

+ 1 John 2:15-17 + Who Do You Love? + 6th Sunday after Pentecost + 20 July 2014 +

It's hard to ride a fence. It's uncomfortable, painful, even risky. It's not an enjoyable position to be in. Even if you can actually get yourself seated up on top of that fence, you still have to keep your balance. You can only keep up that balancing act for so long before your uncomfortable position starts to become painful taking your focus off your balance. Pretty soon you start tipping one way or the other. You try to right yourself, but doing so causes yourself more pain which takes more focus off your balance. Next thing you know, you overcompensate and either you fall off the fence or you end up hanging there with your feet caught in the fence. For good reason, people don't sit on fences. It's too uncomfortable, too painful, too risky.

Now if we all know how uncomfortable, how painful, how risky fence-riding can be, why do you and I try so hard to be expert "fence-riders"? I'm not talking about figuring out how to best sit on a picket fence or a barbed wire fence. No, I'm talking about riding the fence in our lives.

You could say that we've been influenced by the culture around us. It demands compromise and "tolerance" and not being so judgmental and exclusive. Now it's one thing to not be judgmental about someone from a different race or nationality or culture. It's another thing to be cowed into thinking that if I call sin "sin" according to God's Word or speak against what is immoral in God's sight or stand up for God's very exclusive "Christ alone" teaching in his Word, then I will find myself on the "intolerant", "judgmental", unpopular side of the fence excluded and ridiculed and looked down upon by others. You and I don't like to be in that position. So we ride the fence. On the basis of your Christian faith, you may oppose what you see or hear. On the basis of God's Word, you may disagree with a person's lifestyle, but you keep your mouth shut or look away as you continue to painfully ride the fence. Eventually, though, you either fall off the fence or stop objecting.

On the flip side of that, your sinful nature hates the fact that you're a Christian, but you won't give it up. Your sinful nature wants to chase after its ungodly cravings and lusts. So what does it do? Your sinful nature plants this foolish idea in your head that you can really have both. On the one hand, why not throw yourself into enjoying the things of this world? After all, you only live once. On the other hand, why not keep professing that you're a Christian? It looks good in the eyes of the people around you on Sunday, while you indulge your flesh during the rest of the week. What makes it all so foolish is that it's nothing more than painful fence riding. You can only keep up the balancing act for so long before either your Christianity proves to be nothing more than a façade or you forsake it altogether for this life.

Because we so easily fall into that foolish "fence-riding" trap, the Apostle John's words really strike home today as he asks us, **WHO DO YOU LOVE?** You can't answer that while question sitting on a fence.

So who do you love? You either love the world or you love the Father. John tells us, **"Do not love the world or anything in the world."** What's unique about that statement is that John uses the word for *love* that he uses when in a certain sense he writes, **"For God so loved the world..."** (John 3:16) The *love* of which he speaks is like the love that God has for us, the love that moved him to sacrifice his own Son that you and I would be saved. It's a love that is willing to sacrifice self for the sake of another. That takes us back to John's question. Who do you love with that kind of love?

Do you love this world? Are you willing to sacrifice yourself for this world, for the things of this world, for the people of this world? At first, you and I would object to that. "Of course, I wouldn't want to sacrifice myself for this world!" Yet how much do you and I sacrifice for the treasures, the stuff, the toys, the gadgets, the clothes, the things of this world—not just to enjoy them, but because we want them so much for ourselves? How much do you and I sacrifice for people in our lives—not just because we care about them, but because either they have or can give something we want or they have taken first priority in our lives? How much are you and I willing to sacrifice for other things in this world—for a job, for sports, for getting ahead in life, for whatever? While your words and mine might protest against such love, how much we sacrifice for this world betrays how much we truly love this world.

That's why the Apostle warns, **"If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him."** You can't have both. Either you love the world or you love the Father. Either you sacrifice for this world or you sacrifice out of love for your heavenly Father. There really is no "fence-riding".

Yet you and I are quick to object, "...But can't I have both? Can't I love the things of this world and love the Father (at least outwardly)?" The Apostle John just shakes his head at us and says, "No. In fact, **everything in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride in one's lifestyle—comes not from the Father but is from the world.**" Now John is not saying that the bountiful gifts which God gives to us in our

world are evil. No, he speaks of what is at the heart of this sinful world—cravings, lust, longing for what is not yours and then pride and arrogance in what you have, in what you do, in what kind of lifestyle you lead. He speaks of how your sinful nature loves to indulge itself with what it sees and craves. All of that is at the heart of the world around us and our sinful natures buy right into it. “I see it. I want it. I will do whatever it takes to get it so I feel good about having it, but a moment later I’ll see something or someone else and want that for myself and go through the whole, ridiculous cycle all over again.” You start running on that hamster wheel as a child and keep running as an adult—getting nowhere and blindly chasing after what passes away.

None of that comes from the Father. Therefore, you and I can’t ride the fence between loving the world and loving him. Sadly, loving the world leaves you with nothing, but dust and ashes, regrets and guilt and death. Hence the Apostle’s final warning, **“And the world with its lust is passing away, but the one who does God’s will remains forever.”** Everything and everyone in this world lasts for a moment and passes away. It doesn’t matter what it is or who it is. It will pass away like dust blowing away in the wind—and so will you and I with this world and the cravings of this world.

...But did you see the small light of hope at the end of that last warning? **“...But the one who does God’s will remains forever.”** As we’ve seen there is no way to ride the fence when it comes to love for God or this world. There has to be total commitment. It’s always going to be “either...or...”, never “both...and...” So if love for the world comes naturally to you and me, how do you and I love the Father and do his will and actually **“remain forever”**?

It all goes back to John’s word for **love**, but not your love for the Father or mine. No, it goes back to God’s love for you and me through Jesus. No pun intended, but John loves to write about God’s love for you and me. Just a couple chapters after our text, he describes God’s self-sacrificing love beautifully, **“This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.”** (1 John 4:9-10) Love for the Father starts, continues, and ends with God’s love for us through Christ Jesus.

That love moved Jesus to enter this sinful world of cravings and lust and arrogance to rescue you and me from the foolish traps in which we were caught. That love moved Jesus to go through this life fighting off the temptations of the flesh, warding off the temptations before his eyes, and crushing the shallow arrogance that comes so naturally to every one of us. Unlike us, Jesus’ love wasn’t for the things of this world, but instead Jesus let his love for helpless sinners like you and me move him to sacrifice himself to forgive the guilt of all our sins. His love moved him to sacrifice his own life to reconcile us with God and to enable us by faith to love the Father again, to do his will—not to get something out of it, but to express our thanks with every last breath that our gracious God gives us.

That love moved Jesus to come from the Father, to give you and me pure desires to do God’s will in all of our callings in life, to reveal to us his will through his holy Word and to purify and forgive and strengthen us through his holy Sacraments. That love moved him to give you and me life with him in the glories of heaven forever—not because of who we are, but because of his great love for you and me that caused him to live a perfect life for our sakes, and to die on the cross, and to rise again on the third day.

Because of that love of the Father for you and me through Jesus, you and I now devote our own lives to the love of the Father, to doing his will, to following him and living for him. Rather than chase after the cravings and lust of this world for a moment of arrogant pride, we yearn to serve the Lord in our callings in the home, in the church, and in society. In doing so, we realize that this world and the things of this world and the temptations and cravings of this world will one day disappear. Yet what we have in Christ lasts forever. You see a day will come when you and I and all believers in Christ will remain with the Lord forever because of his love for us.

You can’t ride the fence on that. You can’t be partially committed to the world and partially committed to the Lord. It’s either the world or the Lord. I pray that by faith, the Lord will place you firmly on his side of the fence no matter what the world around you thinks, that he will guide your desires and thoughts and actions to do his will, and that you will remain totally committed to the Savior-God who loves you, who gave everything for you, and with whom you will remain forever in heaven. Amen.