

That You May Know That You Have Eternal Life

The Church and the World

1 John 2:12-17

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Scripture

False teachers were spreading heresy about knowing God. In his First Letter, John wrote to encourage the church regarding their assurance of salvation. John had been coming down hard on the false teachers. He had also given clear tests about how one could be sure that one has fellowship with God. Then, it seems that John realized that he needed to encourage believers in the church about their walk with God, and also to give them a command about the world.

Let's read about the church and the world in 1 John 2:12-17:

**¹² I am writing to you, little children,
because your sins are forgiven
for his name's sake.**

**¹³ I am writing to you, fathers,
because you know him
who is from the beginning.**

**I am writing to you, young men,
because you have overcome the evil one.**

**I write to you, children,
because you know the Father.**

**¹⁴ I write to you, fathers,
because you know him
who is from the beginning.**

**I write to you, young men,
because you are strong,
and the word of God abides in you,
and you have overcome the evil one.**

¹⁵ Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. ¹⁶ For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world. ¹⁷ And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever. (1 John 2:12-17)

Introduction

In the past few years, I have been reading biographies of military and political leaders. I am currently reading the biography of Ulysses S. Grant (1822-1885). He was the Commanding General of the Union Army that was victorious over the Confederate Army in 1865. In 1869, Ulysses S. Grant became the 18th President of the United States and served until 1877.

During the Civil War, several armies were fighting in different locations. To be successful, the Commanding General had to deploy his various armies to the places where they were most needed to achieve victory. One of General Grant's great strengths was the clarity of his aural and written commands. Grant's biographer repeatedly notes that his statements were never ambiguous. They gave his officers clear instructions about what was to be done.

As I consider John's letters, I am reminded that John, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, gives similarly clear instructions. John knows that there is a great battle between the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness. He knows that God has deployed his church throughout the world and that we are engaged in a battle that will ultimately result in defeat for the kingdom of Satan and victory for the kingdom of God.

At this point in his First Letter, John wants to reassure the church and to give a clear command regarding the world.

Lesson

First John 2:12-17 teaches us about the church and the world.

Let's use the following outline:

1. Encouragements to the Church (2:12-14)
2. Enjoiners about the World (2:15-17)

I. Encouragements to the Church (2:12-14)

First, let's look at encouragements to the church.

John's encouragements are given to the church in verses 12-14. Commentators differ on several issues regarding these verses. However, regardless of how one resolves the differences, the final result is essentially the same. So, I don't think too much should be made about the differences.

First, in verses 12-14, John addresses children, young men, and fathers. Since he is writing to the church, I take these to be spiritual categories and not simply natural categories.

Second, another question commentators wrestle with is whether John is writing to one, two, or three groups. This is where the differences all seem to produce a similar result. For my part, I am going to suggest that there are three groups.

And third, John changes the tense of "I write." In the first three instances, he uses the present tense ("I am writing"), and in the second three instances, he uses the aorist tense ("I write"). I am inclined to view the aorist tense as what is known as an "epistolary aorist." The *New International Version* takes this view by translating all six instances as "I write."

Having addressed some of the differences that commentators have with these verses, let us turn our attention to them. John wants to encourage the church by reminding them of their relationship with God. He addresses each of the three groups in the church in terms of their spiritual maturity.

A. Spiritual Children Are in the Family (2:12, 13c)

First, we learn that spiritual children are in the family.

John writes in verse 12, **“I am writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven for his name’s sake.”** He also writes in verse 13c, **“I write to you, children, because you know the Father.”** We need to keep in mind that John is an old man, perhaps in his nineties when he wrote this letter. **“Little children”** is one of John’s favorite expressions for his beloved flock. He also uses it in 2:1, 2:28, 3:7, 4:4, and 5:21. John is not using the term so much in terms of their age but rather in terms of their spiritual maturity.

John wants young Christians to know that they are in the family of God because God is their Father based on having their sins forgiven through Jesus Christ. That is the essential message of the good news that all the apostles preached. They were sent out by Jesus to preach repentance and forgiveness of sins through Jesus (Luke 24:47).

I think my favorite Bible verse is Romans 8:1, in which Paul says, “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” When I became a Christian at the age of nineteen, this verse meant so much to me. God would no longer condemn me for my sin because my sins were forgiven. There was such freedom! No condemnation. No condemnation! I was in the family because Jesus forgave me my sins.

B. *Spiritual Young Men Are in the Fight (2:13b, 14b)*

Second, we learn that spiritual young men are in the fight.

John writes in verse 13b, **“I am writing to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one.”** And in verse 14b, John writes, **“I write to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one.”** John’s expression of **“young men”** refers to believers who are maturing and growing in the Lord. They know how to resist the evil one. And do you know how they have overcome the evil one? By reading and studying and applying the word of God daily in their lives.

Do you recall that immediately after Jesus’ baptism, he was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil? Jesus faced three temptations from the devil. Each time, Jesus responded with the words, “It is written” (Matthew 4:4, 4:7, 4:10), and then quoted a verse of Scripture. If Jesus, the Son of God, had to overcome the evil one by the word of God, then how much more do we need to do the same?

C. *Spiritual Fathers Are in the Faith (2:13a 14a)*

And third, we learn that spiritual fathers are in the faith.

John writes identical statements in verses 13a and 14a, **“I am writing to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning.”** The word **“know”** does not merely refer to intellectual ability. Rather, in the Bible, **“know”** often refers to an intimate relationship, say, of a husband and wife.

Many years ago, I attended a lunch event with three friends at General Assembly at which Dr. R. C. Sproul was the main speaker. After lunch, one of our friends said that he wanted to go and greet Dr. Sproul, whom he had known as a

friend for many years. The three of us said that we would meet him at the car. After a long wait, I was sent back inside to get our friend because we had to attend the afternoon session of the General Assembly. When I got back into the banquet hall, Dr. Sproul and his wife Vesta were speaking with my friend. As I rushed up to call my friend, Mrs. Sproul turned to me and said to me (as if I was a celebrity hunter), “Oh, would you like to meet R. C.?” I was taken off guard but I did get to meet R. C. Sproul, and also managed to get my friend to leave.

The point is that my friend knew R. C. Sproul well. Mrs. Sproul knew him even better. I can say that I have met R. C.

John had known Jesus for over seventy years. When John spoke of knowing him from the beginning, he did not mean that over time, he became a better theologian. No. He meant that over the years, he had grown in his faith as he had become more intimately acquainted with his Savior.

These, then, are John’s encouragements to each of the three groups in the church. He wants them to be strengthened in their battle against the kingdom of darkness.

II. Enjoiners about the World (2:15-17)

And second, let’s examine enjoiners about the world.

John now turns to a prohibition. It is important to believers who want to be assured of their faith in Jesus.

A. Do Not Love the World (2:15)

First, do not love the world.

John says in verse 15, **“Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.”** John uses the word **“world”** three

times in this verse and three more times in the next two verses. John uses the word **“world”** twenty-three times in this letter.

Some see a contradiction between John’s exhortation here to not love the world and God’s love for the world in John 3:16. However, in John 3:16, we learn of God’s love for all kinds of people in the world. Here, in verse 15, John is telling his beloved flock not to set their hearts on the world and the things of the world. In other words, it is a warning against worldliness. Moreover, worldliness is a sign that the love of God is not in a person.

B. Why We Must Not Love the World (2:16)

Second, let’s look at why we must not love the world.

John says in verse 16, **“For all that is in the world – the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life – is not from the Father but is from the world.”** John gives three reasons why we must not love the world.

First, we must not love the world because the desires of the flesh appeal to our appetites. In verse 16b, John writes about **“the desires of the flesh.”** The word for **“flesh”** refers to all improper appetites, not only to improper sexual desires. The *New International Version* better translates the idea when it talks about “the cravings of sinful man.” I think commentator William Barclay gets it right when he says that **“the desires of the flesh”** refers to being “gluttonous in eating habits, soft in luxury, slavish in pleasure, lustful and lax in morals, selfish in the use of possessions, heedless of all the spiritual values and extravagant in the gratification of material desires.”¹

¹ William Barclay, *The Letters of John and Jude*, 3rd ed., The New Daily Study Bible (Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 64.

Second, we must not love the world because the desires of the eyes appeal to our affections. In verse 16c, John writes about **“the desires of the eyes.”** God gave us eyes with which to see things. But sometimes we see things that grip our affections, such as a beautiful person, a nice home, a sporty car, and so on. Perhaps the biggest struggle for many today is pornography.

When I was a student at the University of Cape Town, a Campus Minister named Vic Pearce labored faithfully with the students. Vic was well into his retirement and had never married. One summer vacation, he planned a trip to the Netherlands for about a month. Less than 10 days after his departure, he was back in Cape Town. When we asked him why he had returned, he said that he could not go anywhere without being confronted publicly with pornography. The appeal to his affections was so great that he cut short his vacation.

And third, we must not love the world because the pride of life appeals to our ambitions. In verse 16d, John writes about **“pride of life.”** The Greek word that John uses for **“pride”** (*alazoneia*) refers to “the man who laid claims to possessions and to achievements which did not belong to him in order to exalt himself.”² The *New International Version* translates this phrase well by referring to “the boasting of what he has and does.”

Interestingly, these three reasons for not loving the world compare to the same three things that led Eve to disobey God, as we read in Genesis 3:6, “So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate.” And that led to the Fall into sin.

² William Barclay, *The Letters of John and Jude*, 3rd ed., 65.

C. *The World Is Passing Away (2:17)*

The third enjoiner is that the world is passing away.

John concludes this section with verse 17, **“And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.”** The world as we know it is not going to last forever. The people in the world also live and then die. Their souls continue to live but their bodies, in their present form, cease to exist. John’s point is that obedience is an important component of eternal life. It is not enough simply to profess faith in Jesus. One must also give evidence of that faith by one’s obedience.

Many people in our culture think that they are going to heaven. They have an intuitive sense that there is life after death. That is because God “has put eternity into man’s heart” (Ecclesiastes 3:11). They may even believe that Jesus is the savior of sinners. They may express belief in Jesus. According to James 2:19, even the demons believe the historical facts about Jesus but they are not going to be in heaven. So, what is the key? The key is the new birth. And the evidence of this is obedience. A child of God wants to please her Heavenly Father. And that is done by obeying the whole counsel of God.

Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed the concept of the church and the world in 1 John 2:12-17, let us grow in our faith and do the will of God.

Ernest W. Shurtleff was born in Boston, MA in 1862. In 1887, he was about to graduate from Andover Theological Seminary. His classmates asked him to write a hymn to be sung at their commencement. As he sat down to write, the many

friendships, conversations, and study groups came to mind. He felt well prepared for his life's work, yet he was somehow intimidated by the challenges before him. There were so many opportunities to serve in the church and to advance the kingdom of God. But sadly, not all his contemporaries were able to discern the difference between advancing the church and loving the world.

So Shurtleff wrote a hymn that we know as "Lead On, O King Eternal." The first stanza was a call to arms – the ready acceptance of his marching orders from the Lord: "Lead on, O King Eternal, / The day of march has come; / Henceforth in fields of conquest / Thy tents shall be our home; / Through days of preparation / Thy grace has made us strong, / And now, O King Eternal, / We lift our battle song."

The second stanza observed that the tools of Christian warfare are love and mercy, not military might: "Lead on, O King Eternal, / Till sin's fierce war shall cease, / And Holiness shall whisper / The sweet Amen of peace; / For not with swords loud clashing, / Nor roll of stirring drums: / With deeds of love and mercy, / The heav'nly kingdom comes."

And, in the final stanza, Shurtleff fixed his sights squarely on the heavenly prize promised to all believers: "Lead on, O King Eternal, / We follow, not with fears; / For gladness breaks like morning / Where'er thy face appears; / Thy cross is lifted o'er us: / We journey in its light; / The crown awaits the conquest: / Lead on, O God of might!"³

Though this hymn was written as a commencement hymn, it may be sung by all Christians who want to grow in faith and do the will of God. Amen.

³ Paul Eckert, *Steve Green's MIDI Hymnal: A Complete Toolkit for Personal Devotions and Corporate Worship*, Electronic ed. (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 1998).

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church
is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and membership in his church family,
develop them to Christlike maturity,
equip them for their ministry in the church
and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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