



ONE TOUGH NOT

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We're back in the book of 1 John this morning, talking about the theme of walking in the light. What does that mean?

We saw last week how important John thought it was that Jesus had come as a physical being. There was a new belief cropping up that was saying the spiritual was good and the physical world was bad, and John showed that we can't think that way. My actions matter to God. What happens in the physical realm has spiritual implications.

Today I'd like to focus in on just a few verses found in the second chapter of 1 John.

1 John 2:15-17

Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world—the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does—comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever.

Honestly, when I first read this passage, I didn't like the idea of preaching from it. A "do not" message is never my favorite. Who wants to tell people what they CAN'T do? It's so negative! It's so preachy! But the great thing about Scripture is that the more you spend time with it, the more you discover about it, and the more time I spent reflecting on these verses, the more vital truth I discovered in them.

Here again, John isn't using big words, but he's communicating a really difficult and important message. In fact, these three short verses grapple with what is maybe the toughest "not", the toughest topic at the center of the Christian life, this whole idea of not loving the world. I think it is tough from two different angles.

If you're a Christian, try to think back to a time before you put your faith in Christ. And if you haven't committed your life to Jesus, I think you'll back me up on this. Most people that I have talked to who are unsure about Christianity have a lot of different questions they raise – about other faiths, the historical facts, hypocritical Christians they've known, etc. And one by one, most of those questions find an answer.

But there's something still standing in the way, and when it gets right down to it, it's this: I'm not sure I want to stop loving what I love about the world in exchange for what God

has to offer. I've actually had more than one person tell me that directly, and I think it's the most honest reason to shy away from Christ. It shows that they understand God isn't fooling around. Like I said last week, when he comes into our lives, he wants full access and full allegiance.

So the first reason it's tough is because I'm not sure I want to give it up. The second struggle is this: I'm not sure what it looks like.

John gives us a rough sketch of what he's talking about, but no details, and that makes our job more difficult. What does it really mean to love or not love the world? We said last week that the material world was created by God and it isn't inherently evil. So where are the lines? How do we live in this world the way we're supposed to without loving it? How do we say it's not evil on one hand and not love it on the other? What's okay? Should we separate ourselves entirely like the Amish, or can we do whatever we want, just as long as we can make sure we don't love anything more than God?

It's tough because the topic is your heart – not just avoiding certain behavior. It's much easier when the instruction is about concrete actions. What John is talking about takes some soul searching and coming face to face with the ugly stuff we find inside ourselves. That's hard work. And it is a lifelong process, because until we leave this world, we're going to face the temptation of loving it.

So let's begin by asking a question first: What is the world John is talking about? This is the same author who wrote the verse, "For God so loved the world..." Why is it right for God and wrong for us?

John uses the word "world" in different ways. In John 3:16 where he's talking about God's love for the world, he means God's love for all people everywhere. And that's a love that we should share as well.

But when he tells us NOT to love the world, he doesn't mean the people in the world. He's talking about something else. John means the whole system that sets itself up against God. The actual things that tempt us in the world are just a small part of something or someone with a darker motivation to remove us from being in relationship with God.

Think of a fish going after a nice juicy worm on a hook. That bait is tied to something else outside of the water. The lure is just a piece of a bigger plot to get the fish.

John is referring to us loving the specific things that tempt us away from God, but in that, he's also saying those things are lures tied to a bigger something called "the world" that is intend on yanking us out of the water, drawing us away from our love of God. It's like the friend I knew who started out going after the bait of pornography online, which grew to visiting with women in chatrooms, which turned into him leaving his wife for one of

the people he met on the Internet. The initial lure of pictures was part of a bigger issue about his heart.

It can look completely different for someone else. I know a woman with an out of control shopping problem, as the stuff she sees reels her in, or another friend of Karin's who was laughing about how much better she knows the Ikea catalog than her Bible.

The world, then, is a kind of catch-all word to summarize everything that would stand in opposition to God in our lives. So the next logical question would be, "What does John mean by *loving* the world?" How is he defining love?

The word he's using is the same word he uses about our love for God. In Greek it's *agape*. It conveys this sense of an emotional bond with the object. It's a relationship word. When you love in this way, you could describe it as feeling affection, finding pleasure in something or having a preference for it and devotion to it.

Now by that definition, there's a lot about my life that you love. Let me ask you a question. If you were to die tonight and your life was over as you know it, what would you miss about it, besides the people?

I love playing music, and I'd miss that. I love reading. I love a good movie. I love good food. I feel affection for a lot of things in this world. Is that what John is talking about when he says "do not love the world"?

If it is, this is one INCREDIBLY tough not. It would make for a pretty miserable existence of denying ourselves any enjoyment at all and always looking critically at anybody who was having too much fun.

I'm so glad that God doesn't give us little verses in isolation, but that he puts them in the context of the whole Bible. That way, it's harder to misinterpret individual passages. And it's spelled out pretty clearly in other places that there is nothing wrong with the good things in life.

In fact, the writer of Ecclesiastes stated it pretty strongly:

Ecclesiastes 5:19-20

Moreover, when God gives any man wealth and possessions, and enables him to enjoy them, to accept his lot and be happy in his work -- this is a gift of God. He seldom reflects on the days of his life, because God keeps him occupied with gladness of heart.

That says straight out that being able to enjoy wealth, possessions and work is a gift directly from God. In other words, if loving all those things means enjoying them and taking pleasure from them, then it must be okay. Are we talking degrees here, then? Is it okay to love them, but just not too much? How do we know if we've crossed a line in our relationship to the world?

John gives us some good guidance in this area. But first he lays a foundation by explaining why we should even listen to him. He gives us two reasons to care about this issue.

Two reasons to care.

It's a lot of work to change your heart and your feelings. You have to a strong motivation. Why does John think we shouldn't love the world or be so emotionally tied to it? He gives two reasons.

First, it takes up too much space.

If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.

It's like an oversized piece of furniture in your house that hogs all the floor space and doesn't leave any room for anything else. I have a friend who was a desperate alcoholic, who spent six weeks in a motel, drinking half a gallon of vodka every day. That was all his life consisted of, until God thankfully grabbed a hold of him.

If all your attention is focused on the things that you're attracted to in the world, then you won't have space in your heart for caring about God or showing his love to other people.

That's just logical. Whatever you love is going to dominate your time and thoughts. John says it really won't be possible to say we love God if we're too attached to other things. James puts it in terms of a love relationship

James 4:4-6

You're cheating on God. If all you want is your own way, flirting with the world every chance you get, you end up enemies of God and his way. And do you suppose God doesn't care? The proverb has it that "he's a fiercely jealous lover." And what he gives in love is far better than anything else you'll find.

So the first reason to care about not loving the world is because it takes up so much space we miss out on loving God and what that means. John gives us a second reason that's pretty compelling too. We shouldn't love the world because

It won't last

The world and its desires pass away...

We can't love both God and the world. We hold back on committing to loving God because we have pretty strong feelings for stuff in the world and we're afraid we'll miss it. But here's the thing: Everything the world has to offer is short term. The feelings don't last. There's nothing permanent about any of it. Choosing the world over God is choosing a one night stand over a life-long relationship. Everything in this world is over and gone before you know it and in the end there's nothing to show for it.

Some family members of mine invested quite a bit of money in a start-up company that never got off the ground. It still exists, but they're never going to get their money back, let alone make a profit. Knowing their story, it wouldn't make any sense for me to go and buy some shares in the company, because it would just be throwing my money away.

John tells us we're throwing our heart away when we choose the world. With God, the relationship is mutual. The love goes both ways. When we love the world, it doesn't care anything about us. It doesn't make much sense to invest in a one-sided relationship that has no future.

Those are two pretty compelling reasons to be concerned about not loving the world: It takes over space in our hearts that's rightfully God's, and it has no long-term value.

But we still haven't addressed how we know if we're struggling with loving the world or if we're just having a good time and enjoying life. So in addition to two good reasons to care, John gives us three symptoms to check in our hearts that will indicate where we're at.

Three symptoms to check

For everything in the world—the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does—comes not from the Father but from the world.

In the older translations of the Bible, this series of three worldly ways was referred to as the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life. These categories give some shape to our discussion and help us evaluate where we stand. I call them experience, identity and significance, because I think they're reflecting some deeper needs. Let's look at each one.

Experience -- "Lust of the flesh" – This would be desire gone bad. The version that translates the word as "craving" helps get across the idea of this appetite that can't be satisfied. You hear lust and flesh and immediately think sexual sins, which are included here. But it's more than that. Any craving for an experience of any kind would fall into this category.

Let's take something relatively harmless, like chocolate chip cookies. When they are in our house, I can't stop eating them. It doesn't matter if I'm hungry. It doesn't matter if it's only 8:00 in the morning. If they are around, I will find them and I will eat them. If I take some to work with me, I will obsess about waiting to eat them until I can't stand it and I eat all of them in one sitting. I know it's not good for my triglycerides or my cholesterol. I know I will go into a sugar coma about 20 minutes later and that my stomach won't feel great. But I do it for that sweet 30 seconds that they taste so good. I crave the experience, even though it never lasts and it never quite lives up to what I imagined.

That's how it is with the lust of the flesh. We want something for the experience of it, and it never quite lives up to what we were hoping for, because we were looking for a level of meaning in it that it can't offer. It's not that things like cookies or sex are bad – it's what we're expecting the experience to do for us. Why do you want what you want? If you are looking for that experience to meet some internal need, if you believe that experience is going to satisfy you and make you happy or make you feel like you're really alive, chances are you're struggling with loving the world. You are asking the world to fill a role that only God can. And as you chase the experience, you won't have room for God. It will consume you. And you'll find when it's over that no matter how fun it was, it didn't really last. It didn't satisfy you.

God made us physical beings with five senses. But when we pursue the feelings for the sake of the feeling, we're going to be disappointed in the end.

The second category John mentions, “the lust of the eyes,” I would place under identity.

Lust of the eyes would be about seeing things and wanting them, wanting to possess them. Here it isn't so much the experience we're going after as it is ownership.

I've talked before about my car. God has had a running dialogue with me about that car. I've never cared much about what I drive, but this one has shown me that I do have a little bit of a pride issue to deal with. First of all, it's a station wagon. But it's not just any station wagon – it's like about the cheapest station wagon you can get, and a white one at that so it looks like every courier on the road. What's more it's now 12 years old. You know it's old when your insurance company tells you you have TOO MUCH insurance on it and it isn't worth that much.

I realize this will make me sound vain, but what kills me is when I have to drive to a client meeting. Normally my boss drives, but every once in a while, I have to drive to see our multi-millionaire client who gave his Porsche to his son and now drives a top of the line BMW.

But the bummer is – my car is a great car. It's been our lowest maintenance, most reliable transportation. It won't die. I got in a car accident a few weeks ago. The other person's Honda was going to need major repairs. Mine got such a small ding it wasn't even worth filing a claim. I couldn't even wreck the thing right.

But every time I have wanted to trade it in, God has brought me back to the question, “Why are you REALLY wanting a new car when this one runs great?”

That's such a brutal question. And when I honestly looked at it, it came down to my own ego. How this car makes me feel when important people see me in it vs. how a new car would make me look. And I realized that that was a pretty silly reason to spend thousands of dollars for my 2 mile commute to work. The minute it stops being reliable or becomes more expensive to repair than it's worth – I'll throw a party and go buy something more fun, or at least something with airbags. I have nothing against owning a

nice car. But I can't buy a car hoping it will have any effect on my identity. Despite the commercials, I am not what I drive.

Again, why do you want what you want? If you are feeling that owning something is going to make you feel better about who you are as a person, then you're probably struggling with loving the world. God wants us to find our identity and sense of security in him, knowing he loves us for who we are. He's not impressed by what we own, and we will find so much more peace in our hearts if we aren't feeling the need to fill the void by buying stuff.

The final category that John mentions is the boastful pride of life. I classify this as significance. We have this desire to be of value, and one way we do that is by comparing ourselves to other people and what we've accomplished.

We throw ourselves into our work, hoping that it will reflect on us. We can put the same expectations on our kids, that their behavior or intelligence will reflect well on us. We compare how we're stacking up to our friends or the people on TV. We look for things that we have done in our lives that we can point to and say, "Look at what I've accomplished. That's good. That will last. My existence is now validated."

Again, it's good to do good work. God's not about being sloppy. But if we're pinning our hopes on what we do to make our mark and make us significant, we're setting ourselves up to be disappointed.

Ecclesiastes 2:18-19

I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun, because I must leave them to the one who comes after me. And who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? Yet he will have control over all the work into which I have poured my effort and skill under the sun.

You look at the life of Howard Hughes. Throughout his life he had the most amazing body of work – every speed record as a pilot, he owned an international airline, an aircraft company, a motion picture studio, a tool company, he built and flew the world's largest airplane, he was a multimillionaire. But at the end of his life, he was mentally ill, incoherent and all alone.

Work is good. We should do our best at it. But if we're searching for significance in work that takes up all our time and isn't going to last, if we're pointing to what we've accomplished to determine our significance, we need to ask ourselves if we're loving the world too much.

As tough of a not as this one is, John ends the section with an upbeat note:

The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever.

Jesus said what that will of God is, and John recorded his words for us in another place:

John 6:40

For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.

Doing God's will means believing in Jesus, putting our focus and our search for meaning on him. John says doing that results in something lasting and permanent.

It's such a contrast. You look at how hard we have to work in the world to find any kind of satisfaction or happiness. It's a constant pursuit, always needing to experience more, own more or work more to attain something that will always be just outside of our grasp. What's the attraction there? What's there to love so much?

Things with God are so different. What he offers us has nothing to do with what we do.

Ephesians 2:8-9

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith -- and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God -- not by works, so that no one can boast.

All the running around, trying to make something happen on our own isn't necessary. Christ is standing in front of us saying "Aren't you ready for a break?"

Matt 11:28-30

Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me — watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly.

John has given us a tough not in telling us to not love the world. Tough to define and tough to follow through with once we know what we're needing to do. But it's so important.

So let's take a minute to ask ourselves the hard questions:

First, what's crowding my love for God? Experiences? Stuff? Work? As long as we're living here, we're going to be fighting this battle. What part of the world tugs at me specifically, right now?

Second, am I willing to stop the chase? Have I reached the point where I will give it up? If the answer is no, is what you're holding out for all that great? Does what you care so much about care for you in return, or in the end, will it leave you still unsatisfied, looking for something more?

The world won't love you back. Jesus says, "I not only love you – I loved you enough to put my life on the line for you."

He offers us everything we think the world gives but can't – life, value and significance.
And he tells us we can end the craziness, stop the chase and find rest for our souls.

I'll take that any day.