

The Enemy Around

by Ray C. Stedman

It is significant that the first subject John chooses to instruct upon is that which is supreme in Christian experience because it is the fountain from which both truth and love must flow – fellowship with the Son of God, the shared life. This is also the way to maturity, as we have seen. We learned that we do not achieve maturity by some sudden certain experience. It does not come in one moment of time. We achieve it in fits and starts, as we do physical growth, in varying degrees and through varying experiences. These experiences and moments of growth can be divided, as the apostle divides them, into three general stages of Christian life, marked by these terms, “little children,” “young men,” and “fathers.”

Now, in a final word on the subject of maintaining fellowship, the apostle deals with the supreme peril to fellowship, and, therefore, the greatest peril to Christian maturity. Here is a great enemy of the Christian, the siren voice that seeks to lure us aside, trap us, delude us and ultimately to defeat us, in our Christian experience.

Do not love the world or the things in the world. If any one loves the world, love for the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life, is not of the Father but is of the world. And the world passes away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever. {1 Jn 2:15-17 RSV}

Surely this is a much abused passage. Each of us has heard it used to denounce everything from buttons to beer, from opera to operations, from the waltz to the watusi. Anything that is currently the subject of Christian disfavor has been crammed into this passage, labeled “worldliness,” and denounced. I am not interested in adding to that list.

I am not interested in denouncing, but understanding. Surely there is something very clearly evident to us as we approach a passage like this and that is that the apostle desires to warn us that the world is dangerous. There is clearly something very dangerous about the world, otherwise he would not speak as strongly and as sharply as this: “Do not love the world or the things that are in the world.”

Now what is it that is dangerous about the world? That is what we must discover. The first step in doing so will be to note that the apostle divides this enemy into two major divisions. “Love not the world,” he says, “nor the things that are in the world.” Now why does he make this distinction, and what difference does it make? Does it need to be said that the world which the apostle is talking about is not the physical world, the world of nature? There is nothing wrong with loving the physical world. God has given us the world of trees and mountains, of skies and seas. We sometimes sing,

This is my Father’s world,
I rest me in the thought
Of rocks and trees, of skies and seas –
His hand the wonders wrought.

There is nothing wrong with that world. Nor is this dangerous world the world of humanity, of people with their many different practices, customs and interests. We know it is not wrong to love that world because God himself loves it. That most famous of all Scripture texts says so, “God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life,” {John 3:16 KJV}. That is the world of humanity, the world of people.

But nevertheless there is a world that we must not love and John evidently expects his readers to know what that world is. It is something he has

evidently often talked over with them and described to them, and now he does not need to define it for he knows that they know what he means. This would suggest that the world which John has in view here is clearly defined for us in other parts of Scripture. We shall find it most clearly in John's previous writing, the Gospel of John. In the Upper Room Discourse John records our Lord's words, and he speaks in warning about the world:

“If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.” {John 15:18 RSV}

Here is a world that hated Jesus Christ. What world is that? Obviously, the representatives of that world were the enemies of Jesus. Who were they? It is most striking to recall that the enemies of Jesus were basically religious men. This world which the Christian is not to love is, therefore basically, primarily a religious world. It is not exclusively so for there was a secular world which hated Jesus as well. The representatives of the secular world hated the Lord Jesus, not with the hate of outright enmity, but, which is worse, with the hate of callous indifference. Our Lord said that the world would hate us because it hated him, and John says this is the world we must not love. We must not love that which hates Christ.

The world hated him because he constantly challenged its basic philosophy. He was in continual protest against that to which the world was irrevocably committed. Our Lord put the whole matter plainly one day when he said, “You are those who seek, not the honor which comes from God, but that which comes from man,” {cf, John 5:44}. There is the philosophy of the world, the world that John says we must not love. It does not look beyond this life, it is concerned only with the honor which comes from men and unconcerned about the honor which comes from God. It is a philosophy which is bounded at one end by a cradle and at the other end by a casket. It is centered only in this life and this world. Jesus challenged that concept wherever he went and whenever he spoke. Because he thrust so decisively against this, he was hated and men banded together to put him to death. It was this philosophy which was ultimately re-

sponsible for nailing the Son of God to a bloody cross.

Think about that for a moment – this philosophy that says the only important thing is this life – think how widespread that is today. Are we not constantly exposed to this idea? Does it not subtly penetrate everything we touch today? We see it underlying all of life. It makes its appeal in every magazine. It is blazoned on every billboard. It is shouted abroad by radio and television, every time we turn a dial. It can be summed up in this precise way. “There is nothing better, there is nothing higher, there is nothing more precious than what this earth can give you: its money, its pleasures, its fame. You had best eat, drink, and be merry, for there is no nobler life than that.”

Now, John says do not love that idea, do not love that philosophy, do not think it important. Be careful that you do not give yourself to that way of thinking. If you do, you will lose out on the fullness of Christian experience. You will be eaten by the devil. You will be trapped, deluded. You will become the victim of the Big Lie, and your very humanity will be wizened and withered by that philosophy.

“Well,” you say, “how do you battle this? What can you do about this? If it pervades everything around us, where does the battle begin?” The answer is: with “the things that are in the world.” There is where we must fight this battle. It is not enough to say, love not the world. It must be brought down to specifics. It must be reduced to that with which we actually come in contact. So John adds, “the things that are in the world,” and he defines these. He gives a list of them and says, “these are not of the Father but are of the world.” That is what is wrong. To reject a philosophy we must do so in certain specific actions.

These constitute three things which the apostle now defines, three categories:

There is first, he says, the lust of the flesh. And we have already seen many times, in the Scriptures this word, flesh, is usually something other than the body. It is more than that. It is the sinful nature, the sinful tendencies of humanity, the fallen condition of man, which is present in the body. It is in this sense that the apostle uses it here.

1. What is this lust of the flesh? There are certain things which our body desires that are perfectly proper, God-given. God has made us, as men, to have certain urges and hungers, and to satisfy these is not wrong. But the flesh, that sinful propensity within us, that fallen part of our nature, always seeks to add something, to go beyond the satisfying of God-given desires.

For instance, God has so made our bodies that they hunger for food, in order to maintain life. This is as it should be. But the flesh goes beyond and craves special foods, delicacies. It urges to gluttony, more than we need. It demands the best, the softest, the most flavorful. This is what John is speaking of. God has made us to have need of shelter, as human beings. But the flesh demands that it be luxurious shelter. There is a constant craving after ease and luxury. This is the lust of the flesh. God gives us the wonderful function of sex, which produces the most enjoyable sensation the body can experience. But the flesh wants to indulge this in any direction at any given time. It urges to license. This is the lust of the flesh.

2. There is a second division John sets before us, the lust of the eyes. What is this? The eye symbolizes that which pleases the mind or inner life. The lust of the eyes, like that of the flesh goes beyond simple needs. Our minds, for instance, were made by God to search and inquire, to take the great facts which revelation or nature set before us and to explore them, analyze them and systematize them. But there are certain limits to these. There are limits within nature, and there are limits within revelation. There are certain areas of knowledge of which God has said, we, as fallen men, are not to enter into because they are dangerous, exceedingly dangerous. But the flesh takes this basic permission of God and pushes it beyond God's will to extremes we are forbidden to follow. We demand to know everything. We will not accept facts unless we can understand everything about them. We seek to probe into the world of the occult, and the world of the future. We even give ourselves to superstition and the dark powers in order to explore these areas. This is the flesh, the lust of the eyes.

God has given us the gift of acquisitiveness, i.e., the desire to own things, to possess things as our own. But the lust of the eyes pushes that into greed that is never satisfied. We want more, more, more! This results in the common phenomenon of "keeping up with the Joneses," the desire to have things we do not need, bought with money we do not have, in order to impress people we do not like! God has given us a love of beauty, but the lust of the eyes perverts this into vulgarisms, the love of the erotic, pornography and idolatry, that covetousness of another's body which the Scripture labels outright idolatry.

3. There is still a third division which is the pride of life. What is this? Basically, this is the desire to awaken envy or adulation in other people. The first two divisions had to do with satisfying ourselves, not as God intended us to be satisfied, but beyond that. But they were directed toward us, and only incidentally involved others. The pride of life, however, cannot exist except as it relates to others. It seeks to create a sense of envy, rivalry, and burning jealousy in the hearts of others and gives us pleasure in doing this to them. It is the desire to outshine or to out rank someone else.

Perhaps the chief symbol of it today is the automobile, with its shiny exterior, its luxurious cushions, its beautifully designed interior, and its tremendously powerful engine, these instant horses that can be released with a touch of the toe to send us flying down a highway. What a thrill it gives us! You only have to study the habits of a human with an automobile to see how it is far more than simply a means of transportation. It is a symbol, a symbol of pride. Why do we trade our cars in every two years? Well, of course, we have very carefully designed rationalizations that can show, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that it is much cheaper to do it this way. But actually do we not do it because we want to be admired? We do not want to fall behind in the race. We want to have that which is new and excites admiration in others, even envy and jealousy. Now that is what John calls the pride of life. The automobile is not the only expression of this, but it is certainly one.

Now notice again the warning. What does John say about this? Notice he does not say, touch not, taste not, handle not. Writing to the Colossians, the Apostle Paul says, such an attitude is legalism, and it is this which has made this a verse so abused in the past. John does not say, “do not have anything to do with any of this.” But what he does say, what he wants to bear home to our hearts in living, flaming language is this one phrase, do not love these things, do not set your hearts on them, do not think of them as important. Do not give yourselves to amassing things, do not love luxury and ease, and do not strive to outshine others. God help you, keep from that at all costs. Oh, the subtlety with which this whole philosophy makes its appeal to us! When the love of these things, the importance of them, occupies our major interest; when we find them using up most of our money; when we find them looming large in our thoughts so that we are constantly dreaming of that new “something” we hope to get, then we are in danger, terrible danger. This is what the apostle wants to make clear.

This condition is often revealed in the way we make our choices. I read recently of a pastor who said that a man from his congregation actually came to him and said, “Pastor, I know you’ve been wondering why I haven’t been at the Sunday evening meeting lately. My favorite television program has been changed and it now appears at the same time as the Sunday evening meeting, and I had to choose between the two.” He told this so openly, evidently feeling that the pastor would fully approve of it, that it was a tremendous revelation of how subtly the love of the world had taken over his life. You can see this in your emotional reaction when you have lost something, or been disappointed in a business venture. Are you depressed, discouraged, defeated? What a contrast with that word in Hebrews where the writer reminds those Christians, “You joyfully accepted the plundering of your property,” {Heb 10:34b RSV}. That does not sound like many Christians today, does it?

Well, what is wrong with all this? Why must we not love the world and its things? John gives two very searching and important reasons:

1. First, because love for the world and love for God are mutually exclusive. You cannot do both, it is one or the other. Man is so made

that he is designed to love, and therefore serve, but one master. Remember how Jesus put it? “No man can serve two masters,” {Matt 6:24 KJV}. He is not stating a moral choice there. He is not saying, no man should serve two masters. It is an impossibility! It cannot be done. We only delude ourselves if we think we are doing it. No, we are made to be mastered by a greater power than ourselves. This is the underlying, elementary function of humanity. But that master is either the world, as the channel and activity of the evil one, or it is God. It is God or mammon. Therefore John says, “if any one loves the world, love for the Father is not in him.” You cannot do both.

If we give ourselves to loving the world, we are utilizing all the potential of our humanity to a false and grievous end. There are two powerful forces constantly making their appeal to us. Both of them offer to fulfill us, to satisfy us, to make life rich for us, but one is a lie and one is the truth. You must decide which is the lie and which is the truth for you cannot do both. This is where we fail so often. Many of us say, there must be a way of having the best of both worlds. But the entire testimony of Scripture and experience is, it is impossible. That is why the Apostle Paul writes that the mark of the last days is that men would be lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God. These are two absolutely antagonistic ideas.

This love of the world can get into the heart even of a dedicated Christian, and let us not forget it. Godly companionship is not enough to defend against it. Even the companionship of the Apostle Paul was not enough, for the Scriptures record that Paul himself had to write in sorrow these revealing words, “Demas has deserted me, having loved this present world,” {cf, 2 Tim 4:10}. That is how subtle, how deceitful this thing can be.

2. Now there is another reason we must not love this world. Not only does it exclude the love of God completely, but it is an utterly foolish choice, because the world, John says, is passing away, it is only a temporary thing, but he who does the will of God abides forever.

Martin Luther wrote, “I have held many things in my hands and I have lost them all.

But the things I have placed in God's hands I still possess."

How true that is! We all know the glory of this world is rapidly turning to dust. The power of it soon passes from our nerveless fingers into the hands of another. Nothing lasts very long, everything is changing. "Change and decay, in all around I see." That is the characteristic of the world.

Shall we give ourselves to that temporary, fleeting, ephemeral thing? Must the best issues of our life be built on that kind of a shaky foundation? No, John says, it is he who does the will of God who abides forever. One of these days the world and all that we see in it and all that history records of it, will have been forgotten, will have passed into the silent dust of the centuries. But according to the Scripture, one day the Lord shall stand with his own and view a universe where all things have been brought together and reconciled in Christ, made one in Jesus Christ. What a thrilling thing it will be to stand there and see that come to pass and say, "Thank God, I had a part in that, in the reconciling of all things in Christ."

Our Lord divided the issues of life into two words. He says there are two things, and only two things, you can do with your life. "He that is with me gathers, but he that is against me scatters," {cf, Matt 12:30}.

Now which are you doing?
Are you gathering, or scattering?

Are you uniting and reconciling, or are you dividing and breaking up and severing?

All the issues of life funnel down into those two things. This is also where John puts it. If you are living for the world, loving its glory, seeking its fame, counting important the things it can give, clinging to these desperately, letting your emotions get wrapped up in them, you are scattering, you are breaking up, you are dividing. But if you are walking with Christ, if the things that he loves are most important to you, if a cup of cold water given in his name is of far more value than another dollar in the bank, if time is spent in comforting or encouraging some lonely person is to you a far greater treasure than a killing in the stock market, then you are building, you are gathering, you are building that which will endure, which will last forever, you are laying up treasures in heaven.

Remember the word of that superior young missionary, Jim Elliot, who died at the hands of the Auca Indians? "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep (i.e., his life), to gain that which he cannot lose."

That is where John rests his case.

Prayer:

Our Father, open our eyes to our own selves. Make us to hear the probing question from the Holy Spirit at this moment, "Which are you doing: gathering, or scattering? Building upon eternity, or living for time?" We ask in Jesus' name, Amen.