



# Potomac Hills

## Presbyterian Church, PCA



By Grace Alone ~ Through Faith Alone ~ In Christ Alone

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1 John 2:12-17

July 6, 2008  
English Standard Version

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### *“Overcoming in Christ”*

This is the 5th sermon in the series on the New Testament books of 1, 2, 3 John entitled,  
*“Walking with Christ when Faith is Tested.”*

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

*“I am writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven for His name’s sake. <sup>13</sup> 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. <sup>14</sup> 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. <sup>15</sup> 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. <sup>16</sup> For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions—is not from the Father but is from the world. <sup>17</sup> And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.”*

#### **INTRODUCTION: *The Used Car Sales Pitch* <sup>1</sup>**

I find it somewhat amusing to listen to used-car salesmen. Not all of them are like what I’m about to describe, but I think the word-craft they employ is remarkable ... and instructive. Deceptive sales craft is all about embellishing the positive, shrinking the negative, and using a careful sprinkling of plausible lies.

You walk up to what is designed to be a mode of transportation and the salesman immediately says to you, “This baby has the finest sound system you’ll ever find in a car. And

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<sup>1</sup> The Introduction and conclusion are adapted from *A Quest for More* by Paul Tripp, pages 28-31..

sit in those seats. They're capable of over fifty different positions." Now that he's **overstated** a couple of the car's **positives** so that you're not even thinking about the engine and transmission, he sets out to **shrink** the **negatives**. He says, "It's a great car for driving around the city." This actually means it's very small and doesn't have much pick-up. He adds, "It's a perfect car for a young family." Which really means that the back seat is so small no normal-sized human being could sit there comfortably. And then he ends with **plausible lies**. He says, "We'll have no trouble making it affordable for you." Most of the time this means, "You can't afford this car, but we can manipulate the finances in such a way as to make you think you can."

Such is the craft of the enemy. It's all about embellishing positives, downplaying negatives, and plausible lies. It's the craft of temptation. It's the craft of **pseudo-glory** and false transcendence.

It's a wicked craft ... but it gets us **again and again**.

You see, the enemy of our souls knows that we were created for **transcendence**. According to the American Heritage Dictionary, transcendence literally means "lying beyond the ordinary range of perception." It's something above and beyond us. And our enemy knows that we were created to be constantly connected to something **more glorious than the small glories** of our own survival and pleasure. He knows we all hunger for more, so his craft is to present us with **less** in a way that makes it appear to be **more**.

And apparently, in today's passage, the Apostle John has something to say about that. So let's see what that is. But before we do, let's ...

#### **REVIEW: *What is this book about?*** <sup>2</sup>

This is the fifth sermon in this series on **the Epistles**, the Letters, of John, and again I want to point out some key things I think we need to learn from John.

We must know **why** the church is a community ... and then **be** a community.

We must know **why** Christians are loving ... and then **be** loving people.

We must know **why** Christianity is believable ... and then **act** like **we really do** believe it. And we must know **why** it is **Jesus Christ** who lives, and reigns, and is coming again.

And we must be able to tell others in a way **they can understand!**

The Epistles of John were written to the **church**. The Apostle John was based in Ephesus, and it's most likely that this letter was written to the churches in Asia Minor, much as the Book of Revelation was. John's purpose for readers of the epistle was that they might know that they **already have** life.

The epistle was written for believers to deepen their **assurance** of faith. And they contain "**tests**" by which to judge that faith.

The enemies of the truth in the **epistle** are **professing** Christians (although the "tests given here" show that they are lying) and whose theology of Jesus is distinctly **docetic** and **gnostic** in nature.

**Docetism** was an opinion that Jesus had no human body and only **appeared** to have died on the cross. Docetists didn't deny the divinity of Christ, but they did deny the humanity of Jesus.

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<sup>2</sup> Some of the Review is adapted from the article "Introduction to First John" by Dr. Sam Storms, Enjoying God Ministries, 11/3/06, found at [www.EnjoyingGodMinistries.com](http://www.EnjoyingGodMinistries.com); *The Epistles of John: Tyndale New Commentaries* by John R. W. Stott, pages 49-50; *The Message of John's Letters* by David Jackman, pages 15-17; and the sermon, "If You Love Me, Keep My Commandments" by Ligon Duncan, First Presbyterian Church, Jackson, MS, 10/12/03.

**Gnosticism** were the beliefs of early Christian cults that valued their own **special, revealed knowledge of God** as a means to attain redemption for the spiritual element in man, separating it from the physical element.

The purpose of 1st John is to expose **mere professors of faith in Christ** (non-believers) and to confirm **true possessors of Christ by faith** (believers) by means of the application of certain "**tests of life.**" Such is done with a view to granting assurance of eternal life to true Christians, **1 John 5:13, "I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life."**

However, the problem that existed in the church was that people **couldn't tell** who the real Christians were. There were false teachers who **claimed** to believe in Christ, but **refused** to live like it, and the young Christians in the church were confused. False **teaching** always leads to false **living**, and the ethical implications of Gnosticism are John's concern throughout these letters.

Their ethical error had two ingredients: **first**, a lack of obedience to the commands of Christ that bordered on outright decadence; and **second**, an absence of brotherly love and compassion.

Let's refresh our memory of what we've learned so far. In chapter 1, especially from verse 5 to the end of the chapter, John is responding to false teaching in the church regarding sin. The false teachers are teaching a number of incorrect things: they're teaching that you can have a saving fellowship with God and still live immorally; they're teaching that once you become a Christian, you are a person who is without sin; and they're teaching that once you become a Christian, you no longer, in fact, commit sin. Even though you may be living immorally ... but because you have this special knowledge, it doesn't count as sin.

And John is responding to each of these false teachings. He makes it clear in 1 John 1 that believers—though we are new creations in Jesus Christ—we're still sinners, and we still need to deal with that sin realistically and biblically. And of course that means, as he tells us, confessing our sins and seeking the forgiveness of God. Though we have been saved by grace, though we have been forgiven of our sins and spared of their penalty, as believers we still continue to grow in grace by confessing our sins and having them forgiven.

Then in 1 John 2, he says, "Now, let me make sure that you don't misunderstand what I'm saying. By saying that we, as Christians, will continue to struggle with sin, and by saying that we, as Christians, will continue to need to confess and repent of our sins, I'm **NOT** saying that sin is no big deal; I'm **NOT** saying that we shouldn't pursue godliness; I'm **NOT** saying that we shouldn't be active in the pursuit of holiness — far from it! In fact, he makes it clear in verses 1 and 2 of 1 John 2 that his goal is precisely **that we would pursue godliness.**

He explains to us in 1 John 2:2 the basis of pursuing godliness and righteousness is found in Jesus Christ the Advocate, who is the **propitiation** for our sins ... which means that Jesus, through His death on the cross **for** our sins ... satisfies God's wrath **against** our sins.

So let's dive into this text. John starts by laying out a ...

#### v. 12-14: **FOUNDATION for Assurance** <sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The Exposition of the text is adapted from the sermon "A Word of Assurance" by Ligon Duncan, First Presbyterian Church, Jackson, MS, 11/9/03; *The Message of John's Letters: The Bible Speaks Today* by David Jackman, pages 55-66; *The Epistles of John: Tyndale New Commentaries* by John R. W. Stott, pages 95-103; *Words of Assurance: Reflections on the Epistles of John* by Win Groseclose, pages 49-59; *The Letters of John: The Pillar New Testament Commentary* by Colin Kruse, pages 87-97; *The NIV*

*“I am writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven for His name’s sake.”<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup> 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.”*

This first thing we notice about this passage is the repetition. John addresses fathers, young men, and children. We know John uses the phrase *“little children”* throughout his writings simply to refer to everyone in the congregation, to all Christians. While we can certainly take these to mean **actual** children, it’s much more likely that he’s using this as a metaphor to refer to new Christians, to young Christians, to those who are spiritually immature.

Throughout his writings John also uses the term *“fathers”* to refer to those who are spiritually mature and biblically wise. And again, that certainly fits with the context here. Now John uses the term *“young men,”* which he only uses a few times in his writings, but in fitting it within the context here, it seems he’s referring to Christians who are growing and strong in their faith, but aren’t yet to what we might consider “spiritually mature.” As a matter of fact, this kind of usage is quite common in our own Presbyterian tradition. I was at General Assembly a few weeks ago, and most of the time, when someone gets up to speak ... if he’s smart ... he addresses the assembly as “Fathers and Brothers.”

And that’s somewhat of the sense here.

And John is sort of taking a break in his attack against the false teachers to both **affirm** and **exhort** the people here. First, he wants to affirm them, so he tells them that they’re forgiven, for Christ’s sake, and thus they know the Father, verse 12, *“I am writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven for His name’s sake.”* And the end of verse 13, *“I write to you, children, because you know the Father.”*

Now John’s words to his little children here are meant for believers who are new in the faith. And in those two phrases, in those two verses, John teaches us three things about Christian assurance: that Christians **are forgiven**; that Christians are forgiven **for Christ’s sake**; and that thus Christians **know the Father**.

He’s pointing us to the objective ground of our assurance, and he points to God’s work of forgiveness, **not to something in us**. Now that’s important. So far he’s been talking about something in us that is a response to God’s grace — our love for one another. Our love for one another did not **cause** God to love us; it’s the result of God loving us. Our love for God’s commands did not **cause** God to love us; it is the result of God loving us. But when he points to our life and to our love as evidence of assurance — if those things **alone** are the basis by which we have assurance of our salvation, then we’re going to struggle with that, because our love fluctuates.

Ask any husband or wife in the room today: the quality and expression of love in the **best** of marriages **changes** day-to-day. So if **my assurance** of my standing with God is based upon how I love my fellow Christians, **my assurance** is going to radically fluctuate ... because my love for fellow Christians radically fluctuates. And so John’s pointing us away from those **subjective** evidences of God’s work in our lives to something **objective**, something outside of us, something that **God** does.

And he points to God's forgiveness. Christians are forgiven people, he says, **objectively**. And he points to that work of God in forgiveness as the ultimate ground of our assurance. And it's something **outside of us**.

Think of it this way — forgiveness is not something in you; **God** does forgiveness. And He does it in justification, when He pardons all our sins and accepts us as righteous in His sight: **not for anything in us**, but all for the sake of the righteous Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. And John points to **that** in this passage: he says, "*your sins are forgiven for His name's sake.*"

John's point here is that Christians are not forgiven because of something we **do**; we're not forgiven because we **deserve** it; we're not forgiven because we're **different** in some way from other people who haven't received the gracious forgiveness of God. We're forgiven **because of Christ**; we're forgiven because of God's mercy shown to us **in Jesus Christ**.

In other words, the basis of our forgiveness is **outside** of us, and so the assurance of our forgiveness is **outside** of us, and it's **in** what God has done. And so he points us to this fact: we're forgiven, and then to another fact: that we're forgiven because of what Christ has done as the basis of our salvation.

And our hymns sing about the glory of this truth. When John Newton came to understand that he was a forgiven sinner, he sang "*Amazing Grace! How sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me!*" You see this same truth in Augustus Toplady's "*Rock of Ages.*" Maybe you know the hymn by heart—we ought to—but if you don't, the second stanza goes like this: "*Not the labor of my hands can fulfill Thy laws demands, could my zeal no respite know, could my tears forever flow, all for sin could not atone, Thou must save and Thou alone.*" There was nothing that John Newton or Augustus Toplady or any of us could do in order to **cause** God's forgiveness of us. God's forgiveness had to be freely given to us in the just sacrifice of our Savior Jesus Christ.

My friends, this is so important because, even in the Church, people attempt to justify themselves. They'll want to deal with their sins by denying it; they'll want to deal with their sins by **shrinking** the **negatives** of their sin. And God says, "No, no, no, no, no." The beginning of Christian life is in the forgiveness of sins, and that means that God saves those **who are sinners**. And all those whom God saves come to **know** that they are sinners and that they have **no hope save in Jesus Christ**. And so they glory in the fact that God hasn't saved them because they're **good**, but He's saved them because of **Christ**.

And John points us there first. He says, Get that foundation. Get that foundation and everything else will be put in the right place. Yes, John says, those who have that forgiveness will manifest a love for God's word. Yes, those who have that forgiveness will manifest a love for one another, but their love for one another and their love for God's word will **not create** that forgiveness. Only God's **mercy** brings that forgiveness. And so that's where he begins: Look at the forgiveness of God **based on Jesus Christ**.

And we see how that plays out in verses 13-14. These are John's words to those that he calls "*young men*" in the faith. That is, he's speaking to growing but still young believers. And here's how he characterizes them, "*you have overcome the evil one.*" In other words, they have experienced a definitive break from the bondage of Satan.

To put it in the language of Paul in **Romans 6:6**, "*We know that our old self was crucified with Him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin.*"

Or in the words of our responsive reading this morning, **Ephesians 2:4-5**, "*But God,*

*being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, <sup>5</sup> even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ— by grace you have been saved.”*

In other words, they’ve not only been forgiven; they’ve not only had the **penalty** of sin broken in their lives—that’s what he talked about in verse 12—but they’ve had the **power** of sin broken in their lives as well.

Now, John speaks of Christians as having **“overcome the evil one.”**

Now, most of us don’t feel like we’ve overcome the evil one 24/7, do we? And so this sounds strange. And so we say, “But look, there’s this sin that seems to have gotten a hold of me — what the Puritans called besetting sins.” Or you might think, “Hey, I’ve been praying against and fighting against these besetting sins for 28 years! And I’m still fighting against them, and I don’t **feel** like I’m having dominion over sin.” And John is saying, Even **that besetting sin** reminds you that you have been liberated from the bondage of sin, because there was a time when you were in bondage to **all** sin like you feel you are to **that** besetting sin. You couldn’t even see your need, and you couldn’t even see the Savior until He came and lifted you out of your bondage and your sorrow and your sin. Christians, John says, experience deliverance not only from the penalty of sin, but also from the power of sin. And that’s why he calls them **“strong.”** And that’s why he says that they’ve **“overcome the evil one.”** Once they were weak and helpless before sin, and now by the grace of God **they’re fighting against sin**.

How have they been made strong? Well, John tells you, verse 14, **“The word of God abides in them.”** Jesus says, **Matthew 4:4**, *“Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”*

And the word of God dwells in them richly — and by this the Holy Spirit is building them up and **making them strong**. See, John can look at these Christians and he can see the power of sin broken in their lives, **even if they can’t**.

When we’re thinking about this reality, we think about all the areas where that power of sin doesn’t look broken to us. And John is saying, that liberation from the power of sin doesn’t mean that we coast on home to heaven; it means that we’re in a war. And that’s why all this warfare imagery comes up here in 1 John. When you’re saved, **you’re saved into a fight**. See, the Christian life is not just enjoying fellowship with God and the forgiveness of God; **it’s fighting the enemy**. The world, the flesh, and the devil, Satan and our sins—the Christian life begins a fight. And so that’s the next thing John goes into ... and he goes into it by giving us a

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#### **v. 15: COMMAND**<sup>4</sup>

*“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.”*

First question: What does John mean by **“world?”** What does it mean when we say someone is a **“worldly”** person? John’s usage of **“world,”** in these verses, means **“evil over against God”**—the sum total life of human life, human culture, the ordered world considered **apart** from, **alienated** from, **hostile** to God with Satan as its head.

And we see that often in this letter, **1 John 3:1**, *“See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why **the world** does not know us is that it did not know Him.”*

And then in **1 John 3:13**, *“Do not be surprised, brothers, that **the world** hates you.”*

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<sup>4</sup> Part of this section and the next are adapted from the sermon *“Don’t Love the World”* by Brad Mercer, First Presbyterian Church, Jackson, MS, 11/16/03.

And in **1 John 5:19**, “*We know that we are from God, and **the whole world** lies in the power of the evil one.*”

For John, there is a sharp dichotomy between two sides: between light and darkness, truth and falsehood, love and hate, love of the Father and love of the world. One cannot **profess** to be a Christian ... if one habitually, continually, time after time, invests his or her time, effort, energy, in the things of **the world**, in the things that are **hostile** to Christ and the Gospel.

Second question: What does John mean by the word “**love**?” He’s referring here to a fondness and affection for an object, an appetite, a desire, something that I take pleasure in, something that I set my heart upon; what I am emotionally, physically, spiritually **invested** in; where I get my comfort, hope, and security. We’re not talking about **things** in and of themselves but our **attitude** towards those things. In other words, what drives you from the deepest part of your heart?

Those of you who are familiar with *The Lord of the Rings*, either the books or the movies, know that dangerous little word when someone, anyone is tempted by the temptation of the ring...that dangerous, single word, precious.

What do we find precious? And what drives us in what direction?

And when we can face that question ... when we can honestly answer that question ... then we will **begin** to find out what are the ...

#### **v. 16: IDOLS of our Heart**

*“For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions—is not from the Father but is from the world.”*

Now this is not a comprehensive list but John does give us three marks, three characteristics of infatuation with this world that’s hostile to God. And the first one is **the desires of the flesh** ... if there was ever a meddling sermon, **this is it**.

The desires of the flesh, the lust of the flesh, the appetite of the flesh ... something we think of physically, bodily ... or sensual sin. However, that’s not the complete story ... because John would be giving in to these Gnostics by saying the body is evil. And that’s **not** what John is saying. The phrase is referring to **any** and **every** desire of man **in rebellion against God** for the things of the world, all that panders to my desires and to my appetites. This is just as much about gluttony as it is about sexual immorality. It’s about whatever **physical desire** that leads you away from God. God has given us such things as food, money, and sex ... and when used biblically ... He says they’re all good things.

But when they’re used unbiblically, when they’re abused, when our desire for these things becomes **so strong** that they lead us **away** from God, that they lead us to **betray** those closest to us in order to get this idol, even to the point of betraying **God** in order to get this idol — then John is saying you can’t live like that **and claim to love the Father**.

One of the things that I think affects ministers particularly is the idol of getting everyone’s approval. It’s an easy trap to fall into ... we stand up in front of everyone every Sunday. And most of us try to speak in such a way that we move people ... touching them beneath the surface, at a level of attitudes and affections.

I think some of you have heard me say that I love it when people **cry** during a sermon. One, because I know you’re listening ... I mean, it’s better than watching you sleep. But mostly because I know that somehow I’ve **connected with you below the surface**. Now I can do that because the Word of God is powerful and effective and the Holy Spirit is working conviction in your life ... or I can do because I found a really good tear-jerking story that’s just going to mess

with your emotions.

And while one is good, and the other isn't, either way, **I love it!**

And most of the time, you love it too! Because maybe it shows you that you're not dead yet, I don't know. But after one of those sermons, there can be a lot of embellishing positive comments given this way. And you can get caught up in that so easily. And I got a computer full of manipulating stories.

And yet I've seen guys who do that **so well** ... get so caught up in the glory, pride, and **adulation** ... that they seem to forget why they're here in the first place. And then it's a matter of time until some **sin** drives them out of the ministry.

We focused on the desires of the flesh here, but John also mentions "*the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions.*" Same sorts of things. The greed, envy, and jealousy that comes from *the desires of the eyes* can destroy us just as quickly. And the pleasure and ego and wealth and conceit and boasting and security that comes from the *pride in possessions* has to be one of the fastest ways to turn away from God. They're all just different ways to **exalt self**. And truth be told, every one of us here is pretty good at doing just that.

And then John finishes by telling us why he has such harsh words about the idols of our hearts. He gives us a very simple, yet very clear ...

v. 17: **RATIONALE**<sup>5</sup>

*"And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever."*

Many years ago, an early 19<sup>th</sup> Century Scottish Theologian and Pastor named Thomas Chalmers preached one of the most famous sermons of all time on this passage. And he called "*The Expulsive Power of a New Affection.*"

Thomas Chalmers knew what he talking about when he preached this sermon on "*The Expulsive Power of a New Affection.*" For Chalmers had lived a long time as an unbeliever; indeed, he had been a **minister** for a long time as an unbeliever. Indeed, while a minister in those unbelieving years he cared more about astronomy and mathematics, at which he was expert, than he cared about the Bible, which he hardly ever read. And his sermons were lectures in morality rather than the proclamation of Christ and the Gospel.

They were, that is, until the Lord visited this man with a severe illness and the prospect of death and eternity was brought home to his mind and heart and the gospel borne in upon his soul. He returned to his pulpit a new man, preaching with a passion he never had before, **Christ and Him crucified**. As one of his parishioners put it, suddenly 'the world to come cast an awful shadow over every sermon.' He had come to know that **this world** was passing away ...

And we get a dramatic picture of that almost every year. Whether it's Hurricane Katrina, flooding in the Midwest, an earthquake in China, or a Tsunami in South Asia ... we've all seen pictures of what it looks like when **the world** is passing away. There is not much left ... things **or** people.

Many folks along the Gulf Coast may have loved their homes near the water; but three years ago it wasn't so difficult for them to walk away and leave their homes behind, especially when it became clear that Hurricane Katrina would arrive with waves and winds which would leave their homes nothing but empty slabs of buckled concrete scattered with sand and debris.

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<sup>5</sup> Part of this section is adapted from the sermon '*The Expulsive Power of a New Affection*' by Robert Rayburn, Faith Presbyterian Church, Tacoma, WA, 10/8/89, which in turn is adapted from the sermon of the same name by Thomas Chalmers.

And so it ought to be for us, whose citizenship is in heaven by faith in Christ; and who know by the sure word of God that the world and its **desires** will pass away.

**CONCLUSION: *John is screaming at us***

But, to be honest, all of that is easier said than done. It's much harder to turn our hearts away from embellished positives, shrinking negatives, and lies which are way too easy to believe. We forget the transcendence for which we were made and settle for **less** as if it were **more**.

A father will forget that he's been welcomed to the transcendent glory of being part of God's work of forming human souls. Instead he'll buy into the pseudo-glory of career success. And more and more, his life will be eaten up and defined by his work. A mother will forget she's been called to create a community where souls are nurtured and cared for, and her children cease to be a joy to her, and instead become another obligation in an already-too-busy schedule. Young men and women forget the transcendent glory of having an identity rooted in the grace and mercy of the Redeemer. Instead they will live for the pseudo-glory of the approval of their peers. She'll pick up her friends vocabulary; he'll take on their sense of style; and they'll both do things that **prick** their conscience in their never-dying pursuit to "belong." And the things she hopes to find in the acceptance of her peers ... no human being is able to give her.

And when we fall into the pattern of accepting **less** as if it were **more** ... we find the consequences become profound. Being right replaces being kind, being served replaces serving, power trumps character, possessions are more attractive than blessings, and independence more compelling than community. Even getting the last cookie becomes more important than loving the other person.

And the Apostle John **is screaming at us** — "**That's the world!** And the world and its desires are passing away. Those are just idols — they have no **life** in them. He says, **1 John 4:4**, "*Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.*" Jesus is the Lord of Glory, Jesus is the One who gives life, Jesus is the One who **is really more**. So please ... don't settle for less ... repent of your idols, turn to Christ, and live. Because it's all of grace from beginning to end.

And it's all of grace because it's all of Christ.

You need to pray.

Take a moment to do that, and then I'll close.

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**1 John 4:4**

*"Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world."*