

Sermon File # 1044

Scripture Text: 1 John 2:12-17

Sermon Title: *Godly Living in an Ungodly World*

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On Sunday Morning 19 February 2012

At International Baptist Church of Brussels, Belgium

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the New International Version.

Sources cited in this manuscript are listed at the end.

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Godly Living in an Ungodly World

Introduction:

Last Sunday we considered the love test that John gave to the churches as a basis for the assurance of salvation. We can know we are children of the light, true, being-converted children of God, when we act in love toward others, especially our fellow believers. Love is not a condition for salvation, since we are saved by grace alone, but it must be a characteristic of our lives, as we live in obedience to Christ and allow the Holy Spirit to love others through us. The absence of love, on the other hand, may be evidence we remain in spiritual darkness and are not truly converted.

We come today to what appears to be somewhat of an interlude, when John writes what is almost a poetic refrain that offers his readers some reassurance that gives some respite from his tests. As a concerned pastor, he wants them (and us!) to make sure we're truly in the faith, but also is careful to balance the tests with some loving reassurance and reaffirmation of the genuineness of their faith (Burdick,

1909). But then, not wanting them to drift back into complacency, he issues a strong command for godly living in an ungodly world. Follow as I read **1 John 2:12-17**.

Most of you are familiar with the name of Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945), the brilliant young German pastor and theologian who died at the hands of the hangman in a Gestapo prison, just weeks before he would have been released by the victorious Allied troops.

One of his many legacies was the concept of “religionless” or “worldly” Christianity, which has been misunderstood by many who haven’t bothered to understand his teaching. In fact, as one writer says, many find the term “worldly Christianity” shocking (Devine, 116). In one of his letters from prison, Bonhoeffer espoused the need for the gospel of Christ to shed the trappings of a dead religious formality that was being rejected by contemporary culture. Religion, he said, even the Christian religion, was being marginalized to the fringes of society, whereas the message of Christ needs to be brought front and center, to engage culture and speak to the hearts and minds of those who have rejected traditional religion (Bonhoeffer, 91f).

“God cannot be used as a stop-gap,” wrote Bonhoeffer, noting that the Christian religion had tried to supply answers to life’s questions, and that God was pulled into the discussion as a last resort only when the secular world couldn’t give the answers. But Bonhoeffer called for a religionless or worldly Christianity wherein “Christ is the center of life,” and not just a back-up plan to “answer our unsolved problems” (104).

The worldly Christianity Bonhoeffer says we must live and present to the world is not the message of God’s power to solve the world’s or our personal problems, which is the tack of the world’s religions. True Christianity is the message of the cross of Christ, “the powerlessness of the suffering God” who has a message for the secular “world come of age” (122). Truly, Bonhoeffer’s life, though taken from him at the age of 39, when he was executed in his weakness, still exerts the power of Christ’s resurrection through the legacy of his courageous, self-sacrificial example and his powerful writings. Bonhoeffer wrote that the follower of Christ “must plunge himself into the life of a godless world, without attempting to gloss over its ungodliness with a veneer of religion or trying to transfigure it. He must live a ‘Worldly’ life and so participate in the suffering of God” (122f).

With Bonhoeffer’s definition, John and all the New Testament writers would espouse worldly Christianity. John is calling us to live a godly life of worldly Christianity that resists the influence of an ungodly world. Granted, we have a message for the secular unbelieving world, and we need to remove the religious trappings that make it inaccessible to the secular, unbelieving world. But we must remember that God is light (1:5) and that we are called to follow him as people of the light who have been rescued from the darkness of the secular, unbelieving world that resists and even opposes the message of the light. Our text for today reminds us that “we march to

the beat of a different drummer” (Davids, 201) and as followers of Jesus in this fallen world we must, first of all...

Remember who we are (verses 12-14)

These first verses (12-14) are written in a rhythmical, almost lyrical style, and refer to either chronological or spiritual age groups or stages in spiritual maturity (Barker, 319f, Stott, 96, Ogilvie, 39ff) or could be intended symbolize spiritual experiences and strengths applicable to all believers (Marshall, 137ff, Smalley, 69ff).

Six times in these three verses John says “I write (*grapho*) to you,” certainly for emphasis. I would say in contemporary parlance, “Now hear this!” (It’s unlikely this repetition should be compared in terms of impact to “hitting a mule between the eyes with a two-by-four,” as Yarbrough claims: 116). *The Message* paraphrases this as “I remind you” and addresses three spiritual categories as “dear children, “newcomers” and “veterans,” which seem to capture John’s intention. It is important that we remember whose we are as, first of all...

God’s children

In his pastoral manner, John addresses all the people in the Asia Minor churches as “my dear children” (2:1; 12, 13). In verse 12 John says we are all children (*teknia*) of God, forgiven all our sins and saved by his grace alone. Although we must look for evidence for the authenticity of our faith, we must not credit our works for our salvation. As children depend on their parents for life and provision, so we as God’s children depend absolutely on his grace (Calvin, 250). We must never forget that we are all God’s children, an amazing tribute to his love and grace (3:1). We will never outgrow being God’s children!

But John could be using the picture of a family, which has people of different stages of growth (Wiersbe, 75f), and certainly in the church there are representatives from every stage of Christian maturity. The second time (13c), John addresses children he uses another word (*paidia*), which may indicate a stage of spiritual growth and maturity (Calvin, 250). John may have referred to those in the church who are either newly converted “babes in Christ,” or perhaps those in the church who “have known the Father” (13c) for a long time but haven’t grown in spiritual maturity (Barker, 320).

These spiritual babies need direction for spiritual growth and maturity in order to live godly lives in an ungodly world. Such spiritual babies who remain on baby formula and can’t take the solid food for the mature, are potential problem children for the church and are easy prey for false teachers and are vulnerable to apostasy (Hebrews 5:11-6:6). In an indirect way John could be saying to such spiritual babies, “It’s time for you to grow up and put away childish things” (1 Corinthians 13:11). You’ve known the Father for a long time now, says Pastor John, so move forward in your spiritual growth and maturity of faith.

John also addresses emphatically and particularly...

God's young adults

The Message says "newcomers" and the *New Living Translation*, "young in the faith." This category seems to be those new, younger followers of Christ who are filled with confidence and strength that come from the written and living Word of God and the power of the Holy Spirit (13b, 14b), who has given them spiritual victory.

If these are newcomers to the faith, they have seriously equipped themselves for spiritual battle and fruitful service in the Kingdom of God. They have kept themselves pure by keeping God's Word in their hearts (Psalm 119:9, 11) and by wearing the full armor of God (Ephesians 6:10-20). They have had the spiritual discipline to "flee the evil desires of youth" (2 Timothy 2:22) and have followed the Lord's instructions to continually pray for deliverance from the Evil One (Matthew 6:13).

God uses the enthusiasm of new believers, who often have great zeal and energy for the Lord and especially youth and young adults are more likely to be risk takers for the Lord. Yet, the temptation is to rely on their own energy and strength and to venture into the devil's territory unprotected (much as did Simon Peter. See Matthew 26:58, 69-75). Although victories have been won, more battles lie ahead and young adults grow tired and weary and may fall, and thus must wait upon the Lord to renew their strength (Isaiah 40:30f; Marshall, 140).

John also addresses...

God's mature parental figures

John uses the term fathers (*pateras*) to designate spiritually mature adults who carry a sense of responsibility for others in the family of God (Yarbrough, 117). These are the ones who have followed Christ for many years and can minister to and encourage others out of a store of rich experience (Robertson, 213).

I am, by reason of my age, able to assert, however, that advanced age doesn't guarantee wisdom. We spiritual "fathers" are still capable of immature, foolish behavior and wrong choices. But our experience in Christ normally should give us an accumulation of biblical knowledge and life experience that equips us to teach and disciple other, by word but also by example. *The Message* paraphrases the word "fathers" as veterans, which is an accurate depiction.

Spiritual parents, according to CH Spurgeon, are those who have a deep knowledge, can teach others, are people of "spiritual force. These "parents" have come to the full stature of men (and women) in Christ Jesus," and are therefore "the solid strength of the church. If the young (people) are the church's arms," says Spurgeon, "these are the church's backbone" (159).

IBC Brussels is a very young church, but we have many mature believers who certainly meet the criteria for being parental figures, teachers and worthy mentors of our younger people and those who are newcomers to the faith. It's vitally important that we more mature parental figures live faithful lives, following Christ closely, knowing that temptations and trials don't diminish with age. In fact, it seems that might tests have become more severe. A good friend reminded me recently that the Lord won't stop testing and trying us till we get to heaven, as he continues to refine our character and form Christ in us.

It's also possible that John is pointing out that "all Christians are (by grace, not nature) children in ...dependence on the heavenly Father, young men in strength, and fathers in experience; that all have the forgiveness of sins, the knowledge of God, the Word of God abiding in them, and victory over the Evil One—important attributes of followers of Christ" (CH Dodd, quoted by Morris, 1263).

As followers of Jesus in an ungodly world, whatever our age or experience, we must remember whose we are but also we must...

Remember where we live (verses 15-17)

As is a pattern in some of Paul's letters, John in this text follows the indicative (12-14) with the imperative (15-17). Essentially he's saying, "This is what you *are* in Christ (12-14); now this is what you *must do*" (15-17). John uses fewer imperatives (commands) in this letter (10) than we find in any other New Testament letter, and with so few it makes sense to pay attention to them (Yarbrough, 125f). These are important imperatives that have to do with our attitude toward and conduct in the world, a word used six times in these three verses. There are important distinctions in the word "world" (*kosmos*), and the meanings depend on the context in which the word is used. First, there is...

The world we should love

The well-known verse in John's Gospel that summarizes the gospel message says, "For 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" (3:16). Obviously this verse refers to the people of the world that God loved enough to give his Son to rescue from sin, death and condemnation. As we noted last Sunday, one of John's love tests is that we love not just our fellow believers, but that we have an inclusive love for all people such as characterized our Lord Jesus (7-11). We too must love the people of the world, all of whom are made in God's image and are the objects of his love and candidates for eternal life or eternal destruction. I think this is the "worldly Christianity" that Bonhoeffer espoused, presenting Christ in a way the world can understand.

We're called also to love the world of God's creation. "The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it" (Psalm 24:1). We need to grow in our love for the Creation and respect it and practice good stewardship of the earth's resources. Just as we as God's children are heading toward our final redemption, so is the creation itself "will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God" (Romans 8:21). God has given us the responsibility to manage and care for this created world and our natural environment, and as Christians we are responsible to demonstrate our love and respect for it.

Paul admonishes Timothy to teach the church to learn to be content with God's provisions and to avoid material greed and the vain pursuit of earthly wealth. But nowhere does the Scriptures teach that we're to live an ascetic, pleasure-denying life, but rather we are to enjoy life as a gift from God, knowing that he "provides us with everything for our enjoyment" (1 Timothy 6:17). In fact, Jesus enjoyed the world "sufficiently to be charged with hedonistic excess" (Matthew 11:19, Yarbrough, 127). Jesus evidently knew how to "party" in a fun way with his friends and with potential disciples, and did so without sin.

I'm reminded of what someone said about her ultra-strict Presbyterian pastor grandfather, who lived all his 80-some years without ever committing a pleasure. Jesus on the other hand knew how to celebrate life, and we too are invited to enjoy what God has created for us to enjoy, for his glory and even as an act of worship to him. But there is...

The world we must not love

As one Bible teacher has said, there is a love that God hates (Wiersbe, 65ff), and that is love for the fallen world that is under the dominion of Satan himself. The allurements of the fallen world can be traced back to Satan's temptation of Eve in the Garden of Eden, who was seduced by the enticement of the forbidden fruit, which appeared "good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom" (Genesis 3:6). The world we must not love is the "playground of the devil," who entices us to live independently of God and promises the gratification of all our appetites. God indeed created us with appetites that he intends to fulfill in his way and time, but Satan offers independence from God and the exercise of personal autonomy, which is rebellion against the purposes and plan of God for us. James describes how our fallen, sinful nature continues to be "dragged away and enticed" (1:14f), leading to sin and death.

The world we must not love is the fallen world under Satan's dominion and opposed to the Kingdom of God. What appears to be attractive and may of itself be morally neutral is the world and our life in the world outside of the will of God. Just as God's plan for Adam and Eve was for absolute delight and pleasure in his creation and in their fellowship with him, their fall brought alienation from God and expulsion from Paradise. The rest of the Bible's story is God's work of redemption, to bring

humankind back into a relationship with him and a right relationship with the world. The world we must not love is the world in rebellion against God and that operates according to selfish and sinful values. Our love is to be for God and his Kingdom to come and to once again have dominion over this world.

As *The Message* says, “Love of the world squeezes out love for the Father. Practically everything that goes on in the world—wanting your own way, wanting everything for yourself, wanting to appear important—has nothing to do with the Father” (16). Our Lord Jesus faced similar categories of temptation to love the fallen world, when he was tempted to gratify his hunger instead of trusting God to sustain him with the Word; to do something humanly impressive, which would have tempted the Father to destroy him; and to exercise power and dominion of the world on Satan’s terms (Matthew 4:1-11). When our appetites, corrupted by our fallen sinful nature, and fed by the devil’s empty promises and lies, are indulged outside of God’s will, the results are disastrous.

Richard Foster notes that “Money, sex, and power are the three great ethical themes that have concerned human beings throughout the centuries.” In themselves these are morally neutral and can be enjoyed and employed for good and even godly purposes. “We cannot...avoid the pleasures of life in the world, and certainly God did not intend life to be miserable but ‘very good’” (Marshall, 143). But we know how these themes continue to be exploited and perverted, bringing disappointment and even moral and spiritual destruction. Foster notes that when money, sex and power are taken outside their proper place and away from a Kingdom of God perspective, the results are the demons of greed, lust, and pride (Foster, 4, 13).

Sadly, these abuses and demons are often found in the lives of pastors and other spiritual leaders, causing great harm to witness of the gospel and the health of the church. The world we must not love is the world that opposes the Kingdom of God, even when it has the appearance of a successful evangelical ministry. Tragically, I can tell you of colleagues in ministry, even in recent days, whose lives and ministries have been tarnished, and often destroyed, by falling in love with these demons of greed, lust and pride. The prince of this world and his godless system lie in wait for God’s people as well as the pagan world. “The same kind of satanic ambition can affect men in business, wives in the home, or ministers in the pulpit” (Boice, 80).

The world is the playground, and sometimes the battleground, where our fallen sinful nature is easily seduced, captured and defeated by the devil himself. The battle never stops and the temptations never end. The only hope is for God’s people to “live by the Spirit” so we will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature.” The battle will continue till the day we die (Galatians 5:16ff). The only way out of love for the world is to fall more deeply in love with the Lord Jesus, to have his Kingdom values and perspective on the world, and to follow the way of Christ, who won the victory of the temptation to be gratify himself, to be recognized and acclaimed by the world and to have power over the world. We need to die to the world’s value of power, acclaim,

and success, and take the “downwardly mobile, selfless way of Christ,” in the words of Henri Nouwen. Just as Jesus was tempted by the devil (Matthew 4:1-11) so are we also tempted to be relevant, spectacular and powerful. “All three are temptations to return to the ways of the world of upward mobility and divert us from our mission to reveal Christ to the world” (Nouwen, 48f).

James Bryan Smith notes that one of the world’s false narratives says, “My value is determined by your assessment,” i.e. what you think of me. Because we want so desperately to be loved “we all long to feel that we are valuable, worthwhile and wonderful” (139). This vainglory refuses to believe we are of infinite value to God and seeks the affirmation of others. This vainglory is a “subtle trap for religious people.” The world gets its sense of worth from the opinions and accolades of others, but Kingdom of God people should find our worth in what God thinks of us. Yet we fall into the trap of vainglory as we find ourselves doing good for others and practicing the spiritual disciplines for the accolades and praise we receive from others. We can even become proud of our humility! We have thus become worldly-minded people in a godly environment. And the only cure is to repent and to focus instead on pleasing Christ and living and serving for his honor and glory through us (Smith, 137-150).

This imperative from John is a sharp warning to be on the alert against the seductive pull of the fallen world not yet under the dominion of Christ. We must take heed that the devil is on the prowl like a hungry lion, seeking to devour God’s people (1 Peter 5:8f). Unlike Peter, we dare not follow Jesus at a distance but must be always diligent against the Tempter (Matthew 26:31-35, 41, 69-75). Because we’re “immersed in the culture of our affluent, materialistic, secular society,” says Donald Hoke, “our guard is down.” Hoke continues: “You know the story of how to boil a frog. You don’t put him in a pot of boiling water. You drop him in the boiling water and he’ll jump out before he’s injured. So you put him in a pot of cold water, and he’s perfectly comfortable. Then you put him on the stove, and little by little the water gets warm. It’s very pleasant at first. Then it gets to the Jacuzzi level, and he begins to be a little alarmed. Finally, when it’s boiling, it’s too late” (4).

What does a godly life in an ungodly world look like? Tragically, often evangelicals and church members look and act no differently from the pagan world around us, often having (at least living by) the same values of the fallen world. We are called to live lives that “shine like stars in the universe” of moral and spiritual darkness (Philippians 2:15f). But sadly, we evangelical, so-called Bible believers, are known more for our quirks, and a few social ills we are against. We have often defined worldliness by practicing what many consider taboos against certain practices. An evangelical Christian psychiatrist writes that “One can avoid the movies and beer parties and still harbor worldly bitterness and pride. We can be cigarette-free, but untruthful, total abstainers, but gossipers, modest in dress, but acquisitive....the heart of worldliness has more to do with carnality, possessiveness, jealousy, pursuit

of beautiful material objects, pride, snobbery than with the more traditional taboos” (White, 28f).

Paul addressed the members of the Corinthian church as worldly because of their spiritual immaturity, expressed in their jealousy, quarreling and divisiveness. Paul warned them that such spiritual immaturity and worldliness would eventually destroy God’s temple, the church, and incur God’s judgment (1 Corinthians 3:1-23). Worldliness means acting like the fallen world, following its mindset and way of behaving. Thinking and acting like the world never succeeds in Kingdom life and service, but always causes division, discord and damage to the unity and fellowship of the Body.

The world we must not love is the world that is really our enemy, and one with which we will be uncomfortable if we live too close to it. Jesus warned us that something’s terribly wrong if we’re on good terms with and highly regarded by this fallen world (Luke 6:26). If we follow Jesus in faithful discipleship, we’ll incur the fallen world’s hatred and possibly persecution (John 15:18-6:4). And persecution is an effective means of separating God’s people from the corruption of the sinful flesh and the fallen world (1 Peter 4:1ff). We’re not to be well thought of by the fallen world, yet we’re to love those in the fallen world, who are in the grips of Satan (Luke 6:26-36). We’re to snatch from the fire of judgment those who belong to the world and are in need of the Savior’s rescue (Jude 23).

We must remember where we live, but as we see in verse 17, we must realize where we will live in...

The world to come

John contrasts the fallen world order, which is passing away, with the eternal life we have in Christ, which promises everlasting life in the new heaven and earth (17). We face the choice of living for today or for eternity. We can’t do both. We’re either pilgrims looking for the eternal city of God (Hebrews 11:13; 13:14) or we’re living as “permanent” residents of Sodom, which under God’s judgment and destined for destruction. Change and decay are all around us, no matter how flashy and permanent this world seems (Wiersbe, 78).

I was reminded of this when I saw photos this past week, of my high school building, which was new when I was a student, being demolished as obsolete! I thought of what Paul said about these bodies of ours which are wasting away (2 Corinthians 4:16). For those who reject the ways of the world and who suffer with Christ in the way of the cross the future is certain and secure: we are blessed with great reward in the Kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:10ff). As *The Message* says, “Whoever does what God wants is set for eternity” (17).

Jesus tells us that gaining the whole world at the cost of the neglect of your soul, your relationship with Christ, is a bad bargain (Luke 9:25).

Conclusion:

We do well to heed the few imperatives of John's First Letter. We're sternly warned to not love this fallen world, and we can't love both God and the world (Matthew 6:24). The choice is clearly before us: either godly living in an ungodly world, or ungodly living in the world or even in the religious world. As Jesus prayed for us, we must live in the world but not be a part of it (John 17:15-18). We must have our boat (our lives) in the water (the world), but we must keep the water out of the boat or eventually, gradually, it will sink. We must have a different orientation from the fallen world. "The tension is there. The pain is real. We cannot have it both ways. We cannot love both God and the world" (Davids, 202).

You may be a student, for the first time living away from home. And you're being lured by the fallen, unbelieving world around you. You're drawn to them because they make you feel accepted, like you belong, even though you know deep in your heart it's not where you truly belong. Resist the downward pull of vainglory, and remember that your worth is infinite in God's sight and doesn't come from what this world thinks about you.

Maybe you're a businessman, and the business world and your travel life and ascendancy toward the top in your career is requiring some moral and spiritual compromises. And you're becoming more comfortable with practices and behavior that used to bother your conscience and yet now is drawing you closer to the fallen world and its values and practices. Remember the frog in the kettle. You're warming up to the fallen world and forfeiting your soul as the price you're paying for the world's esteem and success.

Remember who you are—a blood-bought child of God. You have the strength of God's Word and Spirit to enable you to extricate yourself from the fallen world and live in the glorious liberty of the children of God (Romans 8:21). Perhaps there's a brother or sister in Christ who has fallen captive to this world. You who are strong in the Lord must gently restore her or him. May God help us to live godly lives in this ungodly world, shining as stars in the universe, as lights in the fallen world's darkness!

Thought and questions for personal reflection and/or group discussion:

1. Who do you think John means when he addresses "dear children" in verse 12a? Could this be a different classification of believer than the "dear children" in 13c? In what ways should we continue to think of ourselves as God's dear children, and what is the childhood we should seek to outgrow?

2. What are the advantages that newcomers in the faith (13b, 14b) might have in serving Christ? What advantages do younger adults have in Christian service?
3. What are the strengths and advantages that spiritual parents/mature, older believers have in Christian service?
4. What is the world that we as followers of Christ should love, and how should we express that love?
5. How would you describe the temptations of the world in verse 16? What are some ways you have experienced, and perhaps continue to experience these temptations?
6. What weapons did Jesus use to resist the temptations of the devil (Matthew 4:1-11)?
7. What incentives does verse 17 give us to live godly lives in this ungodly world?

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