

**Sermon Preached by Pastor Robert Barnett at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, March 18, 2007**

## **OVERCOMING EVIL**

### **1 John 2:12-17**

I'm sure that most of you saw the movies based on Tolkien's trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings*. Set in the mythical land of Middle Earth, it portrays the conflict between good and evil through the story of Dark Lord Sauron, the loss of his dreaded weapon, the "Ring of Power," and the epic quest of Frodo Baggins who possesses the ring, to destroy it and defeat the Dark Lord. But the task is not easy. Throughout the story are instances of the corrupting influence of the ring. Almost everyone who had the ring was ruined by it. Most of the characters learn that fact, but are drawn to the ring anyway.

For example, in one scene, Frodo's uncle, Bilbo Baggins has possession of the ring and plans to pass it on as an inheritance to Frodo. While talking with his friend Gandalf, the ring begins to exert powerful influence. Bilbo holds the ring tightly in his hand and says, "It's mine! My own! My precious." Even with his friends urging, he has great difficulty leaving it behind. In a later scene, Frodo wrestles with the ring's great attraction. It weighs on him so much that he can hardly walk. Its allure is so great that he is nearly unable to throw it into a volcano and complete his quest.

In many ways, the ring represents the power of evil. It is like the immoral and wicked influence of the world, holding a compelling appeal for each of us. We know the world's temptations and we are aware of its dangers. But they seem so enticing, so inviting, that we are drawn to them anyway.

I think that is the reason the Apostle John wrote the passage we just read. In verse 15, he commands us to not love the world. To not be so compelled by the things the world has to offer that we call them precious. Then how can we avoid loving the world and overcome the allure of its evil? Let's spend a few minutes unpacking this passage.

### **DO NOT LOVE THE WORLD**

It might be surprising to you that John does not give us a list of do's and don'ts as a way to avoid loving the world. No checklist of "thou shalt nots." No commands about avoiding certain movies or TV shows, no rules about the music we listen to, no guidelines about dating or friends. There are other places in the Bible that address these issues, but here John is dealing with our attitude rather than any particular behavior. He talks about what we love, what has captured our hearts. He tells us NOT to fall in love with the world.

So, what does he mean by the world? John is not talking about people, the folks like you and me, and our neighbors and classmates and co-workers who inhabit this planet. John 3:16 reminds us that God loves the world of people. Rather, John is talking about the world system, a

mindset or way of thinking and living, that is decidedly against God's ways, a culture that is indifferent to Him and fails to see Him as Lord. That's the world we live in. You can't turn on the TV, use the Internet, or walk down the halls of your school or the mall without being drawn by the influences of the world.

John helps us understand exactly what it means to love the world. It involves the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes, the boasting of what he has and does.

First are the cravings of the sinful man – some versions call this “the lust of the flesh.” This includes those cravings that often fall into our checklists of things to avoid – giving in to pornography and sensuality, succumbing to financial greed or compulsive spending, chasing anything that provides immediate gratification. Our 21<sup>st</sup>-century culture caters to these base cravings. And we must avoid them!

But we need to think bigger and at a much deeper level. Sometimes our cravings may seem OK to us. We crave things that are good – comfort, good health, and an escape from suffering. But when those desires go unmet we often respond by grumbling and complaining. We may become ungrateful and may fail to realize how our desires might be out of the will of God for our lives. We let ourselves get so overcome with hurt and dissatisfaction that we make ourselves susceptible to the wicked allure of our culture. Think about that. Do you have that problem? When your desires, even for good things, are so great that they control you and you are upset when you don't possess them, you are actually craving the world!

By the lust of the eyes, John refers to those things that entice us visually. We want the thing that we see – that's the point of advertisement and part of what underlies the allure of pornography. Images work through our senses and play on our emotions, easily drawing out of the secret places of our hearts those things that we desire. TV and the Internet put so many things before our eyes. One of the pervasive problems in our affluent society is that we are told that we ought to have whatever we see and want.

The boasting of what we have and do – another translation calls this “the boastful pride of life.” We find sufficiency in ourselves; we look to ourselves – our education, our vocations, our experiences and successes in life - and measure our worth by them. In the Washington area, and even in this church, that's a particular attraction. We are tempted to say, “Look at me! See how well I am doing!” We may unconsciously – or even consciously – think we do not need God. What I call practical atheism. We have allowed other things to become what we worship, idols in our hearts. Ask yourself, what consumes your thinking? What do you worry about? What, if taken away, will cause you to complain or grumble? Those things will be your cravings, your boastful pride of your life, your love of the world.

### **BE ASSURED YOU WILL OVERCOME**

But look! The command “Do not love the world” is given right after several verses about our assurance in Christ. We are not told to battle with the world's influences until we are reminded about who we are in Christ. Isn't that interesting? Let's look at this for a moment.

John is speaking to all Christians when he calls them “dear children.” As a pastor, he makes a loving appeal to everyone who has put saving faith in the Lord. This is the same way he addresses believers in chapter 2, verse 1: *My dear children, I write this so that you may not sin.* Isn’t that cool? Because we belong to Christ, we can actually say “no” to our sinful urges. Because we have been forgiven, we can overcome the compelling attractions of the world.

Let’s pause here for a moment. Isn’t that wonderful? Our sins have been forgiven! Our disobedience to God has been forgotten. Our iniquity has been removed as far as the east is from the west. In Colossians 2:14, Paul tells us that while we were dead in our transgressions, God canceled the written code that was against us and nailed it to the cross. We are no longer held guilty for our sin. There is, according to Romans 8:1, no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus!

This forgiveness is given to us on account of Jesus’ name. Not because of our effort, not because of our own ability to prove ourselves worthy, but because of the Cross of Jesus Christ. You see, God is jealous for His glory because He is the only one capable of saving us; we are not able to save ourselves. We need a redemption that comes from outside of ourselves. Our salvation did not come about because we had a great idea, decided to pull ourselves together and straighten out our lives. No – our salvation was God’s idea, His choice, His election. By His grace alone!

Since forgiveness depends on God alone, we can know that Christ’s death is sufficient for us. We have complete assurance. We were neither wise nor good enough to gain favor with God. So, once we are redeemed, we can never be bad enough to lose favor with God! That is what undergirds John’s warning to not love the world. We are told to not love the world on the basis of our redemption in Christ Jesus!! We are NOT guilty, we NO LONGER have shame.

We are forgiven. And that should motivate us to say no to the world!

John also speaks to “fathers.” Those mature Christians who through a long life walking with Christ have understood the assurance they have in Him. In the same way that he speaks to the children, John says that they have known God.

So what does it mean to know God? In chapter 17 of John’s gospel, we have a record of the prayer of Jesus hours before the Lord went to the Cross. In this prayer Jesus says that knowing God is the same thing as having eternal life. In other words, knowing God means being called as His son or daughter, adopted into His family forever. Knowing God means that you have passed from eternal death to eternal life, because by faith, you have confessed your sin, trusted in what Jesus did for you on the Cross, and received His forgiveness.

In John 14:21, we see that loving God involves obedience. *"He who has My commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves Me; and he who loves Me shall be loved by My Father, and I will love him, and will disclose Myself to him."* Obedience does not bring us into life – it does not save us. Instead, we obey as a response to forgiveness, because we have been clothed with righteousness and are enabled to obey by the indwelling Holy Spirit. When you trusted Christ,

you were given the life of the Spirit of Christ who enables you to say no to the world and do His will. Knowing God means obeying Him.

The fathers that John writes about lived life with the assurance that when they obeyed him they were blessed by Him. In the hustle and bustle of life, even in the suffering and difficulties of human existence, when we obey and depend upon God, He is faithful and can be trusted. Perhaps many of you who have walked with Christ for a lifetime have stories to tell of how God has proved Himself faithful over and over again. What a blessing when we hear those testimonies and hear the legacy of your faith. I encourage you fathers and mothers who have walked with Christ for many years to share your stories of God's faithfulness with the young men and women of our congregation.

I am struck by what John says to young men. In verse 13, he commends them for overcoming the evil one and to emphasize this truth he repeats the same words in the next verse. Wow! What a statement. They have overcome Satan. They have vanquished the evil one. In this verse, John plays on the idea that young people, both men and women, are usually physically strong, with the vitality and energy that come with being young. But here, he says they have proved their spiritual strength. There is no small hint that the battle is a spiritual one. Jesus Christ, the living Word of God, is the force that brought them strength.

On one level, John is talking about the youth and young adults of our church. All of you in junior high or high school or college should be encouraged. These young people have engaged in a struggle that is not with flesh and blood, not just with pornography and sensuality, not just the cravings of the flesh or prideful boasting, but with the forces of darkness and wickedness. They entered the battle of living the Christian life and have overcome the evil one.

Now my tendency would be to say that overcoming was my job. That I have to garner up the strength to join the battle, destroy the devil, and overcome him. But John does not urge the young to defeat the enemy. Rather, he says that they "have overcome" the evil one. Again and again, the Christian life is being celebrated as an accomplished fact. Overcoming evil has already happened. The spiritual war on terror is already over.

The apostle Paul says the same thing. In Romans 8:37, he writes that whatever the world has to throw against those who believe in Christ, they cannot be separated from God's love. We are more than conquerors, we are overcomers. We have already won the war. What assurance!

So, on another level in some sense all of us are young men and women. We have overcome. When did this victory take place? At the Cross. Through the finished work of Jesus Christ.

## **CONCLUSION**

Now is that your experience? Do you have a sense that you are an overcomer? That you have already won the war? Yesterday, Marc Santom talked about how men can overcome the lusts of the flesh in one area – sexual integrity. He explained a principle that is worth repeating because it shows just how overcoming the world really works.

When we battle the evil influences of the world, we have to engage the enemy through both a defensive and an offensive strategy. Our defense team might include things like avoiding worldly influences, controlling how we use the TV or Internet, or seeking counsel and accountability for destructive behaviors like addiction to pornography, compulsive spending, or complaining about everything in life. Those defensive tactics are important and must be done, but they do not win the victory. Even the best defense does not normally take the ball over the goal line!

In order to win the victory, we must have a good offense. That offense is our trust and confidence in what Christ has already done. We win the battle with evil because God won the victory for us. He is our offensive team.

Our ability to say no to the world does not happen because, in our own strength, we have defeated our sinful desires. We are not conquerors because we have the right amount of personal discipline to turn our backs on the world's attractions. That kind of effort makes us appear big and God seem small and weightless.

We overcome when we come clean with God. When we throw ourselves on the mercy of Jesus Christ, admit our weaknesses, confess our struggles with sin, and rely totally on His power through the Cross to overcome the evil one.

Are you discouraged because the world keeps blind-siding you with its enticements and you keep giving in? Then you need to examine your heart and become aware of the dangers of the world. Identify what has captured your interest.

Do you find yourself craving for those things the world offers? Sex, food, clothing, or whatever gratifies your immediate desires? Are the motivations of your heart wrapped around things you can boast about, things that have more weight in your life than the love of God?

Then, confess your struggle to God. He is faithful and will forgive and cleanse you. Cling to the hope you already have in Christ when you trusted His work on the Cross. Preach the gospel to yourself everyday. Embrace Christ, grow in Him, trust in Him. Remember that He is your offense.

If you belong to Christ, you have the assurance that you will overcome. Like Bilbo and Frodo, you have the promise that the magnetic pull of the ring has been thrown into the volcano. The Dark Lord has no power.

You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world (1John 4:4).

If you have made Jesus Christ your Savior, He has made you able to stop loving the world and conquer the allure of evil. If you have come to the Cross, you are an overcomer!