

WORLD-WARY

by Steve Zeisler

I recently read the following story in the newspaper:

A 124-year-old woman fulfilled a long-held dream when she walked down Rio's Copacabana Beach and caught her first glimpse ever of the ocean, newspapers reported Wednesday. "It's pretty, it's big and it's salty," former slave Maria do Carmo Jeronimo told reporters. "Look how it goes up and down." Jeronimo, who lives in the coffee-growing state of Minas Gerais, was invited to Rio by the city's mayor after he read a newspaper article in which she said she had never seen the ocean. Born to a family of slaves May 5, 1871, Jeronimo...said she was delighted with her first visit to Rio and that her only remaining ambition was to meet God.

I am impressed by the simplicity of what this former slave longed for and by the beautiful quality of the things that had captured her attention and interest. She might have wished to see palaces or libraries, museums, a spacecraft, a computer or a monument. But nothing made by any human being interested her. She wanted to see one of the most beautiful aspects of the Creator's work. And having done that, her only remaining ambition was to see God himself.

What struck me about this woman was how she differs from me. I am fascinated by things made by human hands, by the things human beings do to glorify themselves, and not enough by God's creation and activities. Preachers have been addressing the subject of worldliness for a long time. I remember hearing Ray Stedman once say that the call to abandon worldliness has been used to condemn everything from the waltz to the Watusi. That's probably true. But worldliness repeatedly needs examination. The Scriptures frequently bring it up as a concern and we will do well to consider what John has to say.

We live in a time in which the secular arrogance of our culture has brought a descent into darkness that is widely recognized. Even people who claim no faith in God at all, are increasingly weary and disheartened by the way the world is turning out. The bible gives us important insight about what happens to a culture when God is ignored. In addition, a wrong-headed but popular perception of the Christian message is that it exists for no other reason than to make Christians rich and to create arguments for use in partisan politics. The pursuit of riches and partisan politics---two of the most worldly concerns imaginable. So with these contemporary concerns in mind, let's listen to John's warning about love of the world in I 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.

Two major points summarize John's arguments: First, you cannot mix together love for the world and love for God. They are mutually exclusive. If you love the world, you will forfeit love for God. Second, "the world and its desires pass away." They are contrasted in their temporary nature to that which lasts forever.

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

Before we look at the details of John's statements in these three verses, I'd like to consider what the New Testament teaches us about the world and the word "cosmos" in Greek, because I think there are some misconceptions that we should address.

Giving order to chaos

In the Old Testament, the universe---all of creation---is described most often by the phrase "the heavens and the earth." The perspective of the Hebrew Bible is that a personal God spoke into being everything that exists. He gave it its meaning and purpose. He gave it a moral and ethical foundation. The human beings who were created in his image had special responsibility as his regents, and as his worshipers. The creation was to draw its meaning from its Creator.

Greek thinking, which dominated the Mediterranean world when the church was born, was based on the efforts of the human observer to make sense of the chaotic world that could be observed.

The earth's being the center of everything, and the observer's being the center of the earth by giving it order and meaning, is "the world" that John is writing about. The tension is between love for the world and love for the Father. How shall we give meaning to what exists? What will define values or order in the chaos for us? How do we decide what is important? By what standard will we choose to live our lives?

The word cosmos is also the root of the word "cosmetics." This too has the idea of giving order to chaos. It's interesting to conceive of your face as being chaotic in the first place, but if you want to draw attention to your eyes or your lips or some other beautiful part of your face, you adorn that part with cosmetics and try to play down the wart on your nose or the blemish on your chin. Cosmetics give order to a chaotic face as the observer decides what is valuable and deserves attention.

Avoiding misunderstandings

Consider some observations that flow from this. The first is that molecules, the laws of nature, color, art, motion, physics, biology---all the things that you can experience in the created world---are neutral, neither good nor bad in and of themselves. The issue is the meaning we give to them and the value we place on them. Shaping and structuring the "stuff" of creation is morally neutral in itself. Everything depends on the reason, the value, the "for what" question that lies behind art or technology.

The second thing we might notice is that people are not the world as John speaks of it here. In John's command, human beings are not to be refused love. When he says to not love the world, he does not mean that we should not love people. Christian teachers of an earlier generation used the term "worldlings" to refer to those who had not bowed their knee in faith to Christ and had not given him their allegiance, those who were in the world. John 3:16 says, "...God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. "God loves the people of the world very much---he paid the greatest price imaginable for their salvation.

Additionally, we should recognize that the world will never be hospitable to Christian faith. We sometimes imagine an age of innocence when the world was a place in which it was easy to carry out Christian conviction, where everyone generally agreed with the Christian point of view. But in fact the the world has never been the friend of Christian faith or hospitable to Christian discipleship. It is true in every age that John's words need to be taken seriously: Do not love the world, or the love of the Father is not in you.

I've been studying the book of Acts with some friends, and it's striking to me how the message of Christ and the people of Christ were always counter-culture. It didn't matter where the first believers went, they always were different from everybody else. That remains true today. In Acts, we find that the cause of Christ was rejected by Greeks, those with business interests, leaders of the Jews, pagan priests, Roman judges and court magicians. Christians will always be a "peculiar people."

Finally, we are not going to fix the world. We are not going to usher in the golden age. Post-millennial theology says that if we work hard together we can bring about righteousness and peace on earth. And Jesus will come again as the result of efforts to Christianize the world by fixing its institutions and by putting right thinking people in positions of power. But that is not what the Scriptures teach. The world will grow much worse before the Lord's appearing, and it is his return to earth that will set things right.

Positive ways to engage the world

Let me mention three positive contributions we can make. The first is our responsibility, as Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. As salt we cannot stop decay from occurring, but we can retard it. That's probably the primary idea of the reference here; in New Testament times salt was used to prevent meat and other kinds of flesh from decaying as quickly as it otherwise would. We can contribute something positive. With our influence, we can stave off corruption for a time. We can honor the Lord by talking about things that matter to him and enhancing the communities we live in. It is very important that we make these efforts, not because we can fix the world, but because we can honor the Lord.

The candle that is set on a stand isn't going to end the night. It won't make the darkness go away. We aren't given that responsibility. But we can dispel the darkness in a particular place for awhile. The city set on a hill can offer hope to those who are in the darkness, a place to go for those who are lost in the wilderness, a home. We must be engaged with the culture. Jesus said that we are not to be of the world, but we are not to be taken out of the world, either.

Doing good might include decrying and perhaps turning around the sleaze of Hollywood or challenging the aggressive secularism in local schools. In whatever way God calls us, we can challenge moral pollution where we find it.

We can take care of the broken, those who have been treated ruthlessly and violently by the world. A human-centered world view will lead inevitably to competition, aggression, and pain. Perhaps we can be in the business of caring for those who get beaten up by living in this world. Remember Mother Teresa's statement during a visit to this country. She said in a quiet voice, "If you don't want the babies, send them to me. I'll take care of them." Her example can encourage us to care for people no one else wants.

Maybe our call is to be like Charles Colson---to teach the truth amidst error and to say what is right as a challenge to entrenched lies. Our responsibilities will be different. We have different roles in which we are called to engage the world, but we are supposed to be a source of blessing.

The second thing to consider about positive engagement with the world flows out of Jesus' statement in John 17:18: "As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world." He's speaking to his Father, praying, "You sent me into the world with exactly the same assignment with which I send them into the world." That assignment is, to use Paul's words, to be ministers of reconciliation. God in Christ was reconciling the people of the world to himself. We have the opportunity to tell people that Jesus loves them and that their lives can be different because of that.

Recall in 1 Corinthians 9:19-22: "Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law...To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some." Paul was free to go anywhere in the world. He was a Roman citizen, and when it served his purpose to claim Roman citizenship he did so. When he went to the Jews he adorned himself like a Jew and kept the law like the Jews. When he was with Gentiles, he lived like a Gentile. He went everywhere in the world, in every culture of the world adapting himself to the circumstances he was in so that he could get near enough to people to tell them of the love of Christ and the possibility of a relationship with God.

A third point I would like to make before we look at 1 John 2:15-17 in detail is that we will suffer for Jesus' sake. That is our calling as well when we engage the world. Jesus said, "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. Remember the words I spoke to you: 'No servant is greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also." (John 15:18-20.) If we engage the world as we ought to, eventually we'll pay a price---exactly the response that Jesus engendered. The world was fascinated and amazed by him, but it was called to account by him as well. We should not be surprised when genuine faith and serious discipleship lead to ridicule, restriction, and even danger. We can be salt and light, we can be

ministers of reconciliation, but we also should expect to suffer. All of these are proper ways to engage the world that we are to be in but not of, as Jesus said.

Three seductions

With all that as background, let's turn back to I John 2:15-17. The issue is love: Don't love the world or the things of the world. If you do, you have forfeited love for God in your heart. The imagery is that of seduction: the tension between holding in your heart your beloved whom you should and properly do love; and, being seduced by the temptation to love another.

Then John goes on to say that there are three ways of observing this seductive process regarding the things of the world. The first is the cravings of sinful man, or what older translations call the lust of the flesh. The second is the lust of the eyes, and the third is boastfulness and pride in what you are and do. These are all avenues of seduction. What do they mean?

The lust of the flesh refers to basic urges that have been built into our biology. Again, they are neutral in and of themselves, but they offer opportunity for us to arrange the chaos to personal advantage, for our sinful nature to express itself and for us to serve ourselves rather than God. Examples include the instinct for self-preservation. Every one of us was born with instincts to preserve our lives. That's one of the reasons your hand will jerk back if it comes near a flame. Self-preservation is a given with human existence, but it can lead to paranoia and revenge. The desire to preserve yourself makes you lash out, hurt, be suspicious of, and exert force against people who are not endangering you in any way.

The desire for companionship is built in. It is a good thing. All of us long for companionship, but the desire for a companion can lead to jealousy, control, and deception. In your desire to own another person, one who might have been your companion now becomes your servant. Wordly thinking has replaced love for the Father.

The desire for sex, again neutral and God-given, can lead to promiscuity. The hunger for food can become gluttony. Are our appetites offered to the Father to be channelled in proper ways or do they become arenas for selfishness?

The lust of the eyes is the inclusion of the mind in the process. It's the addition of fantasy, tantalization, illusion, appearance---mentally playing with things we desire. People who are enslaved by pornography are those in whom the lust of the eyes has taken root. But there are other ways. One example is being excessively fashion-conscious, where you are unable to feel good about yourself unless you're wearing the latest clothes and have the latest hairstyle and drive the latest car. The advertising industry promotes self-image based on appearance. The word image itself refers to something that is not reality but only appearance. This is what John has in mind when he talks about the lust of the eyes.

The third thing John highlights here is what he calls the boastful pride of life, or the boasting of what one has and does. It's the urge to compete at all costs without any reservation; to insist that what I have done is better than what you have done; to look at every encounter and every relationship as a way of besting the people around you. It is to measure yourself on the basis of accomplishment and to redefine the terms so that your accomplishments are superior. It is a compelling need to come out on top---the destructive power of pride.

The lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life are all seductions. All of them are a siren song to love something else instead of loving the Father. But if anyone loves the world the love of the Father is not in him.

Temporary vs eternal rewards

The last point John makes in verse 17 is to contrast worldly rewards with what one receives for loving the Father. "The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever." One is temporary, one is eternal. One fades, grows old, disintegrates and becomes nothing; the other lasts for eternity. Some have called the point John is making here destination sickness: to have sold out everything that

was worth having in order to achieve some standing or station or accomplishment or riches---everything you always wanted---and then to hate what you have. You have arrived at the destination only to be sick of it. The world and its desires pass away; the pay-off doesn't last. But the one who does the will of God lasts forever.

Abraham is described in Hebrews 11:9-10 as a sojourner: "By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God." This is a marvelous way to think about living life in the world. Abraham lived all his life in the world, but he lived it in a tent. He was looking for the city that had foundations whose builder and architect was God. He was looking for something that would last forever, not just for the moment. He wasn't going to let this world pay him off, but he would not disengage himself from it either. He was willing to live by faith that something better was being prepared for him, so he lived in a tent in the promised land.

That's really the call we have---to live in a tent, to not love anything about this seductive world too much. I love the simplicity of Maria do Carmo Jeronimo: grateful to see the ocean, longing to see the Lord.

We're not to love the world or the things of the world, or the love of the Father is not in us. Let's choose the good alternative, not just denying worldliness, but letting the love of the Father grow in us, caring more and more that he loves us and wants to be intimate with us, that he's available to us and will love us in return. For every indication of love that we give him, we get an infinite response back from him. It's a marvelous way to live. Choose the experience of the love of God, the challenge, the thrill, the laughter, the joy, the uncertainty and the adventure. To keep from being seduced let us fall more and more in love with the One whom we ought to love.

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