

# Do Not Love the World: Breaking the Evil Enchantment of Worldliness (A Sermon on 1 John 2:15–17)<sup>1</sup>

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In C. S. Lewis’s brilliant address “The Weight of Glory,” he talks about our “desire for our own far-off country.” Then he asks,

Do you think I am trying to weave a spell? Perhaps I am; but remember your fairy tales. Spells are used for breaking enchantments as well as for inducing them. And you and I have need of the strongest spell that can be found to wake

us from the evil enchantment of worldliness which has been laid upon us for nearly a hundred years.<sup>2</sup>

This sermon is about breaking “the evil enchantment of worldliness.”<sup>3</sup> The text is 1 John 2:15–17:

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.<sup>4</sup>

That text is familiar to many Christians, but let’s see if we can ask some probing questions about it that will help us understand and apply it better. Let’s ask and briefly answer twelve questions.

### **1. HOW DOES THIS PASSAGE FIT IN THE LETTER’S ARGUMENT?**

This is what I think the theological message of 1 John is: *You can know that you have eternal life in three interlocked ways: (1) believing in Jesus, (2) living righteously, and (3) loving believers.* The burden of the letter is that you can have assurance of salvation. And the way you can have assurance is by a threefold test:

- 1) Faith is the doctrinal test. God’s children believe orthodox teachings about Christ.
- 2) Righteousness is the moral test. God’s children live righteously.
- 3) Love is the social test. God’s children love one another.

Those are three ways you can know that you have eternal life, and they appear over and over throughout the letter. They are inseparable: right doctrine goes with right living.

First John 2:15–17 focuses on the moral test. God’s children live righteously. God’s children live in a way that shows they love the Father and not the world. They do God’s will.

## 2. WHAT IS THIS PASSAGE'S MAIN IDEA?

The first sentence is the main idea: “Do not love the world or the things in the world.” Everything else supports that main command. But you can’t obey that command unless you know what it means to love the world. How do you know if you are loving the world? We need to probe what the words *love* and *world* mean.

## 3. WHAT DOES “LOVE” MEAN? (v. 15)

The premier dictionary for Greek words of the NT time is BDAG, and it lists three senses for this Greek verb for *love*—ἀγαπάω:

- 1) to have a warm regard for and interest in another, *cherish, have affection for, love*
- 2) to have high esteem for or satisfaction with someth., *take pleasure in*
- 3) to practice/express love, *prove one’s love*

Mark Ward wrote his PhD dissertation on “Paul’s Positive Religious Affections,” and he devotes a chapter to the Greek words for love with a focus on ἀγαπάω. He evaluates BDAG’s three senses for ἀγαπάω and concludes, “BDAG would do better to have a single composite sense for ἀγαπάω: ‘To have a warm regard for and interest in, a high esteem for or satisfaction with, *cherish, have affection for, take pleasure in, love.*’”<sup>5</sup> That makes sense to me because whatever love means in 1 John 2:15, it seems to mean the same thing whether the object is a person (“the Father”) or a thing (“the world or the things in the world”).

John—in his typical black-and-white style—asserts that loving the Father and loving the world are mutually exclusive. You can’t love both simultaneously.

So what does “love” mean in v. 15? It means to cherish or have affection for or take pleasure in. Do not *cherish* the world. Do not *have affection for* the world. Do not *take pleasure in* the world.

And that leads to our next question:

#### 4. WHAT DOES “WORLD” MEAN? (v. 15)

BDAG lists eight senses for the Greek word for *world*—κόσμος.<sup>6</sup> *World* in 1 John 2:15 fits sense #7: “the system of human existence in its many aspects.” BDAG elaborates with an excellent sub-definition: “*the world*, and everything that belongs to it, appears as that which is hostile to God, i.e. lost in sin, wholly at odds w. anything divine, ruined and depraved.”

We know *world* means that in this passage because v. 16 specifies what “all that is in the world” is—“the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life.” This world is hostile to God. It is anti-God.

As John says at the end of this letter, “the whole world lies in the power of the evil one” (1 John 5:19). As John Frame puts it, “*World* is the bad part of culture.”<sup>7</sup> So the command “Do not love the world” means “Do not take pleasure in the anti-God culture that permeates this fallen world. Do not take pleasure in worldly ways of thinking and acting. Do not take pleasure in the bad part of culture.”

#### 5. IF IT IS SINFUL FOR US TO LOVE THE WORLD, THEN WHY ISN’T IT SINFUL FOR GOD TO LOVE THE WORLD? (v. 15)

John 3:16 says, “God so loved the world . . .” That is beautiful grace. Yet it is not beautiful for us to love the world. If we love the world, then we don’t love God. So how can God love the world without sinning?

The answer is that the word *world* means something different in those two statements:

- 1) In John 3:16, “God so loved the world” means that God had affection for *humanity in general*. (In John’s Gospel, *world* typically refers to humans who are rebelling against the Creator.) When God loves the world, he unselfishly has affection for humanity in general. He has an unselfish saving stance toward humanity in general—people who are rebelling against their Creator.<sup>8</sup> That is praiseworthy.
- 2) In 1 John 2:15, “Do not love the world” means that we must not have affection for *the anti-God culture that permeates this fallen world*. We must not take pleasure in *worldly ways of thinking and acting*. When we love the world, we selfishly have affection for the anti-God culture that permeates this fallen world. We sinfully take pleasure in the bad

part of culture. That is not praiseworthy; that is damnable.

## **6. WHAT ARE “THE THINGS IN THE WORLD”? (v. 15)**

My colleague Joe Rigney wrote a book with the title *The Things of Earth*.<sup>9</sup> He argues that we should love the things in the world. The subtitle of his book is *Treasuring God by Enjoying His Gifts*—or you could say, *Treasuring God by Loving the Things in the World*. Does that harmonize with the second half of v. 15? John commands, “Do not love . . . the things in the world.” Rigney says we should love the things in the world.

I agree with both the apostle John and Professor Rigney. They are not contradicting each other because what John means by “the things in the world” is not what Rigney means by “the things of earth.” Verse 16 specifies what “the things in the world” are. The phrase “the things in the world” in v. 15 points forward to what immediately follows.<sup>10</sup> So in this context, “the things in the world” = “all that is in the world” = “the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life.” “The things in the world” here does not refer to what Rigney says we should love: the good things God created for us to enjoy as gifts from our brilliant and kind Creator.

## **7. HOW DOES THE SECOND HALF OF v. 15 RELATE TO THE FIRST HALF?**

It gives a reason you should not love the world. Here’s the logic:

- Command (first half of v. 15): “Do not love the world or the things in the world.”
- Why not? Reason (second half of v. 15): “If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.” And if “the love of the Father” is not in you, what does that imply? It implies that you are not one of the Father’s children.

## **8. DOES “THE LOVE OF THE FATHER” MEAN (A) THE FATHER’S LOVE FOR US OR (B) OUR LOVE FOR THE FATHER? (v. 15)**

The Greek grammar is ambiguous, but I think the context indicates that “the love of the Father” means our love for the Father. The reason is that it

seems to parallel not only the first sentence but the previous clause in its own sentence.

- Previous sentence: “Do not love the world or the things in the world.” The object of love is “the world or the things in the world.”
- Previous clause: “If anyone loves the world.” The object of love is “the world.”
- So it makes sense that the object of love in this sentence is the Father: “the love of the Father” = “our love for the Father.”

You can’t have it both ways—you can’t love the world and love the Father.

**9. HOW DOES V. 16 RELATE TO V. 15?**

The next sentence (v. 16) begins with the word “For.” This sentence explains the previous sentence: “If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.” How can that be? Would you explain that, John? Why can’t I simultaneously love the world and love the Father? Answer: “All that is in the world . . . is not from the Father but is from the world.”

**10. WHAT ARE “THE DESIRES OF THE FLESH, THE DESIRES OF THE EYES, AND PRIDE OF LIFE”? (V. 16)**

The easy answer is that they specify what “all that is in the world” is. But it’s much harder to specify exactly what each phrase means.

Some exegetes connect 1 John 2:16 with two other passages:<sup>11</sup>

*Figure 1. Comparing Gen 3:6 and Luke 4:1–13 with 1 John 2:16*

Gen 3:6: The woman saw that ...	Luke 4:1–13 (cf. Matt 4:1–11)	1 John 2:16
the tree was good for food	Command this stone to become bread.	The desires of the flesh

it was a delight to the eyes	If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.	The desires of the eyes
the tree was to be desired to make one wise	If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here.	Pride of life

I think there is something to that. I'm not certain that the three phrases in 1 John 2:16 line up exactly with Genesis 3 and Luke 4 or that John had these parallels in mind. But the three phrases seem to line up at least roughly with Genesis 3 and Luke 4, so the parallel seems legit to me.

I'm also not sure that the three phrases are three separate, parallel, comprehensive categories for all sin. Some exegetes think "the desires of the flesh" is a general category and that the next two phrases are subcategories. But it seems more likely that the three phrases are simply broad and overlapping ways to describe "all that is in the world."

Here's what I think each phrase means:

- 1) "The desires of the flesh" = what your body sinfully craves.<sup>12</sup> E.g., craving immoral sex or pornography or security in an idolatrous relationship or excessive food or drink. Our fundamental problem is not what is "out there" but what is "in here." It's not external but internal.
- 2) "The desires of the eyes" = what you sinfully crave when you see it. Basically, this is coveting—idolatrously wanting what you don't have.<sup>13</sup>
- 3) "Pride of life" = arrogance that your material possessions produce.

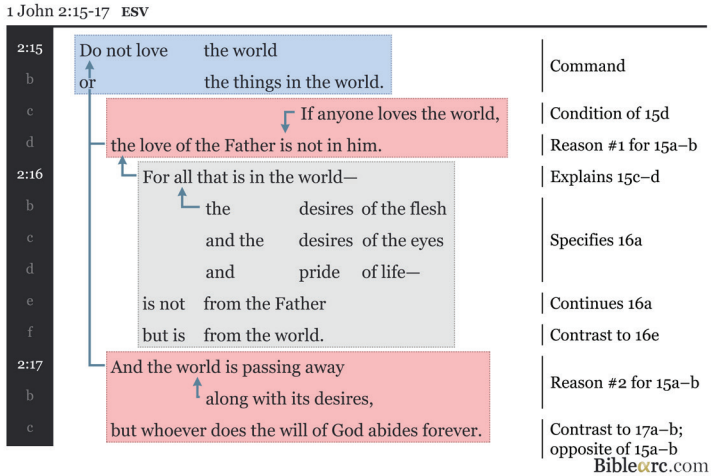
Consequently, you may strut around like a peacock, proudly displaying your fashionable clothes or latest gadget or your social status. Or you may not be a peacock, yet you still find your security in your raw talents or academic accomplishments or your savings account. You are proudly independent; you don't need God.

One Johannine scholar says of these three phrases, "Translating this as 'sex, money, and power' may not miss the mark by much."<sup>14</sup>

## 11. HOW DOES v. 17 RELATE TO vv. 15–16?

I think v. 17 is a second reason for the main command in v. 15: "Do not love the world or the things in the world." Here is how I trace the argument of this passage (see Fig. 2):<sup>15</sup>

Figure 2. Phrase 1 John 2:15–17



Why shouldn't you love the world? Two reasons:

Reason 1: "If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him" (v. 15c–d).

Reason 2: "The world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever" (v. 17). The ungodly world seems so dazzling and flashy, but it's just a flash. It's short-lived. It's already passing away now and will fully pass away in the future. It won't last. It's already expiring. That's why you shouldn't love the world but should rather do the will of God. Doing God's will is the exact opposite of loving the world. Contrast how long the world will live on with how long you will live on if you do God's will: "The world is passing away," but "whoever does the will of God abides forever."

## 12. HOW SHOULD WE APPLY THIS PASSAGE TO HOW WE LIVE TODAY?

Of the twelve questions we have asked about this passage, this one is the hardest for me to answer. I feel much more confident about understanding what the text means than I do about specifically applying it to how we live



today. Sometimes the simple question “So what?” is the hardest to answer.

One reason applying this passage feels so challenging to me is that from about age twelve to twenty-six I lived in evangelical cultures that self-identified as fundamentalist. Such cultures have a reputation for being preoccupied with strict rules about music, clothes, and entertainment. My family moved a lot while I was growing up, so I was in a lot of different fundamentalist cultures, and some of those cultures were relatively healthy and didn’t fit the fundamentalist stereotype. But I have heard plenty of sermons that dogmatically applied “Do not love the world” to issues like why a rock beat in music is sinfully sensual at all times and in all cultures or why women should not wear pants or why Christians shouldn’t go to movie theaters. So now I tend to react negatively when people dogmatically and specifically apply what “Do not love the world” must mean for all Christians.

But I need to be careful that I don’t overreact. While I want to be sensitive to avoid legalism and to celebrate God’s grace in Christ, I also want to be careful to avoid lawlessness that celebrates so-called grace in a selfish way.<sup>16</sup> So instead of dogmatically and specifically applying what “Do not love the world” must mean for you, I’m going to ask a series of questions that I hope will make you think.

I should acknowledge that three sources served me as I compiled this list of questions:

- 1) My graduate students. I enlisted the help of the seminary students at Bethlehem College & Seminary. I asked them to reply individually to this question: What are some specific ways you are tempted to love the world? About 25% of the graduate students thoughtfully answered that question for me.
- 2) R. Kent Hughes, *Set Apart: Calling a Worldly Church to a Godly Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2003).
- 3) C. J. Mahaney, ed., *Worldliness: Resisting the Seduction of a Fallen World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), with a foreword by John Piper.

One more thing: I wrestled with how to organize these questions. I thought about grouping them under three main headings that correspond to the three phrases in v. 16—“the desires of the flesh, the desires of the eyes, and pride of life”—perhaps under the broad headings of sex, money, and power. But those three phrases in v. 16 seem to overlap, especially “the desires of the flesh” and “the desires of the eyes.” So instead of grouping my questions

under those three main headings, I'm grouping them under nine headings that I think are particularly relevant for us in our culture.

What are specific ways we are tempted to love the world? Here are some questions to consider.

### **1. THINKING ABOUT SEX**

- Do you love the world when you think about sex?
- Do you think of sex as something beautiful and sacred that God created exclusively for a husband and wife, or have you conformed to how the world thinks about sex?
- Do you think that marriage and sex would be better if you or your spouse looked sexier according to the world's standards?
- How do you respond to the ubiquitous sexually explicit images that the world celebrates?
- Do you seek out such images?
- Do you take second and third looks when you suddenly encounter such images while going about your business?

### **2. THINKING ABOUT SEXUALITY AND GENDER**

- There is a worldly revolution in our culture regarding sexuality and gender.<sup>17</sup> The issues include the role of men and women in the home, abortion, contraceptives that cause abortions, sex outside of marriage, same-sex marriage, and transgenderism.
- Do you love the world when you think about sexuality and gender?

### **3. USING MONEY AND HAVING STUFF**

- There is a wise way to earn, spend, save, and invest money that glorifies God. But do you love the world when you earn, spend, save, and invest money?

- Are you letting the world influence what you think you need in order to be happy?
- Do you prioritize being comfortable and having “nice” things, or do you have a wartime-lifestyle that prioritizes giving generously and spreading the gospel locally and globally?
- Do you find your treasure in the gold of this world such as new iP-hones or whatever the latest gadget is?
- Do you love the world when you plan your future?
- When you envision your future, does it look basically like the typical American dream?

#### **4. USING SOCIAL MEDIA**

- Do you love the world when you use social media such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter?
- Are you so absorbed with social media that you are lazy in real life and neglect your responsibilities?
- When you see updates on social media, do they awaken the desires of your eyes with the result that you envy people and covet what they have?
- Do you vainly desire to have more “likes” and retweets and followers?
- Do you use social media to feed your ego?
- Do you mindlessly scroll through and absorb social media and thus let the anti-God culture constantly influence how you think about relationships and money and material possessions and social status and celebrities?
- Do you feel the pressure that you must always appear happy and successful on social media and thus create a façade of the real you?
- Do you view immodest pictures or post them of yourself or your spouse? (Immodest means “lacking humility or decency.”)

## **5. WATCHING SHOWS, MOVIES, AND SPORTS**

- Do you love the world when you watch shows, movies, and sports?
- Do you watch so much that you don't have time for more important activities?
- When you have some free time, is your habit to spend that time entertaining yourself rather than doing something more edifying?
- Do you allow what you watch to subtly shape your worldview to become more worldly?
- Do you laugh at what God hates?
- Do you view sexually charged nudity and rationalize it as OK?

## **6. READING LITERATURE AND LISTENING TO MUSIC**

- Do you love the world when you read literature or listen to music?
- Do you rationalize evil storytelling or lyrics by calling it art?
- Do you enjoy stories that celebrate immorality—that lead your emotions to root for people to have immoral sex or to murder?

## **7. EATING AND EXERCISING**

- Do you love the world when you eat and exercise?
- What motivates your eating and exercise habits?
- Do you simply want to be healthy so you can look good and feel good and live a long time?
- Do you want to have a body that looks strong or that other people think is “hot”?

## **8. RELATING TO OTHER PEOPLE**

- Do you love the world when you relate to your family, friends, and neighbors?

- Do you buy the world's lie that life is all about you, that what matters most is that you do what's best for you, that you should "follow your heart" and "believe in yourself" as you selfishly pursue your dreams?
- Do you compare yourself to others and ruthlessly compete against them?
- Do you do everything you can to exalt yourself at the expense of others?
- Do you value having a prominent status more than you value serving others?
- Do you care more about what others think about you than you care about what God thinks about you?
- Do you shy away from sharing the good news about Jesus with people because you are afraid of what they will think of you?
- Do you do what you do because you want other people to accept you and think highly of you?
- Do you marginalize people you think are poor or ugly or stupid or socially awkward and give special treatment to people who are rich or good looking or smart or popular?

## **9. FINDING YOUR IDENTITY**

- Do you love the world when you think about who you are?
- Do you find your identity in what other people think about you or how great you are or what you have or what you have accomplished?
- Do you find your identity in being an outstanding student or a model Christian or a powerful preacher or a critical thinker?
- When you realize what the world prizes—being brilliant or rich or beautiful or skilled or witty—do you try to get it, or if you have it, do you take pride in that and prominently display it?

That was a lot of questions. But we could ask so many more. Asking diagnostic questions about whether you are worldly is worth doing because it

can help us fight worldliness. As one preacher wisely exhorted, “We must fight worldliness because it dulls our affections for Christ and distracts our attention from Christ. Worldliness is so serious because Christ is so glorious.”<sup>18</sup>

Paul argues that way at the end of Romans 13. As Augustine shared in his *Confessions*, this is the passage he read after he heard a child say, “Take up and read.” That was a turning point in Augustine’s life.<sup>19</sup>

The night is far gone; the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires. (Rom 13:12–14)

## CONCLUSION

So, brothers and sisters, don’t love the world or the things in the world. May God give us what Lewis called “the strongest spell that can be found to wake us from the evil enchantment of worldliness.”

Father, we love you. We love you because you first loved us. Please wake us from the evil enchantment of worldliness. We don’t want to love the world, but because we are sinful, we are tempted to love the world in all kinds of ways. Please give us grace not to take pleasure in the world. Instead, help us take pleasure in you and you alone. We ask in the name of Jesus. Amen.

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- <sup>1</sup> This article lightly revises a sermon the author preached at Bethlehem College & Seminary chapel in Minneapolis on March 1, 2017. Thanks to friends who examined a draft of this manuscript and shared helpful feedback, especially Abigail Dodds, Matt Klem, Joe Tyrpak, and Mark Ward.
- <sup>2</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: Macmillan, 1949), 31.
- <sup>3</sup> Preachers used to address worldliness more often. I searched Charles Spurgeon's published sermons and discovered that he used the word *worldliness* over 350 times.
- <sup>4</sup> Scripture quotations are from the ESV.
- <sup>5</sup> Mark L. Ward Jr., "Paul's Positive Religious Affections" (PhD diss., Bob Jones University, 2011), 251.
- <sup>6</sup> (1) that which serves to beautify through decoration, *adornment, adorning*. (2) condition of orderliness, *orderly arrangement, order*. (3) the sum total of everything here and now, *the world, the (orderly) universe*. (4) the sum total of all beings above the level of the animals, *the world*. (5) planet earth as a place of inhabitation, *the world*. (6) humanity in general, *the world*. (7) the system of human existence in its many aspects, *the world*. (8) collective aspect of an entity, *totality, sum total*.
- <sup>7</sup> John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), 866.
- <sup>8</sup> See D. A. Carson, *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000). Carson unpacks how the Bible speaks about God's love in five ways: (1) The Father loves the Son (John 3:35; 5:20), and the Son loves the Father (14:31). That kind of intra-Trinitarian love is unique. (2) God provisionally loves all that he has made (Ps 145:9, 13, 17). (3) God has a saving stance toward the fallen world (John 3:16). (4) God has a particular, effective, selecting love toward his elect (Eph 5:25). (5) God conditionally loves his own people when they obey him (John 15:10).
- <sup>9</sup> Joe Rigney, *The Things of Earth: Treasuring God by Enjoying His Gifts* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015).
- <sup>10</sup> More specifically, the word *the* in the phrase "*the things in the world*" is what Greek grammarians call a kataphoric article.
- <sup>11</sup> E.g., Craig L. Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels: An Introduction and Survey*, 2nd ed. (Nashville: B&H, 2009), 260.
- <sup>12</sup> I don't think what John means here by "flesh" is identical to how Paul often uses flesh to refer to our sinful nature.
- <sup>13</sup> John Piper, *Future Grace* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 1995), 221: "*Covetousness is desiring something so much that you lose your contentment in God. ... Coveting is desiring anything other than God in a way that betrays a loss of contentment and satisfaction in Him. Covetousness is a heart divided between two gods. So Paul calls it idolatry.*" Compare the last sentence of 1 John: "Little children, keep yourselves from idols" (1 John 5:21).
- <sup>14</sup> D. Moody Smith, *First, Second, and Third John* (IBC; Louisville: John Knox, 1991), 66.
- <sup>15</sup> For an introduction to argument diagrams with a focus on phrasing, see ch. 5 in Andrew David Naselli, *How to Understand and Apply the New Testament: Twelve Steps from Exegesis to Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2017), 121–61. I prepared the phrase diagram in Fig. 2 using Biblearc.com.
- <sup>16</sup> There's a tension here that parallels in some ways a tension in two categories of sermons and books: (a) One emphasizes that you should rest and enjoy the things of earth to the glory of God. For example, see Rigney, *The Things of Earth*; Michael Wittmer, *Becoming Worldly Saints: Can You Serve Jesus and Still Enjoy Your Life?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015); David Murray, *Reset: Living a Grace-Paced Life in a Burnout Culture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017). (b) The other emphasizes that you should live radically and not waste your life. For example, see John Piper, *Don't Waste Your Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2003); Francis Chan with Danae Yankoski, *Crazy Love: Overwhelmed by a Relentless God* (Colorado Springs, CO: Cook, 2008); David Platt, *Radical: Taking Back Your Faith from the American Dream* (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah, 2010). I agree with both emphases. Here I'm trying to faithfully apply what it means to obey what God commands in 1 John 2:15: "Do not love the world or the things in the world." So I am emphasizing the "live radically and don't waste your life" message.
- <sup>17</sup> See R. Albert Mohler Jr., *We Cannot Be Silent: Speaking Truth to a Culture Redefining Sex, Marriage, and the Very Meaning of Right and Wrong* (Nashville: Nelson, 2015).
- <sup>18</sup> C. J. Mahaney, "Is This Verse in Your Bible?," in *Worldliness: Resisting the Seduction of a Fallen World* (ed. C. J. Mahaney; Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 35.
- <sup>19</sup> *Confessions* 8.12.29.