

An Old Commandment That's New
1 John 2:7–11
April 2, 2017
South Woods' 30th Anniversary Celebration

I should have known that I was in for a rough ride. I was young, inexperienced, and yet eager to serve a congregation just twenty minutes from my hometown. I found the search committee, for the most part, to be warm-hearted and interested in my emphasis on expositional preaching and a discipling ministry, that is, until they later discovered what that meant. But the tip that should have clued me in was the chairman's repeated emphasis, "We just loooovve each other!" (Yes, he stretched it out!) I heard it from a few others too. It sounded convincing. No doubt, some among them did love one another. It's just that after I began my ministry, they were hard to find. Their idea of love just didn't square with that of Jesus washing the disciples' feet and laying down His life at the cross.

You've probably heard the same kind of talk that didn't filter down into true deeds of love. Maybe it has even be descriptive of you at some stage before the gospel of Christ grabbed you and by a supernatural act of regeneration, transformed you so that you started seeing people differently and finding your heart inclined to love even some who appeared hard to love.

That kind of love has the unmistakable imprint of Jesus Christ upon a life. So important is this evidence of love in true believers, so characteristic of one in union with Jesus Christ, that John keeps repeating it throughout his epistle as a mark of assurance that you belong to Christ (3:10–20; 4:7–12; 4:15–21; 5:1–2). Without this mark of loving one another in the body, we have no ground of assurance that we're in Christ.

As Pastor Matt noted in last week's text (1 John 2:3–6), we *can* have assurance that we're in Christ—not some vague, mystical experience as some thought, but the reality of the saving life of Christ evidencing Himself in our deeds. John presses that truth throughout his letter. So, we know that we've come to know Christ "if we keep His commandments" (2:3).

Yet by keeping His commandments, John doesn't imply a kind of rigid legalism by which one follows his perception of the letter of the law while divorced from the spirit of it. Remember when Jesus was asked what was the greatest commandment? His reply hung all of the commandments of God on two prongs: love God and love your neighbor. So the connection to verses 3–6 in our text proves to be explanatory by amplifying what it means to follow Christ's commands. The focus on the commands of God centers life on loving God and loving others even as Jesus Christ did.

Here is the certainty that we're in Christ: *believing the gospel is evidenced by Christ-like love*. Believing the gospel comes first. In no way does John suggest that if you can work up a good measure of love toward others that God *will* save you. Rather, love for others flows quite naturally out of the new birth. How is that worked out in our text? Let's consider it under three questions:

What is this old but new commandment?

How do we have the motivation and the power to keep this old/new commandment?

How does keeping this commandment mark genuine Christianity?

1. What is this old but new commandment?

With great tenderness and certainty of his care for them, John writes, “**Beloved, I am not writing a new commandment to you.**” By that he meant that he was not switching things in mid-stream by creating new practices for people to do if they would be Christians. He was not like those who lured people from the fellowship of the church to follow after the strange teaching that denied the humanity of Christ and excused sin by emphasis on spirit while ignoring the physical. No, this is no new commandment “**but an old commandment which you have had from the beginning.**” The *beginning* of what? He probably means either the beginning of the gospel proclamation by Jesus Christ or the start of their Christian lives—more likely the latter (1 John 3:11). In either case, he’s reiterating that he’s simply reminding them of what has always been true of those who know Christ—they follow this “**old commandment.**”

But he narrows what he means by adding, “**the old commandment is the word which you have heard.**” John has already written about “what we have heard . . . concerning the Word of Life,” by which he meant what they heard from Christ concerning Himself (1:1). Now, what had these believers heard? They heard the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ. As Paul had written to likely the same church(es) in the previous generation, “In Him, you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation, having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise” (Eph 1:13). So the word they’d heard from the beginning was *the gospel*. They believed this gospel of Christ and the Spirit secured them in Christ. They belonged to Jesus, so what would characterize them as His people?

The gospel that they heard and believed, and the gospel that we’ve heard and believed is not about merely accepting a few facts, praying a prayer, and smugly going about our lives as though we’ve *done that*. The gospel changes us, not just morally—as indicated in verses 3–6—but also socially—so that we love one another [John Stott, *TNTC: The Epistles of John*, 92]. If the gospel that you’ve believed has not affected your relationships then you’ve not believed the gospel of Christ.

Jesus taught and commanded: “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, *even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples*, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34–35). “Just as the Father has loved Me I have also loved you; *abide in My love*. If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love; just as I have kept My Father’s commandments and abide in His love. . . . *This is My commandment*, that you love one another, just as I loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends. . . . *This I command you*, that you love one another” (John 15:9–10, 12–13, 17).

The Christ proclaimed in the gospel commands that we love one another. He does not allow for a separate category of followers who don’t love one another. Such love marks us as His disciples and gives evidence that we’re abiding in Him. Pastor Matt clarified last week, John is “not calling out the atheist” and giving him a list of things to do to make him a Christian. Rather he’s affirming Christians by the way that the gospel has impacted them morally and socially. But this becomes clearer in the next consideration.

2. How do we have the motivation and power to keep this old/new commandment?

Here's where assurance comes into focus. Far too many think that our performance gains favor or merit with God so that He accepts us on that basis. So they follow a few rules, keep some of the commandments, do a few good deeds, and then hope for the best. John is not commanding obedience to gain acceptance with Christ. Instead, he's affirming that our acceptance with God through the death and resurrection of Christ will be evident by the way that we love one another.

He further emphasizes that we can only follow this command of Christ if we're united to Him. And so he writes, **"On the other hand, I am writing a new commandment to you, which is true in Him and in you, because the darkness is passing away and the true Light is already shining."** Two distinct realities give true believers motivation and power to love one another: union with Christ and anticipation of glory.

Union with Christ

When he calls it **"a new commandment,"** John borrows the language of Jesus from John's Gospel (John 13:34). It's not that the Mosaic Law gave no thought for loving one another. The entire Decalogue reiterates love, which is what Jesus clarified in the Sermon on the Mount. One cannot simply refrain from murder and think that he's kept the 6th commandment without loving his neighbor. Nor can he refrain from having an affair while neglecting to love and cherish his wife, and think that he's kept the 7th commandment.

Rather the commandment's *newness* is centered in relationship to Christ. This new commandment **"is true [genuine, real] in Him and in you."** Since the true believer is united to Him, since Jesus' life is now being lived in and through the believer (Gal 2:20), then the desire and power to do this commandment is *real* in the Christian. He cannot reject loving others *if* he's united to Christ who loved us even on the cross. John captures the effectiveness of this union with Christ's life in 1 John 4:9. "By this the love of God was manifested in us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him." So it is His love *in us* and love *through us* living each day loving one another.

Luke describes Saul of Tarsus as "ravaging the church, entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison" (Acts 8:3). Even after much hatred toward the church, Luke adds, "Now Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest, and asked for letters from him to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, both men and women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem" (Acts 9:1–2). He knew a lot about following the letter of the Law outwardly, but he knew nothing of love until the Holy Spirit brought him into union with Christ. Then he could say of these disciples, "I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, . . . I long for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus" (Phil 1:5, 9). Union with Jesus gives new motivation and power to love one another even as Christ has loved us.

Anticipates glory

Why is loving one another so central to the practice of those united to Christ? John writes, **"because the darkness is passing away and the true Light is already shining."** What does he mean by that analogy? Perfect love exists in the presence of God forever.

“God is love” (1 John 4:8) implies that the character and the entire atmosphere around the living God is that of love. “God is love; Christ is God;” wrote John Bunyan, “therefore Christ is love, *love naturally*. Love therefore is essential to His being. He may as well cease to *be*, as cease to *love*” [*Works*, II:16]. Such love was naturally the atmosphere of the world until the entry of darkness—or sin. Hatred spewed where love had reigned. But the work of Christ destroys the works of the devil (1 John 3:8). He who is love died on the cross to break the power of darkness so that love might forever reign in His kingdom. Love reigns in those created in the image of God *only through the cross of Christ*. So love is not something we try to achieve by promoting it but that which we receive through relationship to Christ.

Meanwhile, we live in-between seeing the full manifestation and reign of God’s love in glory, and the present wrestling with sin, selfishness, pride, and other enemies of His love. We’re in the *now/not yet* that anticipates future glory. “***The true Light is already shining,***” so we’re starting to see glimpses of eternal love working through the lives of those redeemed by Christ. We don’t see it fully. It gets interrupted by our weaknesses and falls prey to wrong attitudes and focusing on self instead of serving others. Thank God we have an Advocate for such times (2:1). But the true Light is already shining. His love is breaking through the clouds that have covered humanity since the fall, showing us glimmers of what that eternal love looks like, as through Christ, we love one another. As love is the atmosphere in God’s presence, so love for one another is to mark us as His people. If it doesn’t we don’t belong to Him. Is there that clear of a line drawn between those in Christ and those outside Him? That is answered by our third question.

3. How does this old but new commandment to love one another mark genuine Christianity?

Those who had abandoned the fellowship of the church to follow after the teaching that had overtaken Ephesus still claimed to belong to Christ. They made plenty of professions: “. . . we have fellowship with Him. . . we have no sin. . . we have not sinned. . . I have come to know Him. . . [we] abide in Him. . . [we are] in the Light. . . I love God.” One can claim all day to belong to Christ but if the love of God has not taken root in his life so that he loves others in the body, then he has no leg to stand on. His claims ring hollow.

The epitome of keeping God’s commandments is found precisely in loving one another. The one who keeps His commandments, John writes, “in him the love of God has truly been perfected.” Pastor Matt reminded us that the passive voice of this verb indicates that God is acting on those in Christ to perfect or mature or bring to fruition the love of God. He so works His love in us that we cannot help but love when we’ve received the gift of love through Christ.

That’s why John explains that a *distinct contrast* exists between those in Christ and those who merely claim to know Him. “**The one who says he is in the Light and yet hates his brother is in the darkness until now.**” No amount of talk can suffice for the selfless, servant-hearted love toward a brother or sister. Lots of people profess to be “**in the Light.**” But John explains that the Light shining is evident by love, not mere claims.

Yet such a person making claims to knowing Christ without truly knowing Him, as demonstrated in loving one another, is blind to his condition. “**But the one who hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness, and does not know where he is**

going because the darkness has blinded his eyes.” The apostle doesn’t give middle ground between love and hate. We either love because Christ’s love fills us, and spills over into relationships around us—that’s genuine Christianity, or we hate—which he considers the natural state of life without Christ. Paul agrees: “For we also once were . . . hateful, hating one another” (Titus 3:3). *In John’s theology, the absence of love is hatred rather than social neutrality.* It might be manifested in horrible, destructive words and acts toward others. Or it might just be ignoring and neglecting those we should love. To persist in that condition means *being* in the darkness, *living* in the darkness, and *continually groping* in the darkness due to spiritual blindness. One cannot see his hatred and its self-centeredness until he or she sees Christ crucified for them. Then the eyes are opened to dimensions of love never before considered or seen.

But the contrast is found in the one in union with Christ. **“The one who loves his brother abides in the Light and there is no cause for stumbling in him.”** It’s not, loving his brother that *causes* him to abide in the Light. Rather, the evidence of abiding in the Light—that is, abiding in Christ (John 15:5)—is loving one another. John’s use of **“abides”** communicates relationship. The word means to remain or to stay. The branch abides in the Vine, so it exists in a dependent relationship upon all that the Vine supplies. So the life of the Vine flows into and through the branch.

When we abide in Christ or live in dependent relationship to Him, then His love flows into us and through us toward others. That bears evidence that we belong to Him.

Consequently, when we live in dependence upon Christ and because of that relationship, love one another, **“there is no cause for stumbling in him.”** That’s John’s way of saying, ‘*Everything else in our lives is affected by this vital, lively relationship to Christ.*’ No one looks at that follower of Christ and trips up spiritually. Instead, he’s struck by how Christ shows Himself through that believer with multiple encouragements to live in dependence upon Christ.

Conclusion

Now, what does all of this have to do with our church’s 30th anniversary celebration?

- The Lord has brought us this far by believing the gospel of Christ. We stand upon Christ alone. We are a church only because of the faithful work of Christ.
- The evidence of the gospel rooted in us will be the way that we love one another. Christ is not marked among us by our building or organization but by our love.
- As we nurture our union with Christ and as we live in hope of future glory in Christ, we will never run out of motivation or power to love one another.
- The best evidence that abiding with Jesus Christ affects everything about us will be found in the way that we love one another.
- So for the next 30 years and beyond, let us believe the gospel, abide in Christ, anticipate future glory in His presence, and love one another. That’s the foundation upon which we build and grow to the glory of God.