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A table of contents for *The Expository Times* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expository-times_01.php

pdfs are named: [Volume]_[Issue]_[1st page of article].pdf

Exposition of the First Epistle of St. John.

BY THE REV. PROFESSOR ROTHE, D.D.

CHAPTER II. 15-17.

“Love not the world, neither what is in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the vainglory of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever.”

VER. 15. This exhortation is closely connected with what immediately precedes it (vers. 12-14). There John told his readers that he reminds them of the peculiar character of their Christian standing, in the consideration of which they must find a strong stirring up to be in *complete earnest* with their Christianity, to discard their half-heartedness in respect of Christianity. Now, this half-heartedness consists *in concreto* above all in their remaining attachment to the world. Accordingly, John now casts his exhortation into the concrete form of a call to give up the love of the world. This exhortation does not, however, refer back specially to what he had just written to the young men regarding their victory over the prince of the world, and their strength as opposed to him. For, although at first sight this might seem to be the case, yet this reference is forbidden by the mention of “the Father,” which compels us to think of what was written to the Church as a whole. John warns his readers against the love of the world. The *world* here is not, as in iii. 13 and v. 19, the unbelieving, corrupt world of humanity. The love of the world in this sense of the term, the world which, as John well knew (John iii. 16), is the object of the infinite love of God Himself, he could not possibly forbid without some further explanation. There is no doubt a certain sense in which the Christian must not love even *this* world; but if John had had that sense in view, he must have expressed his mind on the subject distinctly and clearly. Here the world is rather the sum of *material* or visible, and therefore also transitory (ver. 17), being (as contrasted with the spirit) regarded and treated as broken loose from all reference to God; the sum, therefore, of all phenomena which fall within man’s circle of vision, which belong to the sphere of sense, and stir up sensual lust and longings. But it is not merely the world that his readers are not to love; they must not love *what is in the world*. John says they are neither to love the world as such as a whole, nor the individual things of the

world as such. They are not to love the world as such as a whole, *i.e.* the material, sensible world considered as broken loose from all reference to God, because of this its character; not because in it one remains out of contact with God, merely in the element of the material and the sensible. Nor are they to love the individual things of the world as such, *i.e.* not because they are world, and therefore a physical existence, which as such is empty of God and alienated from Him—not because of this their *formal* character; but because of what they are *in concreto*, because of the specific quality which is stamped in them upon this physical existence which is not referred to God, consequently because of their *material* character. For, along with repugnance to the world as such, there may easily exist an attachment to the individual things that make up the world. This attachment to that which is in the world must ultimately lead again to the love of the world as such on the part of the Christian; for the Spirit of God, which works in the heart at the overcoming of that attachment, must become an object of hatred to such a resisting heart.

The love of the Father is the love with which God as Father loves us, and with which the love of the world is incompatible. We see from verse 13 that it is the love to them of the God whom they have known as Father. For whoever has known God as Father, in him dwells the love of God (to him); he possesses and experiences this love. This, however, is impossible in the case of him who loves the world. Why this is so, is stated in verse 16. John takes for granted that for the Christian there is nothing more dreadful and threatening than the thought of losing God’s fatherly love, of which he has become gladly assured in Christ. And this love of God cannot possibly dwell in the creature so long as it opposes itself to God. It is only too easy for us to banish from our mind the thought that it is impossible for us to love at once God and the world; and we still more frequently forget that God’s love be-

comes inoperative in us, if our heart still clings to the world. If God's love to us is really that which we feel to be our chief blessing, it is a necessary consequence that we become in real earnest against every element of the love of the world that we still find within ourselves.

Ver. 16. This verse contains a proof of what has just been said in respect of that *which is in the world*; the world itself, from its very idea, forming the direct antithesis of God. Having just written "all that is in the world," and being about immediately to add "is not of the Father," John notices that if he proceeds thus he will give utterance to a Manichæan proposition, which, taken thus strictly, would by no means express his real meaning. For, speaking properly, he does not intend to say anything about the things of the world themselves, but about the love of man which clings to them. Accordingly he straightway adds the explanatory, or rather correcting, clause: "the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the vainglory of life." "I do not mean to say of the things of the world themselves, that they are not of the Father; but of the lusts of man that turn towards them (Tit. ii. 12)." For the better comprehension of this proposition, he now expresses his idea of the worldly lusts by means of a division of them into their main classes. It is not his intention to give an exhaustive classification of the principal vices, but rather of the main forms assumed by the lusts and longings that turn towards the world as a material existence. He names first the *lust of the flesh*, using that expression in precisely the same sense as it is used in 1 Pet. ii. 11. "Flesh" is the materiality, the sensuous side of man's natural organism, as contrasted with the spirit (Gal. v. 16-18; John i. 13, iii. 6). The lust of the flesh is the lust and longing of human nature considered as material and consequently also self-seeking; it is worldly lust and longing considered as purely physical, or as sensual and selfish, and for that very reason, properly speaking, animal. According to its idea, it forms a direct antithesis to God, who, according to His idea, is spirit (John iv. 24). Naturally, therefore, it cannot be of the Father; and it is the lowest form of worldly lust. A higher form is the *lust of the eyes*, i.e. the delight in and longing for the world, which are gratified by means of the eyes. This is worldly lust considered as gratified by delight in the sensuously beautiful, by æsthetic feeling, by crav-

ing after æsthetic enjoyment (in the fullest sense)—a form of worldly lust that was widely diffused, especially in the Greek world. It is not exactly voluptuousness, which, in some of its forms, certainly belongs here, but in others must be classed among the lusts of the flesh; neither is it avariciousness nor sensual lust in general. The third form is the *vainglory of life*. "Life" denotes the whole external apparatus needed for the maintenance and regulation of one's life in the widest sense of the term; it specially includes everything that is a condition of our earthly life; it denotes, therefore, all the necessities of life. "Vainglory" denotes, in general, the transgression of the due mean, and therefore also of the truth, and that, too, out of vanity, both in word and in deed; it denotes boasting, bragging, showing off, haughtiness. Here, therefore, it is haughty luxuriousness and empty display in the external ordering and regulating of one's life, in what belongs to the external apparatus of one's life. The vainglory of life is therefore that form of worldly lust which has its roots in the vain and haughty temper of egoism. Of all these three forms of worldly lust it is said that they are not of the Father. They are the soul, the vital principle, of him that loves the world; but they are not of God; they do not derive from Him; they cannot therefore mean the existence of God's love in him who is moved by them; they can only derive from the world. It puts us to shame, that John regards these as lusts, which may still dwell in the Christian. At different stages in the progress of Christian humanity the temptation to the one form or the other is specially preponderant. The individual Christian also has to pass through the different periods, in which he has to fight now mainly with the one, now mainly with the other; and it is important for him always to recognise that form which to him is the most dangerous. They conceal themselves behind one another—the first behind the second, the second behind the third; and out of the third the first readily springs. Present-day Christianity has to fight especially against the vainglory of life.

Ver. 17. The vanity of the love of the world is a new reason which should restrain the apostle's readers from it; over against it stands the solidity of the behaviour which attaches itself to God instead of to the world. "*The lust thereof*" is the delight of the man who clings to the world; it is not his longing for the world, for that longing by

no means passes away in the subject along with the passing away of the world itself. Because the world is a transitory world, the delight which is proper to it, which has its principle in it, is also vain, because equally transitory. He that doeth the will of God is set over against the world and its lust or delight. In John's thought the antithesis to the man that does God's will is really "the lust of the world," the world being conceived of as a person.¹ That the world is in itself transitory is the first experience which the Christian makes; and yet practically nothing is so unfamiliar to the Christian as this proposition regarding the transitoriness of everything visible. For its thorough comprehension there is required the further insight, which rests upon general experience, that all life which is merely sensuous dies to joy in the ordinary course of nature. Even if the visible world around us were permanent, our ability to enjoy it would be transitory in the highest degree. Our capacity of enjoying the world is continually diminishing through its own satisfaction. For this reason, a life which decays through its own process appears to us as being exceedingly indigent. This of itself should make the vanity of the world patent to us.

In contrast to that inherent vanity of human life in its bias towards the world, John gives prominence to the unqualified solidity and vigour of human life, when it turns towards God and the fulfilling of His will. The great mass of men believe that man can take no more stable course than by setting his affection upon things that are seen. To the common way of looking at things,

¹ In a later note Rothe adds: The contrast comes out clearly, only if the lust of the world is the lust after the world; in which case it amounts to this—he that lusts after the world.

piety seems an empty ideology, at which healthy human intelligence can only smile. In opposition to this, John states the only rational view. If there is to be anything solid in the world, there must be a God; everything else when taken by itself is mere appearance. And if the life of the individual is to acquire reality and solidity, it must attach itself to this, the only absolute reality; it must form a close alliance with it; it must yield itself up in increasing perfection to be the instrument of the will of God. This doing of the will of God is in the most literal sense the proper food of man—the food whereby his transitory life is transformed into an eternal life. We should lay this especially to heart when it becomes difficult for us to do God's will. For the reality of our existence is conditioned thereby; and when it comes to be a question of being or not being, there is not usually much delay. We must not forget that the opposite of worldly lust is not mere joy in God, mere longing after Him, but the actual *doing* of His will. Abiding for ever is made dependent upon the energetic disposition, which devotes itself to God in active obedience to the divine will. John regards the thought of eternal life, of an existence which is undying in itself, and which cannot be touched by any of the powers of time, as a thought which, in the case of his readers, will finally decide them to love God in truth, and which must have as its result a complete reversal of the natural bias of their life. If, however, in point of fact, this thought of eternal life has an exceedingly slight practical effect, that is one of the most shaming experiences to be met with in Christendom. We must further notice that, according to John, he who does not do the will of God has no abiding existence for ever.

The Vanished Church.¹

In far-off woods the sound of bells
 Floats overhead with muffled pealing,
 Whereof no man the secret tells,
 Nor legend the full tale revealing.
 Borne on the wind there comes the chime,
 From vanished church sent forth unbidden,
 The pilgrim crowds in olden time
 Had found the path now lost or hidden.

When late in these wide woods I sighed
 For pathway from the tangle guiding,
 'Mid ruin of the time I tried
 To find in God a place of hiding.
 There in the forest still and close
 I heard the ringing coming nearer,
 As high my aspiration rose,
 So chimed the bells still louder, clearer.

¹ Translation of Uhland's "Die Verlorene Kirche."