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Perseverance

1 John 2:15–27

Seeking real growth through the gospel is a grueling, lifelong marathon of learning to depend on Jesus instead of self—whether self-righteousness (on the legalist extreme) or selfish desire (on the libertine extreme). Discipleship is not a perfectly even, gradual ascent into heaven; it is an up-and-down journey from the top of glorious Mount Zion all the way down to the valley of the shadow of death and back again.

On top of that, disciples of Jesus must deal with the reality of external pressures, lies, and temptations that make the Christian life even more difficult. We have a great privilege to follow Christ in the company of other believers who are on the same journey, but make no mistake: not everyone in the world prays for our eventual success. In 1 John 2:15–27, John gives a sharp warning: don't let anyone or anything tempt you away from following Jesus.

THE WARNINGS ABOUT THE WORLD

The most obvious lies we face come from the world. Probably, when you think about temptation, your first thoughts go toward what the world constantly offers to you. In fact, there are other, more serious deceptions we will address in the next

section of this chapter, but first, John alerts us to the dangers found in the world. He writes:

¹⁵Do not love the world, nor the *things* in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. ¹⁶For everything in the world—the desire of the flesh and the desire of the eyes and the pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world. ¹⁷And the world is passing away, but the one who does the will of God abides forever. (1 John 2:15–17)

DO NOT LOVE THE WORLD

Notice specifically how John phrases his warning in verse 15: “Do not love the world, nor the things in the world.” John does not speak right away about our behavior (what we do), but he instead asks us to identify what it is that we love. It is easy to tell what someone loves best by asking one simple question: What does this person choose? If we say that we love Jesus (and not the world), what really happens when the world offers us something that would require disobedience to Jesus? Do we choose Jesus, or do we choose the world and the things in the world?

Augustine, an African bishop who lived 354 to 430, preached a sermon to help identify what it is that we actually love. He asked:

If someone asked you, “Which is better, money or wisdom, money or justice, or finally, money or God?” you wouldn’t hesitate to answer: “wisdom, justice, God.” You must hesitate as little when you’re actually making a choice as when you’re giving an answer. Which is better, justice or money? Of course, you all shout out “justice!” as if you were children in class competing to answer the question first. I know you all; I can hear what you’re thinking: “justice is better.” But then temptation comes along. It offers you some money from somewhere else. Now temptation is saying to you: “Look, here’s some money you could have; if you do a bit of cheating the money is yours.” But justice

will ask you, “What are you going to choose? Now’s my chance to test your words.”

When you were listening to my questions just before, you preferred justice to money. But now—both of them are in front of you! Money on this side; justice on that side. You close your eyes against justice, as if you are ashamed, and you stretch out your hand to take the money. What an ungrateful idiot! When I questioned you, you preferred justice to money. You’ve acted as a witness against yourself. Will God call another witness when you’ve convicted yourself? You prefer justice so far as praising it goes; but when it comes to choosing you prefer money.¹

This is a difficult question, isn’t it? We say we love Jesus, but do we? When push comes to shove, what do we choose? What or whom do we really love? We will return to this question in a moment.

DO NOT LOVE THE THINGS IN THE WORLD

In verse 16, John chooses his list of worldly temptations carefully: the desire of the flesh and the desire of the eyes and the pride of life. These are not simply the first three temptations he arbitrarily brainstormed while writing this letter, but they represent a complete set of temptations that summarize all the world offers to us.

Either the world appeals to our bodily needs (food, comfort, sex) or to what entices us visually (beauty, luxury, power) or to our “pride of life.” This last phrase is a bit tricky to translate, but it’s important. The Greek word for “life” here is *bios*. We get our word *biology* from this word, which refers to the study (-ology) of life (*bios*).

Some English versions translate this phrase as having to do with possessions or riches, and with reason, since we come across the same Greek word in 1 John 3:17: “But if anyone has the world’s goods [*bios*] and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God’s love abide in him?” (ESV).² In this verse, we might translate the word *bios*

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as “livelihood” to give an English equivalent of how a word related to “life” functions as “riches.”

To return to our current passage, then, this word could have something to do with materialism or consumerism and the pride that comes from having many possessions. But in fact, this word actually has a meaning even broader than simply the desire to acquire a lot of stuff. R. C. H. Lenski explains that this word refers to a broader pride that seeks to live completely independently from God:

This pretense does not ask regarding the Father’s will but acts as though it had the sovereign direction of its course of life.... The translations “the pride of life” (A.V.), “the vainglory of life” (R.V.) convey the wrong idea; John has in mind that hollow arrogance which presumes that it can decide and direct the course of life without God, determine what it will do, gain, achieve, enjoy.³

This “pride of life,” then, refers not so much to the physical things that our bodies desire, or that our eyes lust after, but rather to an overall outlook in life. Instead of humbly depending on God and his gracious love toward us, a pride of life desires only independence from God. This attitude wants control above anything else. Even people who deliberately avoid accumulating too many things still struggle with the desire to retain complete control over their lives. The “pride of life” is the final frontier of rebellion in our hearts.

Also, we need to recognize that these worldly desires are not new. In these three temptations, John is echoing the description of the fall of Adam and Eve into sin in Genesis 3. Compare “the desire of the flesh and the desire of the eyes and pride of life” with the following:

So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food [desire of the flesh], and that it was a delight to the eyes [desire of the eyes], and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise [pride of life], she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. (Genesis 3:6)

Ever since Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden, human beings have faced temptations that appeal to the desire of our flesh (what our bodies seem to demand), our eyes (when appearance outweighs wisdom), and our arrogant self-direction (what we deem beneficial apart from God). The world offers powerful temptations with deep roots, so what can we do to stand against them? How do we fight temptations through faith in the gospel of Jesus and in the power of the Holy Spirit?

In other words, how do we stop loving the world (and the things in the world) and start loving Jesus more and more?

THE EXPULSIVE POWER OF A NEW AFFECTION

Answering this question, the Scottish pastor Thomas Chalmers (1780–1847) preached a famous sermon on this passage called “The Expulsive Power of a New Affection.” He argued that there are really only two ways to try to change what we love. The first is to expose the lies of this world, demonstrating how this world really cannot offer the happiness, peace, and love it promises:

There are two ways in which a practical moralist may attempt to displace from the human heart its love of the world—either by a demonstration of the world’s vanity, so as that the heart shall be prevailed upon simply to withdraw its regards from an object that is not worthy of it....⁴

All the world has to offer is vanity, a chasing after the wind. This first option for changing what we love, Chalmers explains, basically tries to show the foolishness of pursuing the world’s vanities.

Certainly, exposing the lies of the world ought to be part of our message. It is important we understand that when the world tempts us, it is making promises of pleasure and beauty and satisfaction that it cannot keep. Along these lines, Lenski writes:

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Does the siren voice of the world tickle your ears? Hear the word of truth: “The world is passing away!” The bank is breaking, it was never solvent—will you deposit in it? The foundation is tottering, it was never solid but only sham—will you build on it? The mountain is rumbling, quaking, it was never anything but volcanic, ready to blow off its head at any time—will you build your city there?⁵

Exposing the problem this way gets us moving in the right direction, but it just isn’t enough. We must come to understand that we need something beyond this if we really want to turn our hearts away from the “siren voice of the world.” Our hearts are vacuums that were created to worship something, so the solution isn’t just to stop loving the world. God made us with the intention that we would latch powerfully in love to him. The entrance of sin in the world did not destroy our need to love and to worship something; it only directed our attention away from God onto something else.

So, Chalmers goes on in his sermon to explain that the better way to wean ourselves off of the love of this world is to learn how to love Someone better. Here is the second option Chalmers describes for conquering the temptations of worldliness:

...or, by setting forth another object, even God, as more worthy of its attachment, so as that the heart shall be prevailed upon not to resign an old affection, which shall have nothing to succeed it, but to exchange an old affection for a new one.⁶

Rather than trying to starve our hearts from the pleasures of loving the world, we need to learn by personal experience that the feast at Christ’s table is far better than the pleasures of this world. When we genuinely desire Christ more than we desire what this world has to offer, avoiding sin becomes much easier. Then, we don’t have to grit our teeth, summon all our self-control and resolve, and say no to the world. Instead, avoiding temptation is as easy as joyfully saying yes to Jesus.

At the end of the day, we will always end up doing whatever it is we value the most. Our hearts were created to gravitate toward something. If we have never developed a taste for Jesus, then the powerful affections of our heart will draw us inescapably toward the world. But if we continue to learn to love Jesus more and more, it becomes increasingly easier to choose him over any temptation the world offers us, whether of the flesh, sight, or life.

THE WARNINGS ABOUT THE CHURCH

While John spent three verses warning his flock about the dangers they face from the world, he now turns his attention over the next ten verses toward alerting us to the danger we face from within our own ranks in the church. He writes:

¹⁸Children, it is the last hour, and just as you heard that antichrist is coming, also now many antichrists have come, from which we know that it is the last hour.

¹⁹They went out from us, but they were not from us. For if they were from us, they would have remained with us. But *they went out* so that it might be manifested that each *one* is not from us. ²⁰And you have an anointing from the Holy *One*, and you all know *the truth*. ²¹I did not write to you because you do not know the truth but because you know it and because every lie is not from the truth. ²²Who is the liar except the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This one is the antichrist, the one who denies the Father and the Son. ²³Everyone who denies the Son does not have the Father either; the one who confesses the Son has the Father also. ²⁴*As for* you, let what you heard from the beginning abide in you. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, you will also abide in the Son and in the Father. ²⁵And this is the promise which he promised to us: eternal life.

²⁶I wrote these things to you concerning those leading you astray. ²⁷But *as for* you, the anointing which you received from him abides in you, and you do not

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have a need that someone should teach you, but as his anointing teaches you concerning all things and is truth and is not a lie, also just as it taught you, abide in him. (1 John 2:18–27)

When John says that we are living in “the last hour” (verse 18), he is not so much talking about the specific timing of when Jesus might return but about the condition of the church. Specifically, “the last hour” refers to the danger of antichrist within the church.

Then, when John writes about antichrist, it’s important to recognize that he is not talking about a single, apocalyptic figure to come at the very last hours of the world (the Antichrist) but about many antichrists who lived even in the first century, and who continue to live among us to this day. These antichrists are not world leaders but simply apostates who have left the church—people who “went out from us” (verse 19). The antichrists are not the worldly people John described in 1 John 2:15–17; instead, the antichrists are people who have emerged from within the church.

These antichrists, however, have a telltale difference that John wants us to see: “They went out from us, *but they were not from us*. For if they were from us, they would have remained with us. But they went out *so that it might be manifested that each one is not from us*” (1 John 2:19). Yes, John explains, these antichrists were indeed with us for a time; but no, John assures, these antichrists were not from us, and we know that they were not from us because they did not remain with us.

What, then, is the difference? What makes the antichrists what they are, and what makes us what we are? John does not name greed, anger, pride, or even sexual sin. Instead, the difference is in their theology. The antichrists do not have merely bad theology, but abominable theology. John rails against their doctrine in 1 John 2:22–25:

²²Who is the liar except the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This one is the antichrist, the one who

denies the Father and the Son.²³ Everyone who denies the Son does not have the Father either; the one who confesses the Son has the Father also.²⁴ As for you, let what you heard from the beginning abide in you. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, you will also abide in the Son and in the Father.²⁵ And this is the promise which he promised to us: eternal life.

Take careful note of the antichrists' theological error. They do not hold minor differences of opinion on issues like baptism, end times, proper church government, or even predestination. Much worse, the antichrists are those who try to get to the Father while rejecting the Son. They are "antichrists" because they deny the Christ.

This is not an honest intellectual mistake but serious spiritual rebellion, because the Father loves the Son. Reflect for a moment on all the places in the New Testament where we catch a glimpse of the Father's opinion of his Son. At Jesus' baptism, the voice of the Father boomed from heaven, declaring, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17). When Peter, having seen Jesus transfigured on the mountain, imagined that he would honor Jesus by placing him side-by-side with Moses and Elijah, the Father rebuked Peter from heaven, insisting, "This is my Son, my Chosen One; listen to him!" (Luke 9:35). And after Jesus humbled himself all the way to the cross, he pleased his Father to the highest possible degree:

Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:9–11)

Did you catch that last phrase? When the Son is glorified by all of creation, the Father is also glorified. The Father loves the Son in such a way that his own glory is tied up in the glory of his Son, who pleases him very much.

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Even more, we read in the New Testament that the Son is the official, perfect representation of his Father. Jesus Christ is the “image of the invisible God” (Colossians 1:15), and in him, “the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily” (Colossians 2:9). The eternal Son of God is “the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature” (Hebrews 1:3). So, when we look upon the Son, we are seeing the glory of the Father because of the fact that the Son is the perfect image and representation of the Father. Therefore, when we love, worship, adore, and obey the Son, we also love, worship, adore, and obey the Father. But if, on the other hand, we reject the Son, we also reject the Father.

All of this tells us that the Father takes our treatment of his Son personally. Christology (theology about Christ) is not an abstract mental exercise. Christology is intensely practical because Christology is intensely personal to God. If we honor the Son, we honor the Father; if we dishonor the Son, we dishonor the Father. This is no small matter—at stake is the full weight of the glory of God.

Nevertheless, antichrists dishonor the Son. The antichrists of John’s day (and still in ours) did not dishonor the Son so much by rejecting him altogether but by redefining him and insisting that he was either not fully God or not fully human. They dishonored him by arguing that they did not need the salvation he provided through his shed blood on the cross, the plan for salvation the Father and the Son had agreed upon before the foundations of the world were laid. The Father so loved the world that he gave the world his Son to be crucified for the world! What, then, could be more offensive than to reject the Father’s beloved sacrifice?

John treats this error seriously. Notice again the length of what John writes. He warns briefly against the pleasures of the world in 1 John 2:15–17, but he spends much more time warning against the antichrists in the church in 1 John 2:18–

27. Clearly, he is not as concerned with the fleshly, attractive, prideful temptations of the world as he is with the appalling theological rebellion that had already begun to creep up within the church.

Here is the point: Cleaning up your life from worldliness is not enough. Becoming a member of the church is not enough. Children, let no one deceive you: only the Son of God—who fully pleases and glorifies his Father—is enough. Perseverance in the midst of the world’s temptations and through antichristology in the church requires returning again and again to the gospel of Jesus Christ, who is the Father’s beloved Son. The cleansing blood of Jesus is precious in the sight of his Father, and so we dare not despise it or minimize its value.

THE ANOINTING OF THE HOLY ONE

How then should we react to John’s warnings about the world and about the church? John considers—and rejects—two main possibilities that were actually offered in the first-century church:

1. Should we simply rely on our common sense, trusting our own intuition and discernment to navigate through life?
2. Or, should we instead seek higher knowledge held by elite Christians who know the secrets of fighting temptation that common Christians like us do not?

John rejects both of these suggestions because they reek of faith in human ability and human wisdom. If our common sense were sufficient for guiding us through worldliness and heresy, then why would John write anything at all to us in the first place? And if elite Christians had the secrets, wouldn’t John be among them? Why wouldn’t he just tell us the secrets so that all of us could know them?

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Instead, John writes the following:

²⁰And you have an anointing from the Holy *One*, and you all know the truth. ²¹I did not write to you because you do not know the truth but because you know it and because every lie is not from the truth....
²⁶I wrote these things to you concerning those leading you astray. ²⁷But as for you, the anointing which you received from him abides in you, and you do not have a need that someone should teach you, but as his anointing teaches you concerning all things and is truth and is not a lie, also just as it taught you, abide in him. (1 John 2:20–21, 26–27)

So, what is this anointing? The word here is *chrisma*, and it is closely related to the Greek word *christos*, or Christ. In fact, Christ means “Anointed One.” John is teaching us, then, that we share in the anointing of Jesus, the Anointed One.

John tells us this anointing comes from “the Holy One” (*tou hagiou*), a name that could possibly refer to Christ (e.g., Mark 1:24, John 6:69, Revelation 3:7), but that does not necessarily single out the Son from the other persons of the Trinity (e.g., Revelation 16:5). “The Holy One” is a term used throughout the Old Testament (especially the prophet Isaiah, who constantly speaks of the Holy One of Israel) to refer to the one true God. So, to help us identify whom John has in mind by “the Holy One,” let’s look more closely at what the Scriptures teach us about anointing.

In the Old Testament, anointing was used to consecrate people for their particular offices. Prophets (e.g., 1 Kings 19:16), priests (e.g., Exodus 28:41), and kings (e.g., 1 Samuel 10:1) were all anointed to begin their respective ministries. The reason that Jesus is called the Christ (the Anointed One) is that he is the true Prophet, Priest, and King—he holds the ultimate anointing for each of these roles.

But although Jesus is the Anointed One (the Christ), he is not the one who anoints—that role belongs to the Holy Spirit. This is true in the Old Testament, for example, when

David was anointed king of Israel in the midst of his brothers. There, we read, “the Spirit of the LORD rushed upon David from that day forward” (1 Samuel 16:13).

Moreover, the Scriptures specifically attribute the anointing of the Anointed One (the Christ) to the Holy Spirit:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor,”... And [Jesus] began to say to them, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” (Luke 4:18, 21)

...God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. (Acts 10:38)

The Holy One, by whom Christ was anointed, and by whom we are anointed, is the Holy Spirit. John is telling us we can fight the temptation of the world and the errors from antichrists in the church by the anointing we have received from the Holy Spirit.

John boldly declares that “you do not have a need that someone should teach you” and that “his anointing teaches you concerning all things” (1 John 2:27). He wants us to know that Truth himself abides within us, because we too have the Holy Spirit. By the anointing of the Holy Spirit, we can stand firm against error from outside and inside the church.

Note carefully, though, that John does not simply assure us that we have the Holy Spirit and then turn us loose. He explains, “I did not write because you do not know the truth but because you know it and because every lie is not from the truth” (1 John 2:21). So, he doesn’t write to tell us something we do not know but to confirm what we already know by the anointing of the Holy Spirit.

This means John is not dismissing *all* teaching from within the context of the church, since John himself uses this entire letter to teach us about Christian discipleship. Instead, John is simply warning us we should not trust people who offer new, secret, or hidden teaching. Faithful teachers will lead us

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deeper into God's word with the aid of the Holy Spirit and not into brand new teachings of their own invention.

There is a mystery here, and this is the same mystery we experience each time we reread the same passages from the word of God, and each time we gather to hear the word of God read, proclaimed, sung, and visibly portrayed in baptism and the Lord's Supper. The goal of hearing and rehearing the word of God isn't really to learn new facts, although that does often happen. The goal is that God would cause his word to bear fruit in our hearts and lives by confirming the truth in us again by his Holy Spirit.

We know the truth because we have the truth in us. John wants us to be established, rooted, grounded, growing, and experienced in the truth. When we intimately know and love the truth, we will not stumble because of any lies, whether lies of the world or those from some within the church.

Then, if we remain in the truth, we will gain the promise he made to us—eternal life (1 John 2:25). To find out what John means by this, simply peek ahead to the definition of “eternal life” he gives at the end of this letter: “And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. *He is the true God and eternal life*” (1 John 5:20 ESV). If we remain in the truth, we gain Jesus himself for all eternity.

The Holy Spirit anoints us to confirm the truth to us so that we can gain the exquisite joy of a personal, intimate relationship with Jesus Christ, who is true God and Eternal Life himself. In response, we trust, worship, adore, obey, and delight in Christ to the glory of God the Father. The Holy Spirit anoints us with Christ, and Christ, in turn, reveals the full glory of the Father to us.

The more we continue in our journey of learning to love God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—the more we find strength to choose God over the temptations we face in every area of our lives. This is how we experience growth in the

gospel, and this is how we persevere, by the grace of God, all the way to the end.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. In what ways do you feel the lure of “the desire of the flesh and the desire of the eyes and the pride of life”? In particular, how does the temptation of “the pride of life” manifest itself for you?
2. Describe your strategies for overcoming temptation in your life. Do you mainly try to say no to sin, or are you seeking to learn to love Jesus more than you love sin?
3. If you woke up tomorrow morning to realize that overnight you had come to love Jesus more than you love sin, what would be the first thing you would notice as different in your life?
4. In your thoughts, your speech, your behavior, and your worship, do you take Christology as seriously as God the Father does? What would change if you did?
5. What role does godly, faithful teaching play in your life? Is your goal to hear something new, or is it to grow deeper in truth through the anointing of the Holy Spirit?

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2. *Memoir and Remains of the Rev. Robert Murray M'Cheyne*, ed. Andrew Bonar (London: Dundee, 1845), 254.

CHAPTER 3: GROWTH (1 JOHN 2:7–14)

1. See Matthew 22:34–40 and Mark 12:28–34.
2. This outline is adapted from Warren Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary, New Testament*, vol. 2 (Colorado Springs: Victor, 1989), 485–91.
3. John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles*, vol. 22, trans. John Owen (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 181. See e.g., Lenski, *Interpretation of the Epistles*, 417; Wiersbe, *Bible Exposition Commentary*, 495.

CHAPTER 4: PERSEVERANCE (1 JOHN 2:15–27)

1. Augustine, “Sermon 335C: The Sermon of the Blessed Bishop Augustine on the Feast of a Martyr,” in *Augustine: Political Writings*, ed. E. M. Atkins and R. J. Dodaro (New York: Cambridge UP, 2001), 59.
2. E.g., “pride in riches” (New Revised Standard Version), or “pride in possessions” (ESV).
3. Lenski, *Interpretation of the Epistles*, 426.
4. Thomas Chalmers, “Discourse IX. The Expulsive Power of a New Affection,” in *The Works of Thomas Chalmers*, vol. 6 (New York: Robert Carter, 1840), 209.
5. Lenski, *Interpretation of the Epistles*, 427.
6. Chalmers, “Discourse IX,” 209.

CHAPTER 5: HOPE (1 JOHN 2:28–3:10)

1. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 89.
2. 1 John 2:6, 10, 14, 17, 19, 24 (3x), 27 (2x), 28; 3:6, 9, 14, 15, 17, 24 (2x); 4:12, 13, 15, 16.