

Small Group Leaders Notes

1 John 2:15-27

Context

This letter is full of stark contrasts such as light and darkness (1:5), love and hate (2:10-11) and truth and lies (2:21). At the heart of all these contrasts is the contrast between God and the world. John wants us to see that there is a black and white distinction between God and the world. In 2:15-17 he will tell us that we must make a choice; “Will we love the world or will we love God?” We cannot love both!

As we get our bearings it is also helpful to remember that John is writing to reassure Christians who are being unsettled by false teachers who are trying to lead them astray. We have already heard a bit about the claims of these false teachers in chapter 1 (1:6, 1:8, 2:4, 2:9.) Now in 2:18-27 we learn that they were denying the truth about Jesus (2:22-23 and 4:3.) They have left the church (2:19) and they are trying to lead those who have remained in the church astray (2:26.) John writes this letter to reassure his christian friends that they already know the truth (2:12-14, 26-27, 5:13-14) and therefore they really do know God and therefore they really do have eternal life! These false teachers claim to be from God but in reality they are from the world (4:5-6)

Big Ideas

This passage naturally splits into two sections (v15-17 and then v18-27) but they are held together by the themes of the world and eternal life.

Do not love the World

Believers are not to love the world (v15) and the antichrists who John targets in v18-27 are from the world (4:5.) Believers are not to love the world because the world here is humanity in opposition to God. The world is everything that is alien to God. It is everything that stops us loving and obeying God as we should. The world goes with the darkness that John has talked about in chapter 1. God’s love for the world in John 3:16 is a selfless love that wants to love and save and bless the world. The love that God forbids here is a selfish love that lusts for and idolises the things of the world. We are to be devoted to God rather than the world. That is why these verses starkly warn us that if we love the world the love of the Father won’t be in us. The more we love the world the more it will push out love for God. Jesus says exactly the same thing about love for money and love for God in Matthew 6:24. This is a very helpful cross reference to help us get a clear handle on these verses in 1 John. John wants us to see that the world and everything in it is passing away in contrast to God’s people who will endure forever. This is the ultimate practical reason why we shouldn’t love the world. To love the world is a bad investment.

Eternal Life

In both sections John reminds his readers that eternal life is for those who know and obey God (v17 and v25.) The crucial thing that we learn about eternal life in these verses is that Eternal life is something that we enjoy now as we have fellowship with God (v17 and v25). Eternal Life is not something that we look forward to when we die, it is something we enjoy now because eternal life is about being in fellowship with God. We might say that Eternal Life is not about how long you live, it’s about who you live with.

Areas of Application

The two sections contains distinct areas of application. I am going to suggest that you just focus on the first area of application in your study. Better to apply one thing well than to apply two things vaguely.

Do not love the world

This is the area of application that I would focus on because I think that it is such a big challenge for every Christian. Indeed I think that half the time we don't even realise that we love the world because everyone else around us is doing just the same. What it means to love the world is fleshed out for us by three statements in v16. Loving the world is about the lusts/desires of the flesh (lust for physical pleasures), lusts/desires of the eyes (lust for aesthetic pleasures) and then the pride of life (pride in what we have achieved and acquired.) Loving the world is therefore both about what we don't have (lusts) and what we do have (pride.)

The warnings in these verses are perhaps even more relevant today than they were in our day because we live in a visual world where advertising, the media and our culture is constantly encouraging us to lust for more. We're encouraged to lust sexually but also to lust for food, drink and other physical pleasures. We're encouraged to shop until we drop and to deny ourselves nothing. With retail parks, TV adverts and online shopping we are constantly being encouraged to lust for more. Now we need to be clear. The physical appetite for sex and food are good things that God has made. The problem is that we take good gifts and make them our gods. We look for sexual gratification outside of monogamous , lifelong, heterosexual marriage. We don't just eat the food that we need, we binge eat and our waistlines reflect this. A key part of this study will be helping the group to recognise the ways in which we love the world like everyone else. It will also be helpful for the group to think about what it will mean to enjoy physical pleasures in a way that honours God and in a way that is worldly. Where is the line?

Alongside lusting after what we don't have, the world encourages us to take in what we do have. Right from a young age we are encouraged to take pride in our achievements and what we have acquired. Now again we must be clear, God wants us to enjoy the gifts that he has given us. God provides everything for our enjoyment (1 Timothy 5:17) but the world encourages to forget where everything comes from. The pride that we are being warned against here is the pride of Nebuchadnezzar as he surveyed Babylon and said, "Is not this the great Babylon I have built..." (Daniel 4:30.) It is the pride that pushes God aside and pretends that all that we have and all that we have achieved is down to us. Again this pride is everywhere because we live in a culture which denies the existence of God. If God is out of the picture then it is only natural that we will take the credit for our achievements. Again we need to help our groups to see the areas in which we are just like the world when it comes to our homes, our families, our work and our achievements.

Stick with what you have heard from the beginning

As in the 1st century there are sadly many 'christian' teachers today who sound like the real deal but are actually fakes. They might use all the right words but they are peddling a different Jesus and a different gospel and so they cannot offer eternal life. We need to make sure that we stick with the apostolic gospel that we have heard from the beginning and that we find in the scriptures. We need to be like the Bereans who carefully examined the scriptures to check that what Paul was saying was true (Acts 17:11). This means being discerning about what we listen and watch on Online or on TV. It means being discerning at BEC as well because the false teachers that John were countering came from within the church. If you decide to focus on this area of application then you should get the group

talking practically about how we can make sure that we stick with the truth. How can we improve our discernment?

Suggested Questions

I suggest that you focus on just v15-17 and really go deep and practical in applying these verses. If you decide to also look at v18-27 then be careful that your study doesn't run too long. Remember to leave time to pray in what you have been talking about.

Starter Question - What do you think are some of the most dangerous places in the world?

This might seem like a bizarre question at the start of a Bible study but one of the things that we will come to realise as we study v15-17 is that the culture we live in is actually very dangerous for Christians. We tend to think that the desert or a gangland ghetto are dangerous places (and they are) but where we live is full of many subtle but deadly dangers for the Christian. Our culture is constant encouraging us to love the world by lusting after what we don't have and taking pride in what we do have. These verses tell us that's deadly because if we love the world then we won't love God and we won't have eternal life!

Introduction to the study - The big application of these verses is clear "Don't love the world!" To help us think about what that actually means we are going to think about the three phrases in v16; 'the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life.'

1. Starting with 'the lust of the flesh,' in what ways does our culture encourage us to lust after physical pleasures?

The obvious physical pleasure is sex but it is by no means the only pleasure that our society encourages us to lust after. You could take different pleasures and think about the different ways we're encouraged to lust after these things. You could think about the role of advertising, TV, magazines and in shops etc.

A. Does this mean that it is wrong to enjoy physical pleasures like sex and eating? What will it look like to love God as we enjoy these things?

We obviously have to eat and drink and food is a good gift from God that he has given us for our enjoyment. Similarly sex is a good gift from God that is to be enjoyed in the context of marriage. You could focus on one or two particular pleasures and talk practically about what it will look like for us to enjoy these things in a way that honours God rather than in a lustful way.

B. Take the example of food. When does godly desire for food become sinful lust of the flesh?

This question is similar to the previous question but is here to help tease out the difference between godly desire and sinful desire. You could talk about what this looks like when we eat out in a restaurant or when we're doing our shopping in the supermarket. I'm suggesting you focus on food because I think that we are often blind to the sinful attitudes and desires that we have towards food and gluttony. Most Christians know that sexual lust is wrong and look down on those who succumb to it but think nothing of eating to excess and gorging themselves on food. The lust of the flesh is about both the desires of the gutter and the desires of the gourmet. That's a challenging thought in an area like Bessacarr.

2. Moving onto ‘the lust of the eyes,’ in what different ways does our culture encourage us to lust with our eyes?

You might find that you have talked about this under the previous section. The aim is to help us see how visual our culture is and how we are constantly being encouraged to lust after what we don't have.

A. Take a look at Matthew 6:22-24. Why does Jesus say that what we look at with our eyes is so important?

Don't take too long on this question. The aim is not to do a long and exhaustive study of these verses. Instead we just want to see the big point that what we do with our eyes will have a big impact on the rest of us.

B. What difference will this make on the things that you watch, read and look at?

Here's a great opportunity to talk practically about the sorts of things that we engage with. Whilst we don't want to become legalistic and draw up a list of approved TV shows, websites and magazines we do want to encourage one another to think seriously about what we are looking at with our eyes. Different people will have different weaknesses and we need to recognise this.

3. The pride of life is about taking pride in what we have and what we have achieved. What sort of things does our culture encourage us to take pride in?

The list here could be endless because society tells us to take pride in everything we have. The obvious areas are career, family, homes, education but I'm sure you can think of others.

A. What particular things are you most tempted to take pride in?

This question is just here to supplement the previous question and help keep the discussion from getting too general. You might feel that this question isn't necessary depending on how the previous question went.

4. Why is loving the world so deadly? (2:15-17)

Here's a crucial part of the study. Up until now we have seen how we can often love the world, now we see why it is so important that we don't! Help the group to see that we can't love both God and the world. It is either/or not both/and.

5. How can we love God instead of the world when everyone else is doing the opposite?

A. What do we need to remember about ourselves? (v12-14, 17)

B. What do we need to remember about the world? (v15-17)

Here we want to see that as Christians we know God and so we have eternal life. In Jesus we have overcome the world and the evil one. We are on the winning side! Alongside this we also want to see that everything in the world will pass away. All the things that seem so permanent now and seem so important will be gone!

6. What practical changes are you going to make in response to God's word?

Depending on your group you might want to discuss this in small groups or you might like to leave it as a question for personal reflection. The aim is for us to leave the study with a concrete action that we are going to take. It might be something that we are going to change or something different that we are going to do. You could even give your group a slip of paper to write down what they are going to do. However you approach this question, encourage the group to pray about what they have been discussing in this study.