

“The Only Thing”  
I John 2:12–17  
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In this study we will be looking at I John which is the letter that John wrote perhaps to the church at Ephesus or Asia Minor. It was written somewhere between 95 and 100 A.D. and it has proved to be a great model to us. We will be looking at a little poetic section in I John 2.

Hear now the Word of God. I John 2:12–17 says,

*[12] I am writing to you, little children,  
because your sins are forgiven for his name's sake.*

*[13] I am writing to you, fathers,  
because you know him who is from the beginning.*

*I am writing to you, young men,  
because you have overcome the evil one.*

*I write to you, children,  
because you know the Father.*

*[14] I write to you, fathers,  
because you know him who is from the beginning.*

*I write to you, young men,  
because you are strong,  
and the word of God abides in you,  
and you have overcome the evil one.*

*[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.*

May God continue to use the reading of God’s Word to bless us as we fellowship together.

Several months ago my wife Leslie and I were at Chic-Fil-A and we had just sat down at the table when I looked out the window at our Toyota Van. From where I was standing it looked like a man was sitting in our van. I was shocked and about ready to run out there to say ‘what are you doing in our van’ but in a moment I thought ‘my van is locked so he couldn’t be in our van.’ Then I looked more closely and realized that it was a reflection. The man who I thought was sitting in my van was sitting about 30 feet away from my van at one of the picnic tables out in front of the Chic-Fil-A. The sun was so positioned that the light came in from the front of the building, reflected on the window right next to me and I reached in my pocket to take a picture of this reflection with my iPhone, because it sure fooled me for a moment or two.

It’s remarkable how easy it is for us to be fooled or tricked or deceived. As we reflect on I John we see a great treatment of this subject. This deceit is exactly what the Apostle John was facing with his readers in the first epistle (letter) of John that he wrote while he was in Ephesus. At this time Ephesus was the second largest city in the world. It had a population of about 250,000 in the first century and about 45 years before the Apostle Paul establishes a church there where he had stayed for about 2 ½ years teaching. This church became a very prosperous and influential church. He performed many miracles there.

This church emerged and it is mentioned in Revelation 2 when this same Apostle John gave the words of Jesus to this church in Ephesus. Revelation 2:2 says *[2] I know your works,*

*your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false.* It was a small church at the time in a very large city surrounded by all kinds of opposition. It was opposed by the local Jews who had proved in Acts 19 that they were no match for the power of the Apostle Paul. They were opposed by the local business man because the Christians there in a great conviction of spirit had burned their superstitious and magic books and Paul's teaching against idolatry led many to think it was directly attacking the local god Artemis and riots broke out because of the influence of the church. Roman authorities also put their pressure on the church. They made Ephesus one of the centers of emperor worship and a great persecution broke out against the Christians who would not give up their allegiance to Christ to worship the emperor, especially in the latter part of the first century, when this book was written.

It was a time of great difficulty for the church but interestingly, I John is written not because of the problems outside the church but because of difficulties inside the church. Apparently as John was writing to this church and others in Asia Minor he was speaking of a far more sinister attack from their friends, members of the church, who had been faithful but now had turned away, left the church and were forming other groups. Apparently a schism formed and a number of members and leaders had moved on to start their own churches so to speak. We see a little bit of this in I John 1 where he was talking about these people who had departed.

I John 1:6–10 says [6] *If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. [7] But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. [8] If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. [9] If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. [10] If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.* According to verse 6 and 8 these who had departed claimed to have fellowship with Christ and that they were without sin. Then in verse 10 they claim that they haven't sinned as if there was no sin nature and they didn't view that as a problem anymore.

Ian Howard Marshall wrote a commentary on I John and described it this way; 'Having themselves withdrawn from the church with which John had fellowship, they were now trying to persuade the rest of the church to follow them. This situation clearly produced considerable debate and uncertainty in the church. Here were people who had left the church claiming that it was not necessary to accept Jesus as the Son of God in order to have knowledge of God. Indeed, they held that it was possible to live without sin on this basis and they had no need for the Christian doctrine of forgiveness through the death of Jesus. They based their view on Christianity on so-called special revelations for which they claimed Divine authority. They offered a Christianity without tears. It was bound to prove an attractive proposition to the congregation if this simplified version of Christianity offered the knowledge of God in sinlessness, what need was there for John's teaching?'

Marshall has put his finger on it in that it wasn't the external difficulties that were plaguing the church but the internal difficulties of people that were walking away from the Gospel, no longer needing it anymore, so they thought. This is not uncommon even in our day when people call themselves Christians on one hand as they seek the blessings of Jesus for issues of health, wealth and other things but they don't like the issue of sin. They want to be more positive and they don't like talking about repentance, Jesus' death on the cross, His sacrifice for us so sometimes the Gospel is left behind or even rejected for a different kind of Christianity.

John here wants to encourage his readers. He wants them to understand that though they feel oppressed from the outside that they are in the minority in the inside but still they are very precious, important and blessed. In fact, in this text John shifts from prose to poetry and that's why the text is indented. It was a way of emphasizing some practical and simple truths in a poem or a song. When John says 'I'm writing to you...' it emphasizes the importance of what he wants them to hear.

John has chosen to describe, not just what's wrong with their adversaries but what is right for his readers. He addresses three groups. One is what he calls the 'little children' and by that we think he means the whole church. Children here refers to the Greek word 'kinsmanship.' John is not a drill sergeant. He is not putting them down but he is speaking as an affectionate father focusing on family unity and kinship. He spoke to this group a couple of times.

Then he speaks of the older adults and the younger adults. We wonder if when he uses older he is speaking of the more spiritually mature or spiritually immature but most commentators thinking of chronological age – the older adults in the church and the younger adults in the church. By the way, the older adults in the first century probably would have been those between 40 and 50 years of age. We have some real older adults here.

So what is John saying to these groups? I have read this passage many times and I've always had in the back of my mind that John seems to be speaking something in a special context but it's fairly routine information – your sins are forgiven, you've known Him from the beginning, you have overcome the evil one. That's great theology but didn't seem what would be found in a special poetry. Then I remembered what Jesus said in Luke 10.

In Luke 10 Jesus had sent His disciples on a preaching mission and He is addressing them in this passage. Great things had happened when they had gone out into the community to preach. People came to Christ and there were titanic spiritual battles where they had confronted and cast out demons. They had performed miracles and you can imagine that this would have been exhilarating to them for God to use them in this way. Here Jesus receives them back and hears the report with all their excitement about what had happened and Jesus says in Luke 10:20, *[20] Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.*

Jesus was asking them to rejoice at what was something very simple but very important. In I John 2 we see that John says to his readers that despite your small numbers and unpopular message consider that you are blessed that you are honored among all people in your relationship with Me.

Many of you have heard the phrase 'winning isn't everything but it's the only thing.' Some of you would attribute that saying to Vince Lombardi, the legendary coach of the Green Bay Packers but it wasn't a statement that originated with Lombardi. It originated with Henry Russell "Red" Sanders. He was the football coach of the UCLA Bruins and in 1949 they were defeated by their arch rival, USC and that statement is what he told his team in a sense of disappointment. Lombardi picked this statement up in the next decade but later in life he claimed he was misunderstood because what he actually meant was 'winning isn't everything but the will to win is the only thing.' However, it's become a statement that many coaches use and in a sense I think this statement is exactly what John is saying to his readers in this little bit of poetry right here.

John is basically saying that despite what others say, when all is said and done what you have isn't everything but it's the only thing. Ultimately John says you have the one blessing that will matter – your sins are forgiven for the sake of Christ. You are set free not to sin but 'not to

sin.’ Of all the people in the world the following is true in Isaiah 1:18 which says [18] *Come now, let us reason together, says the LORD: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.*

Most of us are blessed by many things like health, wealth, our relationships, freedoms, education, and medical care and on and on. The only real blessing will be is what we find in Romans 8:1 which says [1] *There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.* It may not appear that clear or crucial right now and maybe an appendage we cling to but there will come a time when that will be the most important blessing that you have ever had. When we step into Jesus’ presence no other blessing will matter and that’s what John wants these little folks in this church to appreciate.

There is a second truth. This is that there is only one relationship that will matter. John writes in I John 2:14 that you know Him who is from the beginning and that is the Lord Jesus Christ. Think of all the people that you have known through the years. Now imagine you were personal friends at the same time with the president of the United States, the governor of the state of Alabama and the head coach of your favorite football team and you were on their speed dial. Let’s say they would call you on a regular basis asking for your counsel on things. Wow, that would be really cool but John is saying in a sense that when all is said and done and we stand in the presence of the Lord Jesus, none of those relationships will matter. The only one that will matter is the one we have with the Triune God and it will last forever. What freedom that brings from pain, suffering and unmet expectations. To the world these were ordinary people John was writing to but as children of God they were unspeakably blessed to know Him who was from the beginning – the eternal God and His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.

John points out one more thing and that is that there is only one achievement that will matter. These people have been in the midst of spiritual battle just like us. Reports of success are coming in. In this realm of true achievement for everyone it is true achievement from the least to the greatest. We may accomplish many things in life but in the end when we stand before Jesus those achievements aren’t going to amount to much. The achievements measured by spiritual strength, adherence to the Word of God, those characterized by victory over temptation, sin and the evil one will be what is important. Sometimes there will be achievements done and won in private where no one knows the struggle I’ve had with a besetting sin or personal difficulty but I will apply God’s Word, pray and worship and God will work. God will bring forgiveness and victory and that achievement will be what is truly important.

For all of us in this life there are a lot of blessings. There are a lot of people we come in contact with and a lot of achievements we may accomplish but the time will when most all of them are not going to matter, when we stand before the Lord Jesus at the final Judgment Seat. British missionary Charles Stud put his twist on John’s topic here when he says ‘only one life twill soon be past, only what’s done for Christ will last.’ John wants his afflicted readers who are feeling it inside and outside that what is crucial is only one blessing, one relationship and one achievement will be when they stand before Jesus.

So what do we do with this? How do we respond? It would be interesting to ask some of the elders in our church who are no longer with us. Several of them died in this past year. Would their perspective be hard to imagine? They would agree with what John says in I John 2:15–17. These elders would probably say we are phenomenally blessed, privileged and victorious but to be careful and don’t get overconfident. I think John would be reminiscent of Paul’s word in I Corinthians 10:12 which says [12] *Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall.*

In this text John warns us of three areas in our life that we need to be especially careful of and the first would be in I John 2:16 which are the desires of the flesh. The New International Version of the Bible translates this into the cravings of the sinful man. It speaks of temptations that arise within every one of us. Desires aren't bad for we have plenty of desires that are legitimate but when those desires are hijacked by the sin within us they can become unrestrained and destructive. You know how the pattern works.

When an innocent desire within us that is good is unmet then it can become a demand. If that demand is not met by the people around us we can start judging them as we have a hard time with this unmet desire and we get angry. When they don't come through then we start punishing. Simple desires that may be virtuous then become destructive in our lives and in the lives of those around us. The battle starts from within. John says I've given you such great news about what is truly important but beware of the desires of the flesh.

Then John goes on to warn us of the desires of the eyes. These temptations are not so much from within but from without, externally, that we see. These would include sensualism, materialism and the kind of things we can covet in a moment. There is nothing wrong with attractive people or nice houses or nice jobs or hard earned wealth or cars that we drive for those are just objects. But when the desire for these things are hijacked by selfishness they can become unrestrained and can certainly destroy. They can distract us from our relationship with Christ.

I have several young grandchildren and when they pick up something they aren't supposed to be playing with I can go over and just pull it out of their hands but they will cry and make a real fuss about that. But if I come walking over, take gently what is in their hands and replace it with something maybe more shiny or fun looking or entertaining then that's the way to do it. In a way Satan does the same thing with us. As we're clinging to the Gospel Satan comes along with something more shiny and more colorful but definitely not safe and exchanges that where suddenly the Gospel is not needed anymore. We don't think about the priorities of the Gospel in our lives. The desires of the eyes can be very powerful.

The third thing John warns us about is the pride of life. This is the boasting of what we have and do. This is really taking credit for what comes truly from God. It is when we start looking at a gift from God as simply entitlement where we think we deserve that and God don't You take that away from me. The problem isn't the possession but it's assuming that I have earned it or I attempt to derive my glory from it. What we have, including the results of our success, comes from God's hand. This includes the freedoms, health, the circumstances in our lives and all the gifts of God that He has given us. He can take away any and all of this very quickly. We are thankful that He doesn't.

Why does John say that we should be so careful with the desires of the flesh, the eyes and the pride of life? It is because everything that we rely on, all this worldly system is quickly passing away. Those of us who have some age on us just realize how fast life is passing and it should reflect in our choices and priorities. Only those that know God in Christ, know His forgiveness and do His will, will last.

In 1715, King Louis XIV of France died after a reign of 72 years. He called himself 'The Great' and he was the monarch that had made famous the statement 'I am the State.' His court was the most magnificent in Europe and his funeral was equally spectacular. His body was placed in a golden coffin in a magnificent cathedral. Orders were given that the sanctuary should be dimly lit with only a special candle set above his coffin to dramatize his greatness. At the memorial thousands of people gathered and waited in hushed silence and then the bishop began

to speak. While the bishop spoke he slowly reached down and snuffed out the candle as he said 'Only God is great!'

I hope that is a priority in our lives this new year. If you haven't come to Christ then that is what you need to do, to recognize our own sinfulness and alienation from God, repent and turn from our sin as we embrace the forgiveness that alone is found in the Person and work of Jesus Christ and accept Him as our Lord and Savior. What a way to finish the year 2018 but what a way for all of us to move ahead into the new year saying 'Lord, I want the priority in my life to be the priority in these verses, knowing and understanding what is truly important' and then our year will be truly blessed as we move ahead. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, I thank You for the privilege and opportunity that we have to glance at such a simple passage that gives truth that appears so ordinary, especially to those who are Christians who have read this many times. I pray that these Words might throttle us with the singularity of their importance that we might realize You are telling us truly what we need to cling to, embrace and apply in our own lives. I pray that we will together heed these warnings in our personal lives that we might serve You with a clear conscience and for Your glory. We thank You and ask this in Jesus' Name and for His sake, Amen.

#### Power Point

Words of Assurance – I John 2:12–14

John: "I am writing you...."

John addresses three groups, twice each:

    "little children" = whole church

    "fathers" = older adults

    "young men" = younger adults

John says that ultimately....

- A. Only one blessing will matter;
- B. Only one relationship will matter;
- C. Only one achievement will matter.

    "Only one life 'twill soon be past.  
    Only what's done for Christ will last."

Words of Warning – I John 2:15–17

"Therefore, let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall." – I Cor. 10:12

John says, "Beware of three things..."

- A. "Desires of the flesh;"
- B. "Desires of the eyes;"
- C. "Pride of life."