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THE OLD, NEW COMMANDMENT

1 John 2:7-11

By

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1 John Lesson 7

The Old New Commandment 1 John 2:7-11

I think that we all chuckle at the Peanuts cartoon strip because so often we see the truth about ourselves there. That is especially so when Linus protests, "I love mankind; it's *people* I can't stand!" Love in the abstract is a cinch. It's loving those irritating people that I rub shoulders with that is not easy.

In 1 John 2:3-6, the apostle gives a test by which you can know that you truly know Jesus Christ, namely, if you walk in obedience to His word. In 2:6, he states, "The one who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked." Then, in 2:7-11, John goes on to apply this test of obedience more specifically to the area of love. If Jesus' life and especially His death epitomized love, then those who claim to follow Him are obligated to live in love.

In the Upper Room, on the night He was betrayed, Jesus demonstrated His great love for the disciples by taking a towel and a basin of water and washing the disciples' feet. After that unforgettable object lesson, He drove the point home (John 13:14-15), "If I then, the Lord and the Teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I gave you an example that you also should do as I did to you." He was not instituting a ceremonial foot-washing service, where everyone comes with clean feet to be washed! He was saying something much more difficult to practice, that we who follow Jesus must set aside our rights and serve one another out of love.

In that same chapter (John 13:34-35), Jesus said, "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."

Obviously, those words of Jesus were behind John's words about the old, new commandment. It may be that the heretics against whom John was writing claimed to have some "new" truths. Using an obvious play on words, John counters them by

saying that we don't need new truth, but rather the old truth that his readers learned early in their Christian experience. On the other hand, if you want "new" truth, John says that the old commandment is the new commandment, which Jesus gave to us. In short,

Loving one another is an essential mark of a true Christian.

Having said that, I must quickly add that that we *must* define "love" biblically, not culturally. Culturally, if you mention the word "love," people think of "niceness." They picture a loving person as always being nice and sweet towards everyone. He never confronts sin or error. He never gets angry about evil or says anything that might upset someone.

But if you are at all familiar with the four gospels, you will immediately see that by this cultural definition, Jesus was not a loving man! Jesus *loved* the Jewish religious leaders when He said to them, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites" (Matt. 23:15). He *loved* Peter when He said to him, "Get behind Me, Satan" (Matt. 16:23). He *loved* the multitude when He said to them, "You unbelieving and perverted generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I put up with you?" (Matt. 17:17). The apostle Paul was filled with the Holy Spirit, whose first fruit is love, when he said to Elymas, "You who are full of all deceit and fraud, you son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, will you not cease to make crooked the straight ways of the Lord?" Then, he struck him blind (see Acts 13:9-11).

I'm not saying that we should go around blasting people, while claiming that we're loving them! I'm only pointing out that our definition of love, in a practical sense, must encompass all that the Bible says about love, not what our worldly culture says. John makes two points in our text:

1. To love one another is to obey our Lord's commandment (2:7-8).

In these two verses, John makes four points:

A. Jesus' command to love one another is both old and new.

John never specifically identifies the old, new commandment in these verses, and he only mentions love once in this entire sec-

tion (2:10). But his reference to the new commandment makes it obvious that he is referring to Jesus' command to love one another.

This commandment was old in two senses. First, it was old in that Moses taught it in the Law, "... you shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev. 19:18). Jesus identified this as the second greatest commandment, after the command to love God with all your being (Matt. 22:37-40). So in that sense, this command had been with God's people for 1,400 years.

But the main sense in which this was an old commandment is that these believers had heard it from the very earliest days of their Christian experience (2:7): "... which you have had from the beginning; the old commandment is the word which you have heard." John uses the phrase, "from the beginning," in the same way in 1 John 3:11, "For this is the message which you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another" (also, 2 John 5).

But, John says (2:8), the commandment is also new, in that Jesus had issued it as the new commandment (John 13:34). John Stott (*The Epistles of John* [Eerdmans], p. 93) suggests four ways that this old commandment became new when Jesus issued it. First, it was new in its *emphasis*, in that Jesus brought it together with the command to love God as the summation of the entire Law. Second, it was new in its *quality*, in that His own self-sacrifice on the cross became the standard. Third, it was new in its *extent*, in that in the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus extended the definition of neighbor to go beyond race or religion. Anyone in need who crosses our path is our neighbor. He said that we should love even our enemies. Finally, it was new in the disciples' *continuing apprehension* of it. The love of Jesus on the cross is inexhaustible. We can never plumb its depths. And so as we grow in our understanding of His great love, we will grow in our apprehension of how we must love one another. So Jesus' command is both old and new.

- B. From the beginning of your Christian walk, you should learn how to establish and maintain loving relationships.

John tells his readers that they have had this commandment "from the beginning," and then identifies it as "the word which you have heard" (2:7). It was part and parcel with the gospel that they had believed at the outset of their Christian experience. When

we hear and respond to the good news that Jesus Christ died for sinners, at that point the love of God is “poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us” (Rom. 5:5). The first fruit of the Spirit is love (Gal. 5:22). As I mentioned, the entire Bible may be summed up by the two great commandments, to love God and to love one another. So learning how to establish and maintain loving relationships is not “graduate level” Christianity. It is basic, beginning Christianity.

Many of you came into the faith from backgrounds where you did not experience love. Your parents abused you verbally or physically. Maybe you were in a series of abusive relationships with the opposite sex. You’ve had no models of how to love other people. It is urgent, once you trust in Christ as your Savior, to learn from God’s Word and from more mature believers how to love others in a practical, daily manner. You will need to unlearn many bad ways of relating to others that you brought with you from the past. You will need to relearn how to think and speak and act in loving ways, especially toward those who wrong you. If you do not learn to love others, you will fester with anger and bitterness, and your relationship with Christ will suffer.

It all begins with *how you think* about others. Instead of thinking first about yourself, your feelings, your rights, and your needs, you must learn to think first about others. How can I show this difficult person the love of Jesus Christ? How can I serve this person in love? Rather than thinking angry thoughts about how he wronged you and how you’ll get even, you begin to think about how Jesus wants you to think about the one who mistreated you. You begin to pray for this person, that he would come to know Jesus. You look for opportunities to return good instead of evil. I recommend that you write out Paul’s description of love (1 Cor. 13:4-7) on a card and read it over several times each morning, until you have in your mind how a loving person acts. Do the same with 1 Peter 3:8-12.

Then, love extends to *your speech*. You put off abusive speech that tears down the other person, and you put on speech that builds him up (Gal. 5:15; Eph. 4:29, 31-32; Col. 3:8). You stop lying or stretching the truth to your own advantage and begin speaking

the truth in love (Eph. 4:15, 25). You cease from gossip and slander (2 Cor. 12:20).

Then, in *your behavior* you begin to practice loving deeds (Rom. 12:9-13; Eph. 5:2). You look for opportunities to serve others, beginning in your home. You become "zealous for good deeds" (Titus 2:14). Again, this is not advanced, graduate level Christianity. This is freshman Christianity 101. But, maybe you're thinking, "I don't have the strength to do what you're saying." Then,

C. Your new relationship with Jesus Christ is central to practicing biblical love towards others.

John says that this old, new commandment "is true in Him and in you" (2:8). It is *true in Him* because the Lord Jesus is the greatest example of love in the history of the world. He left the splendor and perfect holiness of heaven, where He enjoyed unbroken fellowship with the Father. He came to this cruddy, sin-stained world, not as the conquering King, but as a lowly servant. He was obedient to death on the cross at the hands of sinful men that He could have obliterated, if He had given the command. He did it all to save sinners who deserved His wrath. This new commandment is supremely true in Him.

But John also says that it is *true in you*. If you ask, "How so?" the answer is, "Because you are now in Him." It is true in Him fundamentally and true in you derivatively because of your new relationship with Him. Paul often describes our new relationship as being "in Christ." John uses the term, "abiding" in Him. The glorious truth of the New Testament is that we are joint-heirs with Christ of all His riches (Rom. 8:17; Eph. 1:19-20; 2:6)! So if you are lacking in love for a difficult person, pray, "Lord, You know that I am empty and unable to love this person. But, I am in You and You do not lack love, even for the unlovely. Please love this person through me!" Understanding your new relationship with Jesus Christ is central to practicing biblical love.

D. Growing in love for others is a lifelong process.

John adds (2:8), "... because the darkness is passing away and the true Light is already shining." Primarily, John is referring to the dawning of the gospel through Jesus Christ (see Luke 1:78-79; John 1:9). His coming inaugurated a new era.

But in a secondary sense, what John says here applies to every person who has trusted in Christ. Paul put it (2 Cor. 4:6), "For God, who said, 'Light shall shine out of darkness,' is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ." (See also, Col. 1:12, 13.) Or, as Peter put it (1 Pet. 2:9), God saved us "so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light." So becoming a Christian is a radical change from darkness to light, where God opens your blind eyes to see something of the glory of Jesus Christ.

Yet at the same time, there is a process involved that takes time. The darkness does not dissipate instantly, but rather it is gradually dispelled as the true Light of Jesus Christ and God's word shines more and more into your heart. When it comes to the practicalities of learning to live in love, it is a lifelong process. You never arrive at the place where you can say, "I love everyone perfectly now! Let's move on!" Paul put it this way (1 Thess. 4:9-10), "Now as to the love of the brethren, you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another; for indeed you do practice it toward all the brethren who are in all Macedonia. But we urge you, brethren, to excel still more, ..." Or, as he prayed for the Philippians, "that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment" (Phil. 1:9).

So, don't be like the husband who grudgingly accompanied his wife to the marriage counselor. She complained to the counselor that he never told her that he loved her. The counselor asked, "Is this true?" The man gruffly responded, "I told her that 25 years ago when we got married, and it hasn't changed!" You've got to work at growing in love on a daily basis for the rest of your life. To love one another is to obey our Lord's commandment.

2. Love is inseparable from the light, just as hatred is inseparable from the darkness (2:9-11).

The phrase, "The one who says," tips us off that John again has the heretics in mind. They claimed to be enlightened, and yet, apparently, they were arrogant and self-centered. They did not love others in a sacrificial way. They were using people to build a following for themselves, rather than building people to follow Christ.

So John gets out his black and white paint again, and without mixing them into shades of gray, he shows that these false teachers were not true believers. They do not love; they hate. They are not in the light; they are in the darkness until now (2:9).

But we should not only use John's words to identify false teachers. We should also apply them honestly to our own lives. Sadly, there are many that profess to know Christ, but in their marriages and towards their children they do not practice biblical love. Many evangelical churches are torn apart by conflict because certain powerful members did not get their own way. Rather than acting in love, they viciously attack those who don't agree with them. So John shows that love is inseparable from the light, just as hatred invariably is bound up with darkness. He does not allow for any middle ground, where you can be sort of loving, but sort of cantankerous, too! He makes three points:

- A. Your profession of being in the light is exposed as false if you hate your brother (2:9).

You may be thinking, "Hate is a pretty strong word! While I may not *love* that difficult person, I wouldn't say that I *hate* him." But John doesn't let us go there! You either love the other person, which requires sacrificing yourself for that person's highest good, as Jesus did for us on the cross (John 13:34)—or, you hate him.

Writing to a Gentile church situation, Paul contrasts the new way in Christ with the old life before he met Christ (Titus 3:1-3):

Remind them to be subject to rulers, to authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good deed, to malign no one, to be peaceable, gentle, showing every consideration for all men. For we also once were foolish ourselves, disobedient, deceived, enslaved to various lusts and pleasures, spending our life in malice and envy, hateful, hating one another.

He goes on to talk of how God's kindness and love transformed us through salvation. The point is, no matter how pagan or unloving your background, if you continue in a lifestyle of hate rather than a lifestyle of love, your profession of faith is suspect.

- B. If you love your brother, you abide in the light and have no cause for stumbling in you (2:10).

Whether “light” should be capitalized (NASB) to represent Christ or whether it refers to the truth of God’s Word, I don’t know. It doesn’t matter in that if you abide in Jesus Christ, you also abide in His Word, which sheds His light into your heart. To abide in the light means to live with your life exposed and open to God’s Word. You allow the Word to shine into the dark recesses of your mind, exposing and rooting out what is evil. John says that loving your brother is inseparable from abiding in the light.

If you love your brother and abide in the light, “there is no cause for stumbling” in you. This may mean that you do not cause others to stumble in their walk with God because, out of love for them, you only say and do that which builds them in Christ. Or, it may mean that the person who walks in the light will not stumble himself, because the light illumines his path (John 11:9-10).

In both senses, walking in love preserves you from sin. Failure to love often leads you into other sins. For example, lust and sexual immorality are serious sins, but both are rooted in a lack of love for others. To lust after a woman is to desire to use her to gratify your desires. It is a failure of love. Or, take the sins of greed, stealing, and murder. They all stem from a failure to love others. Invariably, those who commit these sins love themselves quite well! None of us need to work on loving ourselves, as the “Christian” psychologists repeatedly emphasize. The task is, to love others as we all in fact *do* love ourselves!

- C. If you hate your brother, you are still in the darkness, you walk in the darkness, and you don’t know where you’re going because you’re spiritually blind (2:11).

I’m not making up these points. I’m merely summarizing each of these verses. The plain meaning of verse 11 is that if you live for yourself with no regard for others, no self-sacrifice or willingness to be inconvenienced to meet others’ needs, then you are not saved. John is not talking about occasional lapses into selfishness. We all fail in that at times. Rather, he’s talking about a lifestyle (“walks”). The person who lives for himself and is indifferent towards others (which is what hatred means) “does not know where he is going because the darkness has blinded his eyes” (2:11). He is spiritually blind, groping through life without the light of God’s Word to guide him in God’s ways.

I have often counseled with people who profess to know Christ, but their relationships are marked by anger, abusive speech, bitterness, and self-centeredness. Invariably, they don't have a clue as to why they keep experiencing broken relationships. While I do not know their hearts (only God does), their lives do not give evidence that they have experienced the love of God in Jesus Christ. Rather, they seem to be in spiritual darkness, blindly colliding from one broken relationship to the next. They do not practice biblical love, which is an essential mark of every true Christian.

Conclusion

Again, none of us loves perfectly. When we fail, we need to repent and ask forgiveness of the one we wronged. It is a lifelong process of being conformed to the image of Jesus Christ. But those who have met Him at the cross will be growing in love for others.

Also, note that love for others is a commandment, not a warm, gushy feeling. That should give you hope, because God's commandments are not burdensome (1 John 5:3) and God's Spirit gives us the grace and power to obey His commands, which are for our good. *Biblical love is a self-sacrificing, caring commitment that shows itself in seeking the highest good of the one loved.* You can obey the commandment to love others!

So if you're thinking, "But I don't love my mate any more," or, "I just don't like that difficult person," the Bible is clear: Get to work obeying God's commandment to love him or her. It's not optional for the follower of Christ. It's essential!

Application Questions

1. How can a person who grew up in an abusive home learn to love others?
2. What is the relationship between *loving* someone and *liking* him? Are we obligated to like others?
3. Why is the modern psychological advice, "Learn to love yourself," completely misguided? What about someone with "low self-esteem" or someone who is "co-dependent"?
4. How would you advise a couple who claimed that they no longer loved each other? Where do they begin?

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