they *know* God—they know the Father. Remember, the biblical word for *know* always means intimacy. It never means information and facts, but always means a relationship. As a matter of fact, when that intimacy is described, it is described as knowing Him who has been from the beginning. That is a way of saying it is a person who knows God in-depth. The idea of the God who has been from the beginning is the idea that this is a God who is so big, who is so awesome, that these spiritually mature people have begun to plummet the depths of the mysteries of God. They really know Him in a way that is deep and meaningful. So he says, “I’m 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 think when he says “young men” he is talking about those growing Christians who are in a battle. They are the ones in the trenches, and they are face-to-face with the enemy, and they are overcoming the enemy. That’s what characterizes them. It would be a reference to most of us who are in that place in our life. We’re headed toward maturity, but we’re really engaged in battle with the enemy.

He goes on in the end of verse 13: “I have written to you *{past tense}*, children, because you know the Father.” This is a different word for children. This is a word that emphasizes to be in submission to—to be under authority. In this case I believe he is referring to new believers, because he’s making a specific reference to the fact that a child is under the authority of a parent. He’s saying that spiritual infants—new believers—are under the guidance and authority of spiritual parents, the more spiritually mature. The comment he makes about them is that they *know* the Father. They don’t know the Father like the spiritually mature, so he doesn’t have the line about “Him who has been from the beginning.”

They really don't know Him that deeply yet; they just know Him. They are entering into that relationship.

Verse 14: "I have written to you, fathers, because you know Him who has been from the beginning." That is an exact repetition of what he has already said. The reason he repeats it exactly is to emphasize that is the end goal—the ultimate purpose of this journey that we call discipleship, from spiritual infancy to what we call being complete in Christ. To remind us that the goal is to know God in-depth, he simply repeats the phrase again. And then one more time in verse 14: "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." He writes, again, to those growing Christians. But not only are they engaged in the battle, he says that they're strong, and their strength comes from abiding in the Word—from knowing the truth. That is how they are going to do battle with the enemy.

Now, if you take those verses and put them together, you have some very interesting insights into this discipleship process—this process from spiritual infancy all the way to an intimate relationship with God. For example, one of the things we are reminded of is that we are all at different stages in our spiritual walk. It is very important to remember that.

It isn't very hard to remember that in my own physical family. I am reminded daily that my 10 year-old isn't an adult. I don't expect her to be an adult. I have different expectations for my 16 year-old than for my 10 year-old. That is part of parenting; that's part of this process of growth.

But sometimes we do forget in the spiritual arena that we are at a different level spiritually; and if that is true, then our expectations need to be fair and reasonable. We need to extend grace and have patience with those who are not spiritually mature yet. They're learning ... they're growing. What they need is someone to encourage them and help them along. But we're not at the same level, and our expectations should be reasonable with that.

It is also interesting to notice that, for the new believers, the spiritual infants, John emphasized that they *know* God. Then he goes all the way to the end of the process and for the spiritually-mature person, the emphasis is that he or she *knows* God. In other words, from beginning to end, that's the point. To know God is the goal. That's what our faith is all about, and that is the real joy of our salvation. That is why we have been redeemed and saved, that we might know God, that we walk in intimacy with Him.

It is not about running programs. It is not about a list of rules and regulations. It's not about cranking out religion. It's about knowing God in an intimate way. If our programs, our rules and regulations, and our religious habits do not cause us to know God more deeply, then we have lost focus somewhere along the way, because that's what it is all about.

But he also tells us that, in between, there is this battle. From spiritual infancy to spiritual maturity, it is a battle. It's a battle with the enemy, and the only way we are going to win that battle is if we are strengthened with the truth of God's Word.

It is similar to the military where you have seasoned officers who have been through the trenches, and now they're in positions of leadership, overseeing the process. But typically it is the soldiers who are really down in the trenches doing battle. He says that is the discipleship process—that's what it looks like. Most of us are in that stage, where we're in

the trenches and we're doing battle with the enemy, en route to a deep, satisfying relationship with God. That is an overview of what we would call the discipleship process.

Now, starting in verse 15, he has some concerns. He says, "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." It is very important that we don't pull this verse out of its context, but that we understand it within its context. In other words, what has he just shared with us? He has just shared with us, from beginning to end, the point of our salvation is that we know God—that we enter into this deep love relationship with Him.

When John wrote his gospel, in chapter 17:3 he said, "This is eternal life; this is what defines it—that we *know* the Father." But what he is saying here is that we need to understand, if we love the world, then we don't love God. In other words, if we love the world we have lost the whole purpose of our salvation. We have missed the whole point.

What does John mean when he talks about the world? The Bible uses the term "world" in a couple different ways. For example, in John 3:16, when it says "...for God so loved the world" it is a reference to the world of people. But when it is used negatively, like it is here in John's letter, it means the world system—sometimes what we refer to as the culture. It's the world system that is opposed to God, which seeks to replace Him and become a substitute for God. Because that behavior is offensive to God, John says if you love that, then you don't love Him.

Some people try to have it both ways. Some people want to go out and love God a day or two a week and love the world the other days through the week. And many of them are convinced they are making that work. But John is saying you need to understand that if you love the world even *one* day of the week, you don't love God. It's like a husband having a wife and a mistress. I've heard this before: "I love them both." But John would say, "No you can't. The moment you love that mistress, you have betrayed your wife; you don't love her anymore." That is what he is saying about our relationship with God. You can't have it both ways.

That is important because the Gnostics, the false teachers, taught that you could have it both ways. They believed there was no connection between the spiritual world and the physical world. So while they claimed to be the spiritual elite because of their knowledge, they lived very worldly lives. They were involved in all kinds of sexual promiscuity and all kinds of worldly behaviors; and in their mind, that had no relationship whatsoever to their spiritual life. And that's what they were teaching in this church. John comes back and says it doesn't work that way. If you love the world, you need to understand you don't love God. You just don't.

He goes on to define what he's talking about in the world: "For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh..." When he's talking about the lust of the flesh, he is talking about those natural fleshly desires, those longings that we have. And they aren't wrong; as a matter of fact, in and of themselves, they are put there by God. We have certain longings, certain desires. We have a sexual longing; and we have a physical appetite for food and water. When you study the Scriptures, you find that these were placed in us in order to draw us to God. When we realize He is the only one who can fully satisfy those appetites, it leads us into intimacy with Him. That's the whole point of the relationship—the whole point of salvation. That's why, when you read through the New Testament, you find out that Jesus is the "bread

of life” and the “water of life.” Even in studying the sexual relationship, you find out that when a husband and wife come together in sexual intimacy, it is but a taste of the ultimate intimacy that we have in God. All of those drives, used God’s way, draw us into intimacy with Him.

But the world comes along and says, “You don’t need God to satisfy those appetites.” You can do it your own way ... you can do it on your own terms.” So the world comes along and says you can satisfy that sexual drive this way and that leads to all kinds of sexual behavior outside of marriage, such as pornography. There is a promise that this will satisfy, that this will somehow make us happy, that this will get us to paradise. But it is a lie. It just doesn’t work. It doesn’t satisfy. As a matter of fact, because it doesn’t satisfy, then the appetite just becomes greater. There is an all-consuming appetite to satisfy that desire, and it just leads to more and more behavior that is identified as the lust of the flesh. It is an all-consuming appetite to somehow be satisfied without God.

John talks about the lust of the eyes. The lust of the eyes also is dealing with desires that we have that are legitimate desires. All of us long to be loved. We long to be valued. We long to feel like we matter. Those desires are put in our heart to lead us, again, to God. Only He can ultimately satisfy those, and it causes us to continue our search until we experience intimacy with Him. But the world comes along and says you don’t need God for that and offers cheap substitutes. The world says that you can feel valuable, that you can feel like you’re somebody important. It has to do with the size of the house you live in, or the kind of car you drive, or how much money you have in the bank, or your profession, or what title you wear, or your degree of education, or how popular you are, or how good of an athlete you are, or how you look. Those are the promises of the world. Those are the things the world says will make you “somebody” and ultimately make you happy. But it doesn’t work that way. That is a lie. So again, you have this insatiable appetite that becomes a lust of the eyes because it can’t be satisfied. It drives our lives.

Thirdly, he talks about the boastful pride of life. The best way to understand this is to go back to Genesis 3. It’s what the serpent told Adam and Eve: “You can be like God. You can decide for yourself what is good and evil.” That’s the boastful pride of life thinking, *I can be my own god. I can call my own shots. I can decide for myself what is right and wrong, what is good and what is evil.* Sometimes I hear people say, “I just worship God in my own way.” That’s the boastful pride of life. Either we worship God on His terms, or we don’t worship at all. The boastful pride of life is thinking, *I’ll decide for myself.* Or sometimes people say, “All roads lead to Heaven; everybody can make up their own way.” That’s the boastful pride of life, thinking, *I’ll decide for myself; God is not going to tell me what to do.*

The world is made up of the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the boastful pride of life. The world is that airplane—that Concorde. What makes the world so effective is that they have a very effective marketing strategy. It’s so effective, with so much glitz and glamour, that they make it seem so alluring. It is so convincing, and it works. You hear promises from that marketer who tells you, “This is where it’s at.” And people, by the thousands, believe that marketing plan and they board that plane. They’re convinced that plane is going to take them to paradise because that’s what they were promised.

But verse 17 tells you right where that plane is going: “And the world is passing away...” That’s a word which means doomed. This plane is doomed. “...and also its lust. But the one who does the will of God abides forever.”

There is an alternative to the plane that is going down, and that is God's way. That is God's will. We are promised that this ship doesn't have all the glitz and glamour, doesn't make all the false promises, but it is guaranteed to arrive. And when you arrive, you will experience paradise forever.

But there is also another interesting thing about that journey. You will find, on that journey to paradise, a life more enriching and more fulfilling than you ever could have imagined.

Here's an interesting project for those of you looking for something more to do. Keep a journal or a notebook this week, and journal every way that the enemy markets this airplane. Write down every time you watch television, both what is on the shows and what is on the commercials, every movie you see, every book you read, every magazine you leaf through, everything you hear out in the marketplace. Just write it all down, and notice the marketing strategy of the enemy. What you will find out is that we are bombarded on a daily basis with messages trying to convince us to get on that plane, because that is what is going to take us to paradise. They never bother to tell us that plane is going down in the ocean.

I have a wife and three daughters. If I got onboard that ship, and I was the only one because Patty and the girls climbed on the airplane, would I be satisfied with that? Absolutely not. I would do everything in my power to get them off that plane. As a matter of fact, if I had to, I would go on that plane and I would physically carry them off. That is exactly what John is saying. John is saying we are family here, and we have a responsibility to one another that nobody gets on that plane because we know where it is headed.

There are those of you here this morning who are spiritually mature. God has blessed us with many godly people in this church. Do you know what we need from you? We don't need you to get on that ship and just celebrate the fact that you're on the ship. We don't need you to huddle together with other spiritually-mature people on that ship. We need you to get out there and "mix it up" with those who are thinking about going on that plane. We need you to go out and experience life with those people. That is why community is so important. You have a responsibility to make sure those people don't get on that plane.

As a growing believer, wouldn't it be a marvelous thing if there was a spiritually-mature person in your life who knew you well enough to keep you from climbing on that plane and making stupid mistakes, but rather would steer you to experience the will of God? That's community. All of us have a responsibility to the spiritual infants among us—the new believers who aren't even sure where they are headed and may very well get on that plane by mistake if someone isn't involved in their life. John is saying that, because we're family, if one of us gets on that plane, that's one too many, and every one of us bears responsibility for that. No one person can do it all; that's why we live in community. We share one another's lives, because we have a responsibility to one another.

This isn't a game we are playing. The stakes are extremely high. We're talking about people's lives, and we're talking about our responsibility to one another as the people of God. We're family. We must do our part to get every one of us on that ship so he or she does not suffer the consequences of the way of the world. That is authentic Christian community.