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THE FLOWER WE HAVE NOT FOUND

1 John 2:12-17

Back in 2011 Laurie and I had a vacation with our then single adult children, Carissa and Toby. It was the second to the last trip we ever took with them before they both got married. The year before we had hoped to go to Disney World in Florida with them, but events in Laurie’s and my life made that impossible. However, the kids went, and had a great time. They came home saying we had to go back with them. So the next year we made a dream come true. We had an incredible time. For us, it really was the happiest place on earth at that moment.

One of the rides at Epcot is one I have mentioned to you before, but it is particularly germane today. It is the Mission: Space ride. This attraction has two options, the Green ride and the Orange ride. They called the second one Orange to hide the fact that it really should have been called Red, as in you should stop right now. It simulates a rocket launch and a mission to Mars by putting you in a large centrifuge that also tilts. If that sounds like one of those horrific, nausea-inducing carnival rides at the fair, it is more sophisticated, but it is a distant cousin of them. It has great potential for creating turbo charged motion sickness. They give you a briefing before they start the ride. They emphasize a couple of super important instructions. Keep your eyes on the screen in front of you, do not look away from it even for a moment, and do not close your eyes, as much as you might want to. They tell you those things several times. That’s kind of negative because it involve some “don’ts” that limit your freedom. The reason for those “don’ts” is if you close your eyes or look away, you will get roaring motion sickness and you’ll throw up. We’re talking industrial strength upchucking here. Those “dont’s” are not given to limit you, to stop you from having fun. They are are given so you can actually enjoy the ride, and if you don’t heed them, not only will it ruin the ride for you, you’ll likely feel awful for some time afterward. Plus those around you on the ride will despise you for what you’ve just done to them.

This letter from the apostle John called 1 John has a great deal to say about experiencing the fullest possible life. The points I’m going to tell you today all sound a bit negative because they all start with the word “Don’t.” It’s possible to think that’s the problem with religio. It has so many “don’ts.” But I want you to think of them being like those instructions given before the Mission: Space ride. Don’t look away from the screen and don’t close your eyes. Those were also “Don’ts” that one might think were negative and limiting, but in fact were intended to keep the riders healthy and maximize their experience on the ride. These “Don’ts” are like that. They are not about limiting our freedom. Rather, they are designed to keep us healthy and maximize our experience of life. Let’s look at 1 John 2:12-17.

DON’T FORGET WHO YOU ARE

Verses 12-14 are the subject of much disagreement among Bible scholars. In these verses John mentioned children, fathers and young men. He says their sins have been forgiven, they know “him who is from the beginning,” and they have overcome the evil one. Then he addresses those same groups again but uses some variation in his description of what is true of them.

Scholars often try to define who those groups of people were and explain why John says the particular things he does about each group. But the discussion ends up being confusing because there is little agreement. Plus some of the connections some scholars try to make just don’t make an awful lot of sense. There are some details of the grammar that can help clarify what John was saying.

First, the little Greek word *hoti,* which is translated “because,” often means “that.” I think it should be translated that way here, and that helps us get what John is saying. “I write to you, dear children, that your sins have been forgiven on account of his name.” He is reiterating something he said in the first chapter, that their sins were forgiven, and this wasn’t because they deserved it, it was because of Jesus and his work. He says, “I write to you, fathers, that you know him who is from the beginning.” He is telling them they do, in fact, know the true God. He tells the young men that they have overcome the evil one. By putting their faith in Christ they have defeated Satan in his efforts to derail them.

No English versions translate the passage that way, but the grammar is correct. The most definitive lexicon of New Testament Greek lists 3 main meanings for *hoti*, and the first is “that.” Translating it “that” captures John’s thinking best. In *The Message*, Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase of the New Testament, he has verses 12-13 read, “I remind you, my dear children. Your sins are forgiven in Jesus’ name. You veterans were in on the ground floor, and knew the One who started all this. You newcomers have won a big victory over the Evil One.”

I believe he’s right. John is reminding these people of some things. He is reminding them of who they are. They are people who are forgiven, who know God, and who have by faith overcome the enemy. But that raises the question of who the specific groups of people are, and why John mentioned the descriptions that he did for each one.

First, I believe we should not see 3 groups here, but 2. Some think there are 3, the children, the fathers and the young men. But John consistently uses “children” in this letter to mean all of the church. He uses it that way every other time he uses the term in this letter. Notice also that if he were intending “children” to refer to the youngest members of the church, the order is wrong. It should have been children, then young men, then fathers. I believe the children he wrote to here were all the believers. They were all forgiven.

Second, we should not get too wrapped up in trying to figure out why he used particular truths to apply to each group. You might notice there is some variation in what he says about each group, which suggests he didn’t have something specific in mind for each. I think he mentioned the two groups to emphasize he was addressing everyone in the church, young and old. He’s saying, “I write to you, children, both young and old.” They all knew God, they all were forgiven and they all had victory over the evil one in Christ.

Why did he repeat himself? In both ancient Hebrew and Greek repetition was a way to emphasize something. We have the same idea in English. If we ate at a restaurant and we liked it, we might tell someone it was good. If it was especially good we might say it was “really good.” But if it was unusually good, outstanding, we might say it was, “really, really good.” The repetition emphasizes the point. That’s what John did in this passage.

Why did John think it necessary to affirm these truths for his readers? Remember that there was some false teaching infiltrating the church. It was teaching that denied some of the fundamental truths of the Gospel, and those who were spreading it asserted they had superior knowledge of God. They claimed to have something better, more true, than the Gospel of Christ, and it enabled them to really know God, which, they insisted, was not true of these common, garden variety followers of Jesus.

John says, “Despite what those people say, and what you yourselves might fear, you are forgiven and you know God, the Creator of all.” You might encounter people who claim to have superior knowledge of God. Maybe they claim that they have experiences with him that you’ve never had, maybe they even believe he speaks to them or gives them visions. Here’s the thing: I don’t know about those people, but I know what John says to you if you put your faith in Jesus. I write to you that you are forgiven, that you know God, and that because of that faith you are defeating the enemy of the human race. That is objectively true of you, regardless of what others say or even of what you may feel. It is certain because God says it, and he is not ever wrong nor does he ever lie.

John wrote these things because they needed the reminder and the encouragement. My first semester in seminary I wanted to take an elective class that was intended for students in their last year. It had a number of pre-requisites that I didn’t meet. It was taught by a prof who was the best at that school. I knew him from previous encounters, so went to see him about letting me into that class. He agreed to let me take the class. I was a bit cocky and figured I could handle it no problem. Things went fine for a while. But we all were assigned one big project that would be the largest factor in our grade. We had to take a topic and do a presentation for the class on it, then open up for questions. To shorten the story, I will tell you that my presentation turned into a nightmare. The students began asking questions that revealed painfully I was out of my depth, and it went on for more than an hour. I had no answers. I felt like the proverbial deer in the headlights. It seemed to go on forever. I had utterly failed. I realized I was over confident, even cocky, and I’d just be handed a huge helping of humble pie. I was shattered. This was my first big project in grad school, and I’d made a hash of it. I thought maybe I didn’t have what it took to do this. I didn’t even want to look at the prof, who I figured was seriously disappointed in me. I thought maybe I should consider giving up on the seminary idea. We had to turn in a written form of our project. A week or so after the debacle the prof gave my paper back to me. I didn’t even want to look at the grade, expecting it to be awful. I was shocked. He gave me an A. As he handed the paper to me he patted me on the back and said, “Great job, Rick. I know that was a bit rough for you, but you handled it well. I was proud of you.”

I was stunned. But I was relieved. I had been humbled, and that was good. But the prof’s pat on the back, figuratively and literally, restored hope that maybe I was all right. And that hope was necessary for me to go on. All of us need that hope. And this passage is John’s way of saying to us, “Great job. I know this may be a bit rough, but you’re handling it well. I’m proud of you.” It was John emphatically affirming that you are on the right track. You are indeed forgiven, you do have fellowship with God despite what other people say or your own shortcomings, and in your faith you are winning a big victory over Satan.

DON’T BUY INTO THE SYSTEM

Having given his readers the affirmation and encouragement they needed, John now issues a command. He says in verse 15, “Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in them.” John says that because it was a temptation for them. Loving the world in this case would have been trying to look as smart as those people who claimed they had special spiritual knowledge. It was kind of being able to compete with them and being respected, not looked down on. But as we will see this command has broader significance as well. What exactly does it mean?

My wife, my children, my grandchildren are all in the world. Since John says we are not supposed to love anything in the world, does that mean I’m not supposed to love them? That clearly can’t be right, for God has commanded me to love people, beginning with my family. The fact is, I love this world. We all do. This has been a bizarre and difficult year for everyone. I remember when the pandemic first became a clear and present danger in our nation I wasn’t all that concerned about it. Not because of anything the President said, but because I heard so much about it being a threat to people who have underlying health conditions. I don’t have any, so I wasn’t all that concerned about it. But then our son, the emergency room doctor, began dealing with cases of covid. He said he saw it absolutely ravage people. He told me that I needed to be very careful because I was in the high risk category due to the fact that I’m ancient. He reiterated this several times. I had that moment where I thought about the possibility that I could get that disease. I thought, “Well, what’s the worst that could happen?” The worst was I could die.

That statement says a lot. The worst that could happen is I could die. Leaving this world would be the worst thing that could happen. That means I love this world. I like being here. I’m not anxious for it to end. I enjoy so much here. Obviously my family is huge and they bring great delight to me. But I enjoy friends, activities, interests. I find my days are full of enjoying the things of this world. I find each day to be full of little delights.

Is that wrong? There are people who have taken commands like this to mean we must not be so attached to things of this life. Throughout the history of the church there have been those who have gone the ascetic root, seeking to have only barely enough to survive on, foregoing the many good things of this life. But remember what Paul wrote in 1 Timothy 4:4. “Everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving.” God created all this stuff we enjoy as gifts to us, and he wants us to receive it with gratitude. He wants us to enjoy it. Paul actually referred to people who teach that we must not enjoy God’s gifts in this life as “hypocritical liars” in verse 2. So whatever John means by not loving the world, it’s not that.

Let’s think about what John meant by the term “world.” The Greek word was *kosmos*, from which we get the English term cosmos. The most extensive source on the meanings of Greek words used in the New Testament, *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, a massive 10 volume work, says the original meaning of the word was, “the order whereby the sum of individual things is gathered into a totality.” Plato used the word to refer to the political system of a city. So the word meant “order” or “system.” That meaning is reflected in the English word “cosmetics.” The idea being women use cosmetics to bring order to their appearance. That’s not my idea, it’s just where the term came from. So don’t blame me.

What John was referring to then was that we should not love the world system or the things in the world system. There is a way the world works, there are things the system of this world values, and this system is exerting a relentless pull on us every moment of our lives. We need to pay attention to what John said later in 1 John 5:19. “The whole world is under the control of the evil one.” The world system is shaped, manipulated and controlled by Satan. What is Satan’s plan for your life? What does he want for you? He wants to rip you away from God and to destroy you. So understand that the world system is designed to pull you away from God and to ruin your life and crush your soul. That is the whole point of it!

Often Christians have interpreted loving the world in ways that are both external and often trivial. You’re being like the world if you dance, or go to movies, or wear makeup or wear some kinds of clothes and so on. But the real problem is far deeper than that. John gives us a glimpse of the world system in verse 16.

Verse 16 says, “Everything in the world, the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, comes not from the Father but from the world.” Oh, okay, so the world system is about lust. That seems like it is a sexual issue when it is the “lust of the flesh.” Understand that sex is not the focus on this verse. Yes, lust is involved here, but not what we usually think of when we use the word lust. The word translated “lust” here just means desire. The world system is about the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes and the pride of life. Scholars have debates about what these terms mean, but they are actually not all that hard to figure out.

The desire of the flesh is simply the desire for physical wants and needs to be met. It is the desire for food, for comfort, for pleasure, yes, for sex, but that’s only a part of the bigger picture. The desire of the flesh is the desire to feel good, to have comfort and pleasure, however one thinks one will get that. Let’s call this one the longing for pleasure.

The desire of the eyes has to do with wanting what we see. Recently Laurie and I had to have our master bathroom remodeled. Her sink was cracked and her faucet was not functioning well at all and the pipes were leaking, the shower was having problems and the toilet was an overflow waiting to happen. The house is 30 years old, including our bathroom. So it was time. We are happy with the outcome, but I have to tell you that I still have to deal with a little bit of dissatisfaction. The problem is the shower is really small. I tried to figure out a way to seriously remodel and get a bigger shower, but it just wasn’t feasible. Why did that become an issue? Our shower has adequately served its purpose for 30 years. But we had watched shows on HGTV that are about remodeling or flipping houses. And when people are remodeling, where do they spend money? Floors, kitchens and bathrooms. We had seen these glorious showers that are beautiful, that are big enough that if you wanted to you could plug the drain and swim laps in them. Ours is the size of a phone booth. Oh, wait, there are no phone booths. So a small closet. If you bend down in it you might bang your head on the wall. I don’t know why I felt like we could really only be happy with one of these jumbo-sized showers, but now our closet sized shower seems like a joke. That’s a little bit of the desire of the eyes at work. I see what is out there in the world, what I think other people have, and I want it. You and I both know how that works, and we also know that it is endless. There is always some other shiny object out there that I don’t have and I badly “need.” We can think of this as the desire for possessions.

What, then, is the “pride of life”? It is about something that all of us desire. In fact, this desire is powerful almost to the point of being overwhelming. It is present in all of us all the time, and it rules our thoughts, our emotions, our words, our choices, our actions to a degree that we are mostly not aware of. It is the desire for notice, for approval, the desire ultimately for significance. It is about being a success, being admired, being accepted. We feel that if we don’t have that, then it will destroy our soul. This was the point where John’s readers were tempted to love the world. They wanted to be accepted, admired, respected, thought of as wise, deeper, more knowledgeable and spiritual than your average bear.

The past few months I’ve been playing guitar for our Sunday morning garage band live stream broadcasts. This is a new thing for me. It has been surprisingly stressful. It is stressful because I am not as adept at it as I wish I were, and I don’t want to mess up. Why am I concerned about messing up? There’s a good component of that. I want to encourage people to worship God and I want to honor him, and messing up does not help that. But honestly, a significant component is I don’t want to look bad. I don’t want people to think, “Why doesn’t Myatt stop and just get out of the way, because he’s terrible.” That’s the pride of life at work.

We’ve been doing our garage band thing on Sunday mornings with our garage door open because it has been really hot. So our music has been heard in a good part of our neighborhood. I wondered how that would go and suspected we might not be able to continue long because some might not want to hear it. But we have had neighbors come and hang outside our house to listen to the music, and we’ve heard from pretty much everyone we talk to that they enjoy it. So everything has been great, until a few weeks ago. We got a call from the HOA manager that they had received a complaint about our music. She said she felt bad about having to talk to me about it because she’s heard from everyone else that they love it. The plaintiff said Sunday morning was the only morning she can sleep in, and our music was disturbing her sleep. I thought she must be sleeping awfully late because we weren’t starting to practice until 9:30, which is hardly the crack of dawn. Then I began reflecting on the fact that one of our neighbors is building shelves in his garage, and he often uses his power saw out in his driveway on Sunday mornings, even before we start. And it is loud, much louder than our music. But the woman didn’t complain about that. So what’s the real issue? Either she thinks we suck, or she doesn’t like the message of our music. It could be that we suck, but I suspect that’s not the problem. I felt bad that a neighbor was having a problem with us. I want to be a good neighbor, and I want to reflect well on our Lord. But I noticed there’s also a little bit of discomfort just at the idea that someone doesn’t like what we do. It bothers me. There’s a little bit of the pride of life at work there. Just to put your minds at ease, we adjusted so we rehearse with the door closed, and don’t open the door until 10:15. The president of our association said told us that was great, and that if she heard any more from the complainer she’d just tell her that 10:15 is a reasonable time for music any morning so she’d have to let it go. To capsulize this, the pride of life is the desire for pride.

But how is that the world system? Aren’t many of our desires God given? Is it wrong to want some of the things we want? That doesn’t make sense. No, there is nothing wrong with most of the desires. Here’s where Satan’s system twists them into a problem. The world system tells us that these things we desire ***are what life is all about*** ***and that they are the source of life***. We can only have life by getting the things that we desire.

**The world system tries to find life without God at the center of it and as the source of it.**

We see the beginning of that system in the Garden of Eden. Satan told Eve, “That thing you desire is what you must have to really live. Don’t listen to God. Get what you know you need.” The world system is saying that to you every day of your life in a myriad of ways.

DON’T TRADE THE PERMANENT FOR THE TEMPORARY

John ends this section with a significant reminder. “The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives forever.” That is the problem with the world. It is transitory, it is impermanent, and that is true of everything in it. Recently we were at Toby and Anna’s just before the kids’ bedtime. They motivated the girls to get moving with their pre-bedtime routines by telling them when they got done Dadden (that’s Toby), would continue the story he was telling them at bed time each night. He was making up a story for them and they were loving it. That caused me to flash back some 30 years. I remembered a time when we visited friends in Kansas City. They had 3 kids about our kids’ age, and each night during that visit I would gather all the kids in their jammies after they had brushed their teeth, and tell them a story at bedtime. I made the story up, and each night would contain a new episode of the continuing story. The kids ate it up. I suspect that’s where Toby got the idea. Now my son, whom I told stories to in order to get him to go to bed, is now doing the same thing for his kids. It doesn’t feel that long ago to me that I was telling my kids stories at night. It feels sort of like I went to sleep one night, and when I woke up 30 years had passed. Call me Rip Van Myatt. It feels like it has gone by that fast.

It is highly unlikely that I am going to live another 30 years, but even if I did those years would pass by just as fast. It’s going to feel like going to sleep and waking up only to find out it’s over. Makes me a bit concerned about going to sleep at night. Laurie has a theory about life. She says it’s like a roll of toilet paper. When you start out it’s like one of those Charmin mega rolls, so much toilet paper it seems like it’s all you’ll ever need because it will last forever. But as you get closer to the end it seems to go a lot faster. You get to the point where there’s just a little left on the roll and you think it’s going to be enough, but when you pull it off, all of sudden it’s all gone.

That’s how life is. It’s temporary for all of us, way more temporary than we’d like. And everything in it is temporary. Not long ago we were at a car wash. They have a store at this place where they sell lots of food you shouldn’t eat as well as all manner of trinkets, including air fresheners for your car. One of them had a new car smell scent. Have you noticed they don’t have one with an old car scent? No one wants old car smell. But that new car smell doesn’t last. Cars, sadly, don’t stay new. Nothing does. We love our new bathroom, but it will get old, wear out, get out of style. That’s how everything is in our world. All the things that we desire that we think are so central to life, come, get old, wear out, fall apart or get thrown away or lost. Nothing is permanent. Nothing.

The contrast to that, John reminds us, is “whoever does the will of God will live forever? Can that be true? Laurie and I recently had dinner with an old friend who was a part of our ministry but moved away 15 years ago. He was in town and wanted to see us. In the course of the dinner he told us a story of something that happened not long after his wife of 55 years died a couple of years ago. He was putting her clothes in boxes to give away and the sadness of it was overwhelming. He missed her terribly and was so lonely. He said that night he cried out to God and said, “Lord, could you just let me know somehow that she is really okay where she is?” Not long after that a friend who knew nothing of what our friend John was feeling and had prayed, came and said to John, “I have something I really need to tell you.” She had been seriously ill, had gone into a coma and came close to dying. But she said at that point she had that classic experience. She saw a brilliant light and was drawn toward it. But soon instead of that light she saw our friend’s wife. She was standing in a beautiful field of flowers. She looked young, healthy and happy. The woman wanted to go and join her, but she said, “No, it’s not time for you. You need to go back.” Then she said, “But tell John I am doing great and am very happy here.”

That doesn’t prove anything. Perhaps that woman just had a dream. But isn’t it interesting that whatever that was, it happened right after our friend had prayed for some reassurance, a prayer that woman had no knowledge of whatsoever. That experience may be just a curious coincidence, but it gets us in touch with the fact that the apostle John claimed that because Jesus rose from the dead, those who follow him will live forever. Our confidence that we will live forever is based on the historical fact of Jesus’ resurrection. That means there is something permanent, eternal. Who we are and what we do will go on into eternity.

This touches one of the deepest longings of our hearts. C. S. Lewis said the longings that the world system distorts are actually the rumblings of a deeper desire, a yearning for something we can’t even name but we know is true. We can’t quite put it into words, but we sense it. In his book, *The Weight Of Glory*, he said it is, “the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have not visited.” It is the longing for God and his eternal kingdom.

Only when we find our rest in God can we experience and enjoy the things of this world as they were meant to be, as part of a relationship with God, that fills us and all we do with his life.

APPLICATION

MAKE WHO YOU ARE THE FOUNDATION

Remember you are forgiven, you know God, and in your faith you are handing the enemy of our souls a resounding defeat. This is the lens through which you must view yourself and everything in life.

DON’T MAKE THE FATAL SUBSTITUTION

One man said, “It’s not pleasure we need, it’s joy. It’s not more stuff we need, it’s contentment, it’s not achievement we need, it’s significance.’ There is nothing wrong with desiring good things and enjoying them when we have them. Our desires are God given, and so are the good things of this world, to be enjoyed with thanksgiving.

But we must never, ever, think they the source of life, the center of all things. God is the source of life and he is the center of all things. We must ever keep him at the center and know that real life comes from him.

ASK THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

As we think about all of the things that we think about, desire, pursue in this world, the things that occupy our minds, our hearts, our dreams, it is helpful if we will ask two important questions about them.

Who does this thing point me toward? Does it point me toward myself, is it causing me to be obsessed with me and what I want? Or does it point me toward God? If it points you toward yourself, be careful with it, and make sure that God is the Lord of it in your life.

How long will this thing last? If it is temporary, then you need to remember that. Use that to focus you on that which will last forever, which according to John is doing the will of God.