

“A Call to Arms”
1 John 2:15-27
July 6, 2014

INTRODUCTION:

Today’s passage gives us some insight into the specific situation that prompted John’s letter to this congregation. A group of members decided to leave this church over a doctrinal disagreement at the heart of Christianity. They denied **“that Jesus is the Christ”** (v. 22). So they left the church, which would have given this the feel of a church split. I have been around some church splits before, though thankfully never in a church I pastored. I was once appointed to be a part of a commission that was given the task of helping a church suffering through a split. It was particularly divisive, to the point that even families were split apart in the division. Everyone who was part of that church was shaken by the split, and discouragement took root in its aftermath.

Something similar must have happened here. A church split separates people from one another, and it is painful. John seeks to help them by reminding them of the time in which they are living. They are in the **“last hour”** (v. 18), and it is a time of conflict. It is a time which calls upon them to fight. What they have been through is a fight for truth and for the kingdom of God. It is the kind of fighting Christians are called to.

It is still the same for us. Christians are called to fight. There is a great deal of fighting language used in the New Testament, language about battles, wars, wrestling and weaponry. I knew a Christian lady once who refused to sing the hymn we are going to sing at the close of today’s service. She felt that “Onward, Christian Soldiers” was too militant. I had some sympathy for her position. After all, Jesus is the Prince of Peace who has come to end all warfare. He has come to bring about the kingdom in which the swords shall be beat into plowshares. But at the end of the day I thought she was mistaken. In this age, we follow Jesus into the fight. The failure to recognize that we are in a fight won’t make the fight go away. It will only make us unprepared to prevail in the fight. While we don’t fight with earthly weaponry, we are called to fight in a spiritual arena. Let’s consider what this fight looks like as we consider the three battles described here.

I. Fighting Worldliness

John gives the command not to love the world, and says that the stakes couldn’t be higher. If a person loves the world, then such a love chases out any love for the Father. The two cannot be mixed. So John tells us to fight worldliness before it chases out any love for God.

What is worldliness? What is the world we are told not to love, and why is it wrong to love that world when John tells us that God so loved this world that he gave his son to save the world? Obviously, John uses the word “world” to mean different things. The world we are not to love is not the created world, which reflects the beauty of its Creator. Rather, it is the world as a system that is opposed to God. Specifically, it refers to the sinful values of this world. Christians make two mistakes in this area of worldliness: too much separation or too much assimilation. The Bible teaches that though we are in the world, we are not to be of the world. The separation error goes astray on the part about being in the world, and the assimilation error gets it wrong in the area of not being of the world.

We are to be in the world, entering fully into the life of those around us. We move into houses around people who don't know the Lord, go to school with them, let our children play with them, all the time looking for things to share in common. But we stop short of sharing their values. John speaks of the right kind of separation in the three phrases he mentions in verse 16. Part of the world we are to separate from is **“the desires of the flesh.”** Some translations say “the *lusts* of the flesh.” This is talking about a desire that has gotten out of hand, not a normal desire we are created to have. For example, a desire for security is good and normal. But when our sinful nature attempts to provide that security without trusting in God, it becomes a hyper-desire, a lust.

He mentions next **“the desires of the eyes.”** This is the form of worldliness by which things are judged only by outward appearance. Those guilty of this form of worldliness have a great desire simply to look good. They are easily fooled by appearances. If something looks good, it must be good. I can remember attending a county fair once as a young boy, and I saw there a beautiful knife that I wanted. It was a prize in one of those booths that test your skill in shooting or throwing. I can't remember exactly what the booth was, but I can remember paying my quarter in an attempt to win the prize of that shiny knife. And I won it. I was so happy, until a day or two later I saw what a really cheap knife it was, quickly dulling and losing its handle.

The final form of worldliness is called **“the pride in possessions.”** Pride is the attempt to lift ourselves above others. So this describes doing so by our possessions. We count ourselves better than others because of possessing more than them, leading us to look down on those with less.

After looking at these three forms of worldliness that we are to fight against, we are ready to better understand how to be in the world but not of it. I believe God calls us to receive with thanksgiving whatever good parts of creation he decides to give to us. There is nothing wrong with wearing attractive clothes, beautifying our environment or eating good food. To enjoy these things in such

a way that they lead us to worship God and to connect with others fits God's intentions for these things. It is when we look to them to satisfy at deep levels, levels where only a relationship with God can truly satisfy, that we fall into worldliness. This suggests to us how we are to go about fighting worldliness. We do it not by withdrawing from the world, but by bringing a heart of worship and gratitude to our interactions with the world. The best way to fight worldliness is through a heart of worship, gratitude and love for the Lord.

II. Fighting Antichrists

There are two words we need to spend a little time on if we are to understand this section about antichrists. The obvious one is the term "antichrist," but before getting to that one we need to look at this phrase about **"the last hour."** What does John mean when he says it is the last hour? Some say that he thought Jesus would be returning in a very short while, within the lifetimes of most of those reading his letter. If that's what he meant, he was obviously mistaken. In light of the fact that Jesus taught that no one knew the time of the end except the Father, I think it clear that John didn't mean to contradict Jesus by claiming that he did know the time.

I think a better explanation for the last hour is that it is more a theological term than a chronological one. That is, John was describing the nature of this current age between the two comings of Christ. We have been in the last hour for over two thousand years now. It is the age of conflict between Jesus and his church on the one hand, and Satan and those in league with him on the other hand. This conflict will be present throughout this age, but will escalate toward the end of the age just prior to the return of Christ.

What does John mean by the "antichrist?" He is the only New Testament author who uses this term, though other terms are used elsewhere for the same figure. John refers both to *an* antichrist and *many* antichrists. The New Testament teaches in several places that a mighty opponent of the Church will arise at the end of time. He will be something of a false Christ in that he will force people to worship him and put to death those who worship the true Christ. This is the Antichrist. John's main point here is about the many antichrists who have already arisen. They are similar to the main Antichrist at the end of the age.

Why does John use the word "antichrist?" The prefix *anti-* could possibly mean someone who is a false or counterfeit Christ, or it could mean someone who is opposed to Christ. I think it is deliberately ambiguous, because the idea is of those who oppose the true Christ by claiming falsely to be the Christ. John is speaking specifically here of these secessionists who had left the church. Their theology was false because they denied that Jesus was the

Christ. What they taught was that Jesus was just a man like any other, but at his baptism the Christ came upon him, but then left him prior to his crucifixion. The effect of this is to deny the real identity and saving work of Jesus. So John is telling this church not to be discouraged by those who have left. “Good riddance,” he says about them, because they were bringing harm to the glory of Christ.

What is the application of this to us? This particular error is not so much the one we fight today, but we do fight other errors that have the effect of attacking the glory of Christ. I read this week about a man from a Hindu background who came to a large church because he was curious about Jesus. “Everyone here has been very friendly to me,” he reported to the pastor, “and my family has been enjoying all of the programs. But I do have one question. When am I going to learn about Jesus?” The spirit of antichrist is any approach to doing church that denies to Jesus the preeminence he deserves and that the world needs. We fight the antichrist simply by giving to Jesus the place of prominence he deserves.

I read this week a blog post by Christian author Skye Jethani in which he draws a comparison between the modern American church and cruise ships. Prior to the early 1950’s, big ocean-going ships served the utilitarian function of actually transporting people across oceans. But that began to change in 1953 when the De Havilland Comet became the first commercial jet to cross the Atlantic, taking only six hours instead of the six days required for a ship. As ships lost these passengers, they needed another purpose and they found it in cruises. These cruises weren’t about transporting people across oceans, but about the cruise itself, in which the departure and arrival ports were the same. Cruise ships have now become so big that people can be aboard them for days without ever seeing the sea itself. Jethani says that the American church has done something similar. As our culture has grown more secular, people have not been willing to come to churches where they only talk about Jesus. Instead, they want programs to meet every felt need people have. There is nothing inherently wrong with programs or churches large enough to have an abundance of them, as long as Jesus doesn’t get missed in the process.

How is it that we make sure we don’t miss Jesus but continue holding him up as preeminent? Two things are suggested by the text. First, we don’t make being big and holding on to members a priority. John says about those who left the church, **“They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us”** (v. 19). I can live underwater for about 60 seconds. But since I don’t belong to the water, I must go out from it. That was the case with these secessionists. Their natural realm is not the church, and the church makes a big mistake when it tailors itself to those whose natural condition is not the worship of God. Second, we focus on faithfulness to the Bible, which brings us to our next point.

III. Fighting Error

John speaks of two resources they are given in their fight. We don't fight with earthly weapons because ours are far more powerful. They are the truth of God's word and the power of God's Spirit. John says that they know the truth because they know who Jesus really is. What is this truth? **"Let what you heard from the beginning abide in you"** (v. 24). It is the truth of what the apostles had taught them, which we have in the writings of the New Testament.

They also have another resource that he mentions twice. **"But you have been anointed by the Holy One, and you all have knowledge"** (v. 20). He repeats this same promise at the end of the passage. **"But the anointing that you received from him abides in you, and you have no need that anyone should teach you"** (v. 27). In the Old Testament, leaders such as priests and kings were anointed with oil, which was a symbol of the Holy Spirit. The oil would be poured on the head and would run down the face. The qualities of oil are symbolic of the truth of what is happening. Oil is pleasant. It doesn't evaporate like water, signifying that the Holy Spirit stayed with them. When leaders were anointed, symbolizing the presence of the Holy Spirit, this Spirit enabled them to accomplish what they were called to do. So Oholiab and Bezalel were given the Spirit to help in the construction of the tabernacle furnishings, and the Spirit enabled them to accomplish this. After David's anointing as Israel's king, he was enabled to fight and defeat the giant Goliath and all Israel's other enemies.

What is it that the anointing of the Spirit enables us to do? The Spirit works through the Scriptures to help us know the truth and apply the truth. He makes Jesus both real and beautiful to us. These two resources of the Bible and the Spirit, then, provide a powerful combination of truth and relevancy. We need both. If you focus only on the Bible and ignore the anointing of the Spirit, you end up making the Bible dry and academic. If you ignore the Scriptures and focus only on the anointing of the Spirit, you end up with no objective truth and confuse the voice of God with your own voice. You will think God told you to do something when it was really just your own voice speaking to you.

CONCLUSION:

Here's the concluding application. God calls us to fight, and one of the primary ways we do so is to pick up the Bible and read it. And we read it with a prayer that God's Spirit would apply it to our hearts.