

## Love Not the World – 1 John 2:15

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### Introduction:

1. Religious error is nothing new.
    - a. Cain engaged in it (Gen. 4:3-5; Heb. 11:4).
    - b. Job's "friends" had false views of suffering and evil.
    - c. Nadab and Abihu offered unauthorized fire (Lev. 10:1,2).
    - d. Moses had to deal with the rebellion of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram (Num. 16:1-40).
    - e. Saul usurped authority by offering a sacrifice (1 Sam. 13:8-14).
    - f. Solomon allowed his wives to seduce him into idolatry (1 Kings 11:1-8).
    - g. Jeroboam set the kingdom of Israel on the destructive path of idolatry which led to the eventual termination of her national existence (1 Kings 12:25-33).
    - h. The Pharisees adopted a legalistic approach to the Law of Moses causing them to become the epitome of hypocrisy (Matt. 23).
    - i. The Sadducees fell in love with Greek philosophy and denied the fact of the resurrection (Matt. 22:23).
    - j. An unholy amalgamation of paganism, hedonism, the Law of Moses, Christianity, and Greek philosophy produced a general set of beliefs we know as Gnosticism.
  2. This Gnostic error must be understood if we are to understand much of what John wrote in his first general epistle.
    - a. Gnosticism was beginning to make inroads into the early church during the latter part of John's life.
    - b. It was an error that *had* to be fought against if the church was to remain pure.
    - c. It was particularly seductive in that it seemingly offered a way to have that which was impossible.
    - d. Not to mention that it appealed to the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life.
  3. This study will approach 1 John 2:15 from a three-fold standpoint:
    - a. This historical context of Gnosticism.
    - b. How John fought this error.
    - c. How does this apply to us?
- I. The historical context
- A. Hellenism – The admiration or imitation of ancient Greek thought, manners, or style; Greek culture.
    - i) The first mention of anything Greek occurs when the prophet Daniel interprets a dream of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon (Dan. 2).
      - (1) Nebuchadnezzar's dream was of a great image made of four distinct metals which represented four great world empires.

- (2) The third empire in this line was the Grecian Empire carved out by Alexander the Great.
- ii) Alexander the Great is remembered for two major contributions to the ancient world:
  - (1) The Greek language which became a near universal language.
  - (2) The spread of Hellenism (Greek culture).
- B. Greek culture would eventually make its way into Palestine.
  - i) The Greeks held that there was no higher position in life to which one could obtain than that of a philosopher.
    - (1) Hellenism greatly emphasized physical pleasure.
      - (a) Thus, they were basically hedonistic.
      - (b) The worship of their false gods often involved licentiousness of the worst sort.
    - (2) Hellenists loved sporting events.
      - (a) Often, these sporting events were done in the nude.
      - (b) This culture seemingly had no concept of modesty, moderation, or morality.
    - (3) The theater was much loved.
      - (a) This, again, provided another means for lewd, public expressions.
    - (4) Above all, they loved philosophy.
      - (a) They loved to hear and tell new things (Acts 17:21).
      - (b) Philosophers sought a higher level of spirituality through knowledge.
      - (c) They believed themselves superior to the “common man.”
      - (d) People looked up to them as the great leaders and thinkers.
  - ii) Many Jews embraced Greek culture during the intertestament period.
    - (1) The result was a major division between conservative and liberal Jews.
    - (2) This would give birth to the sects of the Pharisees and Sadducees.
    - (3) Those who embraced Hellenism eventually built a gymnasium in Jerusalem where Jews and Gentiles alike participated in nude exercises.
    - (4) Jerusalem became inundated with Greek culture.
- C. This mixing to Judaism and Hellenism would plant the seeds of Gnosticism.
  - i) Gnosticism is a general word given to a myriad of false beliefs that began in the first century and flourished until the third century.
  - ii) Though beliefs varied on a wide range of topics, nearly all Gnostics shared a few basic beliefs.
    - (1) All physical matter is evil.
    - (2) If all physical matter is evil then Jesus did not really come to this earth in the flesh (He only seemed to).
    - (3) If He only seemed to be here then His suffering and death were not real either (He only seemed to suffer and die).
    - (4) A holy God could not create evil, thus, the “supreme God” must be an ineffable, transcendent God who created several “demi-gods” the least of which was the Jehovah of the Old Testament.
      - (a) Therefore this material universe and man were created by this inferior god named Jehovah.
    - (5) Since the flesh is evil, salvation must come in one of two ways:

- (a) By abusing and destroying the body while becoming “enlightened” by knowledge (asceticism).
  - (b) By destroying the lust of the flesh by fulfilling the desires thereof (debauchery).
    - (i) This group believed that nothing done in the body would affect the spirit.
    - (ii) Sound familiar?
  - iii) Gnostics, in their own minds, held a certain moral superiority over all others.
    - (1) This smug arrogance is easily detectable in Philo’s treatise, “On the contemplative life.”
    - (2) This egotism also led to the belief that they were above sin and thus not affected by it.
- II. How John fought this error
- A. Gnosticism was seductive and began to infiltrate the church during the first century.
    - i) Paul spent much of Galatians refuting it.
    - ii) John’s first epistle confronts it.
    - iii) The church at Pergamos tolerated it and was rebuked for doing so (Rev. 2:15).
  - B. 1 John 1:1-4 – Jesus is indeed the Son of God.
    - i) John immediately sets out the fact that Jesus was indeed Deity in the flesh (contrary to Gnostic thought which said that Jesus only seemed to be real).
    - ii) John and the others saw Him with their own eyes, heard Him with their own ears, examined Him closely, and touched Him.
    - iii) Jesus did not merely *seem* to be.
  - C. 1 John 1:5 – There is no evil in God.
    - i) Jehovah is not evil and did not create evil.
    - ii) Thus, physical matter is not inherently evil.
  - D. 1 John 1:6-10 – Living in sin makes one a liar, not spiritual.
    - i) There is no such thing as sin immunity.
    - ii) Gnostics thought that they could rise above sin by asceticism or debauchery.
    - iii) According to John, they were deceiving themselves.
    - iv) Salvation does not come through knowledge alone but through the blood of Christ.
    - v) The Gnostics never sought to rid themselves of sin but rather to rise above it.
    - vi) The faithful child of God is one who realizes the reality of sin and is cleansed from it.
  - E. 1 John 2:1,2 – Sin is not something to be lived in but something to be forgiven if it happens.
    - i) There is only one cure for the sins of humanity.
    - ii) Jesus provides it, not Gnosticism.
  - F. 1 John 2:3-6 – We know God by keeping His commands.
    - i) In the finest spirit of Greek philosophers, the Gnostics thought they could come to a superior understanding of God through “special knowledge.”
      - (1) One does not know God through vain contemplation and self-abasement.
      - (2) One knows God by keeping His commands.
    - ii) Anyone who knows Christ should behave in the same manner as He did.

- (1) Christ did not live a life of solitude and practice self-abuse.
  - (2) Neither did He live a life of decadence.
  - (3) Rather, His life became the beautiful pattern that we are to copy (1 Peter 2:21).
- G. 1 John 2:7-11 – Sin blinds, not possessions.
- i) Many Gnostics who went to live the contemplative, ascetic life believed that their possessions blinded them to spiritual “enlightenment.”
    - (1) Thus, they gave away everything.
    - (2) They apparently had little spiritual regard for their brethren, friends, and family since they gave their “blinding possessions” to them.
  - ii) The man who hates his brother is in sin and thus blind.
- H. 1 John 2:15-17 – The root of the problem.
- i) Gnosticism, with its Hellenistic roots, was a worldly system.
    - (1) How then does a Christian guard against this error?
    - (2) By having no moral attachment (love) to worldliness (the world).
  - ii) Of what does worldliness consist?
    - (1) The lust of the flesh.
      - (a) Many Gnostics lived hedonistic lives.
      - (b) Indulgence was the norm as they sought to fulfill their fleshly lusts.
      - (c) This they did while also promising a certain immunity from sin (deeds of the body do not affect the spirit).
    - (2) The lust of the eyes.
      - (a) Hellenism, which was at the root of Gnosticism, appeared beautiful outwardly.
      - (b) The city of Corinth was a wonder to behold from a distance.
      - (c) A closer look revealed a depraved population lost in the excess of sin.
    - (3) The pride of life.
      - (a) Gnostics and their philosopher forerunners believed themselves superior to others because of their “special knowledge.”
      - (b) People looked up to them as great ones.
      - (c) This would appeal to the prideful.
- I. If those first century Christians were to withstand and overcome Gnosticism, they were going to have to realize:
- i) Jesus did indeed come in the flesh and is indeed the Son of God.
  - ii) God is pure and holy.
  - iii) That sinful living separates one from God.
  - iv) Only Jesus offers forgiveness of sins.
  - v) That the only way to know God is to keep His commands.
  - vi) The need to go the final step and remove any moral attachment they may have had to sin.
- J. This is the only way to defeat the arrogant attitude that sought to improve upon and/or discard God’s word.
- K. This is the only way to defeat the false teachers who believed themselves to be so enlightened that they could speak for God.
- III. What does this mean to us?
- A. Religious error will never die so long as the world stands.

- i) When it is defeated, it rises again later under new names and using new words.
  - ii) The basic attitudes, however, remain the same.
- B. Ever heard someone say:
- i) “Worshipping this way makes us feel closer to God so that is what we will do...”
    - (1) Is this attitude any different from the Gnostic who believed his knowledge to be superior to the law of God?
    - (2) Both treat the word of God as if it were merely a book of practical suggestions.
    - (3) Could this not tempt a Christian to set aside God’s pattern for worship?
  - ii) “We need to break down old barriers and step into the 21st century...”
    - (1) The smug arrogance that personified Gnosticism is alive and well today.
    - (2) What this person is really saying: “You need to put your Bibles down and listen to me. I know a better way.”
    - (3) Could this not tempt a Christian who was looking for an easier, non-confrontational version of Christianity?
  - iii) “You can’t know God without experiencing the Holy Spirit...”
    - (1) In other words, “You need special revelation to know God.”
    - (2) Is that not exactly what the Gnostics taught?
    - (3) They believed they could know God through “special knowledge.”
    - (4) What is the difference?
    - (5) Could this not tempt a Christian with promises of excitement and exhilaration?
  - iv) “I can’t possibly fall from grace...”
    - (1) This is not a new false doctrine.
    - (2) The Gnostics were teaching that bodily sins could not affect the soul nearly 2,000 years ago.
    - (3) That doctrine is just as false now as it was then.
    - (4) Could the offer of immunity to sin (however false it may be) still tempt a Christian today?
  - v) “Surely God wouldn’t disapprove...”
    - (1) Does this not imply some superior knowledge?
    - (2) If not, then it is certainly a reckless guess!
    - (3) How often are Christians tempted with error based on the promise of someone they trust that “God wouldn’t disapprove”?
  - vi) “We need a new gospel for a new age...”
    - (1) Gnostics were not content with the simple gospel of Christ.
      - (a) Thus, they chose and sought their own way.
      - (b) One does not choose the inferior unless constrained to.
      - (c) They believed their own to be superior to the gospel.
    - (2) How are the modern “new gospel for a new age” brethren any different?
      - (a) They have invented to themselves a new gospel based on their “superior” understanding of things spiritual.
      - (b) The same smug arrogance that characterized Gnosticism is present today in the “change movement.”

- C. How does a Christian contend with this “moral superiority?”
  - i) The same way John instructed those first century Christians to deal with it.
  - ii) We must realize and respect:
    - (1) The purity, holiness, justice, love, mercy, and sovereignty of God.
    - (2) That a failure to walk in the light of God’s word means eternal separation from God.
    - (3) That only Jesus offers forgiveness of sins and only on His conditions.
    - (4) That we can know God by keeping His commands.
    - (5) That we must remove any moral and/or emotional attachment to worldliness.

Conclusion:

- 1. Every Christian in every age will have to contend with false doctrine.
  - a. It is our duty (Jude 3).
  - b. We have been given the tools necessary for the task (Eph. 6:10-17).
- 2. Particular worldly doctrines may change but the basic attitudes remain the same.
  - a. There will always be some who believe themselves to be superior to others.
  - b. There will always be those who view God’s word as not enough.
  - c. There will always be those who crave excitement and sensory stimulation.
  - d. There will always be those who require special revelation.
- 3. Knowing God, trusting Him, facing the reality of sin, and cutting worldly ties are essential if a Christian is to shield himself from error and bring others out of it.