



RESISTING THE PULL

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So I went to the mailbox a couple weeks ago and there was this envelope from the city of Federal Way. Kind of strange and official looking, so I opened it up and – shock and horror – it was a notice of a red light infraction. What? You’ve got to be kidding me! I don’t run red lights. But they had these two pictures of my car – one before the turn and one turning on the red. They were claiming I never stopped before turning.

There obviously was something amiss. My first instinct was to assume Karin had borrowed my car to try and sully my good name. But then I looked at the date it happened: It was on Isaac’s birthday, so I remembered EXACTLY where I was, and so Karin was off the hook.

So there had to be something else. I studied the pictures more carefully and concluded that the camera was wrong and that I HAD in fact stopped. I compared the time stamps with the distance the car behind me travelled and developed an airtight argument defending myself. In my mind, the pictures did not tell the whole story.

There was an address where you could send a letter contesting the ruling, so I began drafting one. I crafted and crafted it, striking just the right balance between humble citizen and brilliant legal mind. I was almost done drafting it when I noticed in fine print on the back of the letter that there was a web site where you could see actual video footage online instead of the still shots. Huh. That’s interesting. Probably should take a look and see if there’s some additional support for my argument.

Let’s just say I deleted the letter and paid the fine. There was no escaping the fact that my image of myself didn’t line up with reality, and all my protesting just sounded silly when I saw beyond a doubt what I had done. I had to face the fact that I had indeed become an infractor. So I want to apologize to all of you who reside in Federal Way. It won’t happen again. Or if it does, hopefully there won’t be video to prove it.

Sometimes we resist the truth about ourselves. We’ve been looking at the letter of 1 John, and today he delivers a message to us that we’d rather not hear. It’s one we prefer to think doesn’t apply to us. There must be a mistake. But if we take the time to examine the evidence, it becomes clear that we have to face facts and accept what’s true. Let’s take a look and see what he’s talking about.

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.

“Do not love the world.” That is a very simple, straightforward message. Don’t give your heart away to anything other than God. We could almost go home right now, because the bottom line doesn’t need a lot of explanation.

But those words raise some questions. How do I know if I love the world? Maybe I just like it a lot. Is it a matter of degrees? And if so, how do I know what crosses the line? And what does John mean by the world anyway?

When we bump into a passage like this, we’re always in danger of heading one of two wrong directions with our response.

The first danger is that we will create a set of rules and boxes to avoid. We try and spell out what is off limits. We define what loving the world means in terms of specific actions, and then avoid those actions. Back in the 70s, there were these popular seminars for Christian high school students that told them exactly what kind of music to avoid, what kind of clothes to wear, what hairstyles were acceptable. Boys couldn’t have hair past the collar. Girls were to wear skirts that reached at least the knee. Any songs with a back beat were too worldly. The premise was that if you followed these rules, you showed that you didn’t love the world. And if you didn’t follow the rules, you were suspect.

We all like to have check boxes and clear guidelines that help us know where we stand. That feels concrete and we can see we’re achieving something. The problem is that the boxes we draw are rarely God’s boxes – they’re ours. And you can stay inside the lines and obey the rules without even addressing the real issue of the way we think and feel about the world.

So that’s the first danger – becoming legalistic about enforcing John’s command. The second danger is that we won’t take his words seriously enough. John uses a lot of contrasting imagery in his writing: darkness and light, truth and lies, love and hate, life and death. He uses these polar opposites to drive home the point of how little one has to do with the other. And he states in no uncertain terms that when we’re loving the world, we can’t be loving God at the same time. And he says it’s a matter of life and death.

We don’t like to think we love the world, but we also don’t like to think it’s all that bad of a place. John’s words sound a little extreme for our taste. There’s a new book out called “Hipster Christianity”, and it’s all about this new trend in the new generation of Christians who want to distance themselves from the rigid rules we described. They want to demonstrate that they are the furthest thing from being legalistic, so they embrace

everything in the world that used to be taboo. Smokin and drinkin and cussin, getting inked up and reading dark books, working really hard to prove they're not like old school Christians who are so uptight. There is very little outwardly that you could point to and say, "That person is a Christian."

There's an obvious appeal to that kind of Christianity, because it doesn't ask much of me. I can still blend in with the world around me. But if nothing is off limits anymore, then the urgency of John's words gets diminished. There are no danger signs posted anymore to warn us about the world when we're moving close to a cliff.

Both of these reactions to John's words – legalism and do-whatever-you-wantism – avoid the central question: Do I love the world?

I love M&Ms. Plain M&Ms. They are the candy of heaven, I'm sure. Let's say I go on a diet that won't let me eat chocolate. It would be a stupid choice, but let's say I did it and I stuck with it. That strict diet would do nothing to change how I feel about M&Ms. The rule may even make me want them more. My love for them may grow. Or I may change my diet. The point is that rules don't address the heart issue – it just changes behavior.

On the flip side of that, ignoring all the rules and being okay with everything avoids the question as well. If I don't deny myself something I want, then I may never see how attached I am to it.

So how do we stay on the narrow path without falling off in either direction? How do we keep from compromising without becoming totally rigid? Or can we?

Let me just clarify one thing here. I'm not saying we're called to fall somewhere between the two, to try to strike a balance. John's message is strong and all out for God. *So when I talk about avoiding those extremes, it's not because I think we need moderation -- it's because those are wrong ways of thinking.*

Author Francis Chan tells the story of a man who came up to him after a sermon one week. The man had been attending his church for 15 years, and he told Pastor Chan that his sermons hadn't done anything for him. He said he spoke too much about the "narrow road" and how everyone needs to be radical for Christ. The man told him there is also a "middle road" where people like him could do a lot of good things. It's like saying luke warm is just fine.

Jesus said the way is narrow that leads to life and wide is the road that leads to destruction. There is no broad middle area. The last thing John would want would be for us to think it's good to be a little bit Christian and a little bit worldly.

So let's define this term "world." John himself sometimes uses it in different ways. It can refer to all people everywhere. When the Coke ad says "I'd like to teach the world to sing" is not wanting the earth itself to get vocal cords – it's talking about the population

of the earth. And John uses the term in similar fashion when he says God loves the world. He loves the people, and we are also called to love people.

The world can also refer to the entire created order. Everything God made is part of the world, and that usage is also a positive one. God made the world and said that it was good. As we said at the beginning of this series, material things in and of themselves are not bad, because God would never make something inherently evil. We are supposed to enjoy and celebrate God's good gifts.

But there's another way the Bible uses the word world. In Ephesians, Paul refers to the world as a system of dark forces and values and principles that are directly opposed to God. Later in this same letter, John says this:

1 John 5:19

...the whole world is under the control of the evil one.

This is the world after the fall. When Adam and Eve let sin into the picture. It is this system, or this sphere of influence that John is talking about. There is something about the environment in which we live that is trying to seduce us away from God. If we think the world is a neutral place, we're mistaken. Satan will use anything and everything he can to grab our hearts away from God.

John then goes into more detail about how that works.

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.

Cravings of sinful man, lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does. I call these "the three As" – appetites, attractions and arrogance. They are three ways the world woos us and steals our hearts.

First you have the cravings or appetites.. These can be physical appetites for food or sex or alcohol. But there are others that aren't physical. The appetite for control. The appetite for excitement. The appetite for significance or belonging or recognition. They can become pursuits that consume us and pull us away from focusing on God.

Then John talks about the lust of the eyes, or the things that attract us. These are the objects or people outside of ourselves that we think are going to make us happy. More money. That new house. That new TV. That new girlfriend. It is the misguided desire to possess something because we think it will change how we feel about life, or that it will change our status in the eyes of others.

When we obtain those things is when we slip into the third a -- arrogance. The empty boasting about how great we are because of what we've done or what we have. We start to confuse our accomplishments and our possessions with who we are, and our identity

becomes wrapped up in the wrong things. Your job or your car or your children's success in sports. We can give too much weight to all kinds of things.

What John is saying is that the world creates a sense of emptiness in us. Did you catch that? It makes us feel like we need something. But it can't satisfy the cravings it stirs up. David Jackman puts it this way: "What we need to realize is that the world cannot produce what it offers. Its attractions are fundamentally deceptive."

Scientists have introduced a new word called "desertification." They coined it to describe the worldwide phenomenon where deserts are growing. From the Sahara to South America to the Western U.S., dry places are getting dryer and expanding. It can almost all be attributed to growing populations that live in those areas and are trying to raise more crops and livestock. As demand grows, water tables get diverted. Lumber gets chopped down and then won't regrow. Vegetation gets eaten up. More and more people are chasing shrinking amounts of resources, which causes the desert to spread, which places a higher demand on the resources, and the cycle continues. The land becomes less and less able to satisfy the needs.

It's the same process that happens in our hearts when we love the world. It is desertification. These appetites and attractions grow stronger and stronger and they're less and less able to be filled. So the desert areas in our heart grow, and we are less and less full all the time because of it. All the world can give us is a hollow spot that wants to be filled in. It's a chase that never ends with being satisfied.

So you get someone like oil tycoon John D. Rockefeller, often regarded as the richest person in history. When he was asked, "How much money is enough?" He responded with his famous line, "Just a little bit more." If his money couldn't satisfy the craving for wealth, then chances are slim that you and I will amass enough of a fortune to cure that desire. When we're motivated by the world's appetites and attractions, enough is never enough. The desert keeps growing.

It was Augustine of Hippo who came up with the idea that evil was really the absence of good, and you can see that at work here. The world can only offer the emptiness because fullness is what God promises.

Psalm 103:2 & 5

*Praise the LORD, O my soul,
and forget not all his benefits...
who satisfies your desires with good things.*

Psalm 145:16

*You open your hand
and satisfy the desires of every living thing.*

Jeremiah 31:25

I will refresh the weary and satisfy the faint.

Philippians 4:19

And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus.

I dare us all to live like that's really true. God is the source of all good, all fulfillment, all true satisfaction. The only way to oppose the Creator of all things is to be a destroyer – an uncreator. The world is incapable of being anything else.

To circle back now to our original question, “How do I know if I love the world?” The answer isn't going to be in which rules I break or which boxes I'm able to check off. It's going to be in how I respond to two questions. First, **where is the craving in my life?** Where do I feel the most unsatisfied? Am I longing to feel more secure financially? Do I wish my boss would recognize my work more? Maybe it's a relationship, and you think if you only could find that one special person, your life would be complete.

The gaping holes that I'm scrambling to fill are the places I am most vulnerable to loving the world. Because I'm drawn into a pursuit that takes me away from the pursuit of God. What am I pursuing? Where is the craving in my life?

The second question hits that boasting aspect John talked about. It would be this: **What couldn't I bear to part with in my life?** What accomplishment or possession or role is so intertwined with my identity that I can't imagine giving it up? And would I give it up for God?

A few years ago I came across a story that I shared, and I keep coming back to it because I found it so amazing. It was written by Dan Schaeffer, a pastor in California. I'll just share his words directly with you.

Not long ago, my 17-year-old son, an avid guitarist, had been dreaming of buying an electric guitar. It cost well over \$1,000, a price that to his pocketbook was huge. It took him many months of bussing tables to earn that much. But he really wanted it. So we found ourselves driving from our home near Santa Barbara, Calif., to a store in Hollywood to find that very specific guitar.

He bought it, and he was ecstatic. So far so good. What happened next needs to be prefaced by saying that my son loves His Lord very much. He reads his Bible, prays regularly, and is actively involved in sharing his faith and ministering in his church youth group. One evening, as I was preparing to go to bed, my son took me aside.

Can I tell you something?” he said. “Sure,” I replied. I could tell he was deadly earnest about something. He told me that, while he had been praying several days earlier, he had sensed God ask him, “Andrew, how much do you love me?” Again, so far so good. Then he said, “Dad, I took the guitar and smashed it to pieces. I threw it in the trash a few days ago.”

I was stunned. My son had answered the question he sensed God asking him in the best way he knew how. God knew how much he loved that guitar.

I mumbled something about how I understood, but that maybe he could have just given the guitar away, or sold it and used the money for something else. His look told me that I just didn't get it.

The fact is, I was taken off guard. The extravagant love he exhibited toward God was almost alarming. That should have been a warning sign to me.

It made me ask: how extravagant is my love for Jesus? Somewhere, I developed the erroneous idea that my love for Jesus should be a strictly internal affair, carefully contained and measured so it doesn't bubble out in some embarrassing way.

I'll admit that I am afraid of extravagance, how it might appear to others, how it might be perceived. But true acts of extravagant love toward Jesus (which can come in many different forms) will rarely be understood by others — and will often be promptly criticized. There will always be more “reasonable” and “restrained” ways of showing our love for Christ.

But I'm tired of being reasonable and restrained. I'm concerned that I can witness an act of extravagant love toward Jesus and instantly think “waste.” It's time for me to be extravagant.

I don't believe it's wrong to own nice things. I don't even believe God was specifically asking Andrew to destroy that guitar. But I believe Andrew wanted to show God how much he loved him. What's your guitar? What do you justify hanging on to, even when you know it may be interfering with your love for God?

As we were talking about this on Monday night at our little round table discussion, we came to the conclusion that the only way to know the answer to that question is for each of us to listen to the Holy Spirit. We can't answer it for one another. We have to listen for ourselves and trust his voice when it speaks to us. And that can be a scary thing. It's not because we might not hear him – it's because we're afraid we already know what he's going to say, and we don't really want to have to confront the fact that we love the world. We can no longer play around with this relationship with God. He doesn't want to share our heart.

When Karin and I were dating, we sometimes had to sit down for a SORT – a state of the relationship talk. It was just between us to get a handle on how we were really feeling about each other. Nobody outside of us could answer it for us – we had to communicate directly.

I think God intentionally designed it so there is no checklist for whether or not we love the world. That way, we have to engage him directly and frequently for those SORT talks. And the more time we spend listening to him, the less we are pulled away by the world.

John tells us it is so much for our own benefit to do this, because everything about the world is so fleeting.

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

That's the antidote. If we want to avoid loving the world, we can pour ourselves into doing the will of God. When John says whoever does the will of God lives forever, it can start to sound like another check list. Do these things and you'll be okay.

But John himself recorded what Jesus told the crowds that this will of God is.

John 6:28-29

Then they asked him, "What must we do to do the works God requires?"

Jesus answered, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent."

That's what loving God and having a relationship with him is all about – believing in Jesus. Believing he died for you. Believing his death bought forgiveness for you. Believing he rose again. Believing his Spirit can teach and transform you. Believing he will never leave you. Believing that he's the only one who can offer what you're really looking for. Believing that he will be enough, that his grace for you will be enough and that his love for you will be enough and that his enough IS enough.

Do not love the world. There is no middle ground, no room to love both God and the world. After having been doing this church thing for these seven years, I can tell you that for sure. If we can't let go of the world, if we can't walk away from sin, God is not going to bless our lives. God can't bless sin. Where are you going to place your love? It is a choice in front of you today. Are there any places in your heart where the desert is still growing, places where the appetites of the world are raging? If I'm honest, I have to say yes. And because it's a craving we can be afraid to let go of it. We're afraid we'll miss out on something, afraid of what we have to giving up.

Guess what? God can handle our fear too.

Isaiah 58:11

I will always show you where to go.

I'll give you a full life in the emptiest of places.

Where is the craving in my life? What can't I bear to part with? I want to lead you in a prayer as we close.

1. Tell God if you're afraid to give up a craving or part with something.
2. Tell him what it is you're worried about giving up .
3. Tell him why that worries you.

4. Ask him for faith to believe that he has forgiven you. To believe that he is stronger than your fears, that he can supply your needs, that he is better than what you're pursuing.