

October 15, 2023

Faith in Exile: The “Old” New Commandment

1 John 2:7-17

Vernon Advent Christian Church

[Intro]

As we live in this fallen world, we are constantly reminded, and bombarded with, that fact that there are a lot of people who claim to love God, claim to be followers of Jesus, but in reality, are not. This isn't new. It was certainly the case in the early church and particularly in the churches to whom John was writing his letter. In fact, John went into great detail to speak to the issue of how we can know that we know God as we talked about last week. Remember, John was writing to help these early Christians confront the Gnostics, that group of heretics in the first few centuries of the church, which claimed that knowing God meant possessing some mystical, or secret, knowledge. Like those who fell prey to the Gnostics in the first few centuries of the church, many people today are still looking for some secret knowledge apart from the Word of God. Even as Satan tempted Adam and Eve by promising them secret knowledge by eating from the fruit of the tree, many people today are being lured away from the truth of God's word with promises of secret knowledge, knowledge that will somehow make them more like or closer to God.

In contrast to this way of thinking, John says the true Gospel is not so much what you know, as it is Who you know. The true Christian's walk is not evidenced by a full head, but by a changed heart through faith in Jesus Christ. And how do we know that we know Him? Well, says John, it will always be evident in the way we live our lives. In opposition to what the Gnostics were teaching then, and to what many people teach and believe today, knowing God is not merely head knowledge obtained through some secret revelation, but it is heart knowledge based on the revealed truth and promises of God's word.

Now, in Ch.2:1-6, which was our text from last week, John has already made the point that one of the ways we know we know Him is if we obey Him. And now, he follows that thought up with another one; We know that we know Him if we have His love. Both can be clearly seen in our daily lives. In our passage today, John talks to us about the necessity of God's love as evidence that we have an authentic, genuine relationship Him. He tells us that if we love Him, we will grow to be more like Him and that our love for Him must be undivided. If you are able, please stand with me as I read the word of God this morning. [Read Passage]

I want to draw your attention to a few things this morning from our passage. First, notice the priority of love in John's words. Love is one of those themes which goes throughout most of his writings. Whether it is in his gospel or here in his letters, love is a reoccurring theme. In these first five verses, John points out three things concerning the commandment to love. First is its origin in vs. 7. When he says he is not writing a new commandment, but an old one which we have had from the beginning, he is speaking about the origin of this commandment to love. Beginning in the earliest books of the Old Testament, God's desire was that we would love Him and love others. For Jews, this was part of their most basic confession of faith. Known as the Shema, which is the Hebrew word for “to hear, obey or take action” every devout Jew would repeat Deuteronomy 6:4-5 twice a day. “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is One. Love the Lord with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength.” Then, in Leviticus 19:18, God instructed His people, “. . . love your neighbor as yourself; I am the Lord.” So, this

commandment “to love God and one another” was not something new to them. It was as old as Judaism itself.

In fact, Jesus repeated these very words in Mark 12:28, when the scribes came and argued with Him, and asked Him, which was the greatest commandment, Jesus said, "Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is this: Love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these." John is reiterating what they had known, from the beginning. Love God and love each other. This is foundational to what it means to know God.

And then, in vs. 8, he moves from the origins of love to the operation of love. Notice that he says, "At the same time, it is a new commandment that I am writing to you, which is true in him and in you, because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining." John is, no doubt, referring to what Jesus Himself had said in John 13:34 while in the upper room with John and the rest of the disciples, "I give you a new commandment; love one another. Just as I have loved you, you must also love one another." You see, from the very beginning all those who would follow God had an obligation to love Him and others, but Jesus took it to a new level. His commandment did not have to do so much with the decision to love, that was the old commandment. The new commandment had to do with the depth of that love, or the kind of love we are to have for one another. Jesus says, I want you to love each other like I have loved you. That's a very high standard. David Guzik, in his commentary of 1 John, said that one of the reasons this commandment was new was that, "Jesus displayed a kind of love never seen before, a love we were to imitate." In other words, Jesus showed his love for us on the cross. Guzik continues, "The cross points in four directions to show that the love of Jesus is wide enough to include every human being, long enough to last through all eternity, deep enough to reach the most guilty sinner and high enough to [give us access] to heaven." Jesus is our ultimate example of love.

This new commandment to love is more of a commandment to be than to do. Someone cannot be forced into loving someone else. If we are filled with and controlled by his Spirit, his love will be evident through us in all we say and do. That's why love is an undeniable mark of authentic the Christian. And it shouldn't be seen in the legalistic sense of something we have to do, whether we want to or not. But more in the sense of what God's will for His people is. It is more of a mandate as to what we are supposed to allow Christ to make us to be rather than something we just do. Remember, God is more concerned with what we are than with what we do because, as Mr. Rogers once said, "What we are always determines what we do."

People always want to know the answer to the question, "What is God's will for my life?" And by this they mean that they want some quest, some spiritual journey, some spectacular kind of sacrificial task that they can perform for God that they think will cause Him to love them more. When, in reality, all of us each and every day are presented with hundreds of opportunities to do the will of God. Let me answer the question for you. God's will for your life is to love him above all else and love others sacrificially. Every person we meet presents us with a unique opportunity to express the love of God. Every time we come across people who are difficult or who annoy us we have the opportunity to allow the love of Jesus to flow through us in a supernatural way. And with each act of His love flowing through us, He changes us just a little bit more to be like Him.

And so, the love that John is speaking of here is love in action. Further along in this letter he says in 1 John 3:18, "Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth."

Jesus said in the Matthew 5:43-45, in the Sermon on the Mount, "You have heard that it was said, love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you so that you may be sons of your Father in Heaven." When we are truly crucified with Christ, and it is no longer us that lives, but Christ Jesus is living through us, this love will inevitably flow from us to others. Now, this is the operation of love, the transformation of our hearts and minds, into the image of Christ.

But then, John moves from the operation of love to the opposite of love. Look at verses 9-11. The opposite of love is hatred. John has just said one of the ways you know that you know Him is that you love Him and you love each other. He is now making the case the opposite it also true. One of the ways you know that you don't know Him is that you hate your brother. Hate, here, in the original language is not so much an outburst of anger as it is an attitude with which we have grown comfortable. When we think of hatred, we think of active animosity felt or expressed towards others. But that's not exactly what John is saying. John is contrasting true love with hatred. True love, Christian love, the kind of love God has for us, the kind of love Jesus expressed on the cross, is sacrificial and proactive, not merely reactive.

Even as the biblical concept of peace is not simply the absence of conflict but also the presence of harmony and good will, so hatred is not only defined by the presence of animosity, but by the absence of love. John leaves no room for neutrality here. We either love others or we hate them, we cannot, according to John, ignore them and at the same time say we love them. After all, how can we, being the stewards of the gospel, say that we love others and yet be content never to share God's love with them or toward them? You see, for John, love is proactive, it takes the initiative. Even as God showed His love toward us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8), so we must take the initiative and love others as He loves us.

Vs. 10, those who love as Jesus loved, are walking in the light, as He is in the light. And, the verse continues, if we are walking in the light we will not stumble. The implication is that those who walk in the light can see clearly. They have fellowship with God and with God's people. But, in vs. 11, the one who claims to walk in the light, and yet is apathetic towards others, or who possesses no love for others, is not walking in the light but is blinded by the darkness in which he walks. For the Christian love is not optional, it is a priority, a priority which is to be put into practice.

Next, in vs 12-14, John addresses his readers according to their spiritual maturity. In these verses, John gives us two sets of three parallel statements. He addresses three different groups of people in the church.

- 1) The children - those who are young in the faith
- 2) The Fathers - those who have been believers a long time
- 3) The Young Men - those who presently carry the responsibility for the furtherance of the gospel.

Notice that with each of these stages of spiritual maturity, with each group of people, there are specific things John relates. To the children, to those who are early in their journey as believers, he very simply states that they know their sins are forgiven and that they know the Father. Two difficulties young Christians often face are the questions of whether or not Jesus can really forgive their sin, and whether or not their religious experience was the real thing. John addresses both of these questions here. He tells them that their sins are, in fact, forgiven, not on the basis of their own works, but rather for His name's sake, making reference back to Jesus as the payment for their sin. And he assures them that having had their sins forgiven, they know, or have a relationship with, the Father.

To the fathers, those who have been believers for a long time, he points back to that which they have known from the beginning. He wants to remind the rest of the church that there are those who have faithfully walked with Jesus for a long time. One of the beautiful things about our church is the amount of folks who fit into this category. While many of our seniors may not realize it, their very presence is an inspiration and encouragement to us as younger believers. To know that you have faithfully walked with God all these years, to see the living testimony of your witness gives many of us confidence that the promises of God are true. You are living testimonies to God's faithfulness.

And then he writes to the young men, to the leaders in the church who are the folks who do much of what gets done. He says, I am writing you because you have overcome the evil one and because you are strong and the word of God abides in you. It is clear, by what John says to these folks, that they were on the front lines of the spiritual battle which was taking place in their day. God had made them strong and they had overcome the enemy. The word of God was abiding in them and they were winning the war for Christ.

It's important to note that in every church there should be a mixture all three groups John mentions here. Those who have just come to know Christ, those who are in their prime, spiritually, and are fighting the good fight, and those who have carried the torch faithfully for many years and whose lives serve as an example to others. Not only should these different groups exist, but there should be a gradual process where the younger Christians are growing up in Christ and taking the place of those who have gone before them. We call this discipleship. This is the only way the church continues from generation to generation. It's how we can encouraged each other in the love of God.

Then, moving from the process of maturity, John warns us about the opposition to our love for God, the only thing that can distract, or come between, us and our love for God and others; and that is worldliness or a love of the world. Look with me at vs. 15-17. Whereas we are told to love God and one another, here we are strongly warned against loving the world and the things of the world. There are those who have asked, "Why is loving the world bad?" "Doesn't John say that God loves the world?" Yet here we are told not to love the world. Well, as always, context is key. John 3:16 does in fact say that God so loved the world. But in context, John is speaking about the people who make up the population of the world. Here in vs. 15, contextually, when John uses the word, "World" he is talking about the material world in which we live, the spirit which is behind all of the things to which people become attached which compete for their allegiance. We use the word "world" in similar ways. Speaking of people, we might say something like, "The whole world was at the store today," and then we might say, "He is a man of the world." Contextually we realize two different things are meant here. When John warns us not to love the world nor the things of the world, he is speaking about the materialistic world in which we live. He is warning us against becoming attached to things which hold no eternal value.

In fact, he says that if we love the world the love of the Father is not in us. This is a very strong statement. What is John is talking about? He's talking about a strong attachment to this world instead of the world to come. It is a desire for the temporal things of this world rather than the eternal things of heaven. This love for worldly things demonstrates the true nature of a person's heart. And what does it look like? John breaks down the love of the world into three categories.

First, he mentions the desires of the flesh. The cravings of sinful man. These are the desires that come from our inherited sinful nature, desires which are shaped by the world and the

spirit of the age, rather than by the Spirit of God living within us. These types of desires are seen when we seek first the things of the world rather than seeking first the kingdom of God. Immorality, success at any cost, obtaining material things ahead of the spiritual, these are all examples of what John is describing here.

Secondly, he mentions the desire of the eyes. The desire which comes from things we might see. Greed, materialism, envy, are strong desires which come from wanting what we see. The different screens that have taken over our lives (tv, computer, cell phone) are filled with these type of enticements. They appeal to our carnal nature rather than to the new nature we have in Christ. King David comes to mind here. The Bible says in 2 Sam. 11:2, that after seeing Bathsheba, "he saw that she was beautiful," and wanting her he sent for her. You can read the rest of the story in 2 Sam. 11 if you want to know how that story in ends. Or how about Eve back in the garden. The Bible says she "saw the forbidden fruit and desiring it she ate and gave to her husband and he also ate." In all of our lives the enemy tries to tempt us with that which we see. That's why we must be careful what we set before our eyes. As the children's song goes, "O be careful little eyes what you see."

Thirdly, he mentions the pride of life. Or the pride of one's lifestyle, boasting about what one has done for themselves, about what they have made for themselves. This is the sin of self-sufficiency, self-reliance and pride. The root cause here behind this boastful pride are material possessions which causes one to fall into this sin. It is evidenced in a boastful self confidence that causes one to forget that all they have comes from God and belongs to God. The most dangerous place to be is in the place where we are living such comfortable lives that we deceive ourselves into thinking that we don't need God.

John finishes up this section in vs. 17 by pointing out the foolishness of worldliness and its desires that he has just spoken about. His argument is that this world, with all of it's desires and enticements is passing away. Again David Guzik, "It is not a prayer, not a wish, and not a spiritual sounding desire. It is a fact. The world is passing away, and we must live our lives and think our thoughts aware of this fact." However, in contrast to the world passing away, the one who does the will of God abides forever. His point is clear, why waste your life away pursuing all of these worldly pleasures that only lead to death when we can pursue the things of God, obey his Word, and live forever when Jesus returns to establish His Kingdom?

There always have been and always will be those within the church whose loyalties are divided, whose hearts are not sold out for God. It was true in John's day and it is certainly true now. The one who walks in the light, the one who is growing in their spiritual maturity, the one who walks in the light and has fellowship with God and His people is not influenced by the love of the world. Rather, they are controlled by the love of God. Rather than being consumed with the temporal things of this world, they seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness. After all, as Jesus asks in Matthew 16:26, "What will it benefit a man if he gains the whole world and yet loses his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his life?"

And so today, we have the commandment of God to love. It was established in the days of old and made new for us by the demonstration of God's love to us through His son Jesus. The questions is, "Where is your love this morning?" "Do you love the world with all of its pleasures or do you love the Lord above everything else?" "Do you love others sacrificially and put their needs above your own?" The truth is that your life is already answering that question for you. Remember, what and who you are determines what you do. Loving God and loving others is the mark of the true believer. It doesn't come easy. And it requires faith, faith in exile.