

1 John 2:7-17
(Lamentations 3:19-26; John 3:16-21)
“An Old Commandment, Ever New”

Introduction

John wrote this little letter so that those who have placed their faith and hope in Jesus might know that they have received the gift of eternal life (see 5:13). The problem he is addressing is a problem he recounted in the second chapter of his gospel:

Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. But Jesus did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people, and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man (John 2:23-24).

So it is possible to believe in Jesus at a certain level without yet having saving faith. It does no good to ask such people whether they have prayed a certain prayer or whether they believe certain things to be true about Jesus. John wanted Christians to know whether or not they had grounds for being sure that they were God’s beloved children. And we should desire that same assurance based upon the clear teaching of Scripture.

John offers three tests by which we may know that we have eternal life. The first he has already introduced, the behavioral or ethical test: Are we increasingly learning to keep God’s commandments, to walk in the light, to live increasingly as Jesus lived, in glad obedience to the will of his heavenly Father? Every question John encouraged his readers to ask of themselves – Do I know God? Do I love him? Am I abiding in him? – was to be answered in terms of obedience to God’s Word. This makes complete sense, because the biblical view of salvation sees it as a new life, all-encompassing, transforming a person from the inside out.

Now John introduces the second test, the second area that we must examine to see whether or not Christ is in us (see 2 Corinthians 13:5). This is the relational test, and reminds us that life in Christ is not a matter of externals. It is not merely learning to behave. It is rather a new heart, new affections, new desires, that should increasingly express themselves in transformed behavior. So far from being legalistic, John is calling us to transformation so deep and essential that only the Spirit of God can accomplish it within us.

The essence of the change is from self-obsessed to self-sacrificial, from those who love themselves and are willing to sacrifice others to get what they want, into people who love others and are willing to sacrifice themselves to serve others. But does that mean that life is no longer to be embraced, that it is wrong to love the beauty of

the world and its pleasures? Is this a call to monastic asceticism? No! Far from it, as I hope to show. How are we to love the world, and how are we *not* to love the world?

Body

1. The relational test (2:7-8).

An old commandment

The command to love one another is at the heart of both the law and the gospel. In fact, Jesus said that the entire law and prophets hang on these two aspects of the law: loving God and loving one another. So too, in one sense, there is nothing new about the law of love, it is the oldest commandment of all, the one from which all others arise.

A new commandment

And yet, it is new in at least two senses: Jesus made it a new commandment by changing the *standard* of our love for one another from self love to his love for us. “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34). Jesus knew that we may not love ourselves well or wisely, and that a better standard of our love for one another is his love for us.

Another sense in which the old commandment becomes new is that the call to love one another must be worked out afresh every day in every relationship. We are not only called to love the Lord and to love one another, but to love our enemies and those who would seek to use us and cast us aside. This must be re-appropriated, re-learned and re-lived every day.

2. Applying the relational test (2:9-11).

John then applies it very simply to our relationships with one another:

If we love, we are in the light

Just as John has already written that obeying God is a sign that we are walking in the light, so he now says that if we love one another, we are living in the light. This is not merely a matter of feeling and affection. It is a determination to hope and act for the good of others, even those who may not act in our best interest. It is an eminently practical command. Are you merely for yourself, or are you for others, even when it may seem to make no sense?

But if we hate, we are still in the darkness

Conversely, if we allow ourselves to hate, to wish bad things rather than blessings for others, to refuse to act for the good or even to act for the harm of someone else, then it is a sign that we are living in darkness, just as John has already written that if we refuse to obey the Lord we are walking in darkness.

3. A word of encouragement (2:12-14).

Now John writes a word of encouragement to his readers, to those who are new believers (whom he calls “little children”) and mature believers (whom he calls “fathers”) and young but growing-in-grace believers (whom he calls “young men”). His aim is to encourage them at each stage of growth in Christ.

To new believers:

Rest assured in these two things: your sins are forgiven and you know God as your Father. There is much that you do not yet know, but as you examine yourself for growth in the three tests of life that John gives in this letter, know how precious you are to the Lord, and that if you are in Christ, your sins are forgiven and you can call God, *Abba*.

To mature believers:

You have walked with the Lord through good times and bad. At times you have wondered at what seemed his absence, and have also known times of intimacy. Long ago you learned to rest in the assurance of sins forgiven and have called God *Abba* for many years. Now enjoy sweet intimacy with the eternal God, the Creator of all that is, your Sustainer, Redeemer and Friend.

To young believers in the midst of life:

You are strong in God’s Word and are overcoming the evil one. Keep on. Never forget that it is the Spirit and Word at work within that will enable you to grow in grace toward the maturity in Christ for which you were created and redeemed. Soon you will be able to rest in intimacy with the eternal God who has loved you in Christ from before time and will love you for all eternity.

4. A word of warning (2:15-17).

John ends this section with a warning that there will always be temptation to turn away and love people and things in a way that is not life-giving, but destructive. God so loved the world that he *gave* his only Son to redeem it

(see John 3:16), but it is always tempting to love the world in way that leads us not to give but to take, to take for our own pleasure and pride.

Do not love the world selfishly:

John warns us against the kind of love that he describes as “the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and the pride of life,” in other words, loving the things in it that appeal to lust and pride, the things we want to take regardless of the consequences, regardless of whom we hurt, of what we destroy, if only we can have what we want. I am among those who see here a description of the fall of humanity described in Genesis 3. But the point is clear: We are not to love the world in a way that sees our ultimate meaning and happiness in the pleasures of this life. Two reasons are given for why we must not love the world in this way

These things are not of the Father

First, this is not how the Father loves the world. He loves the world self-sacrificially. He loves the world in such a way that offers wonderful consequences, even to those who have offended him and resisted relationship with him. If the Father loves the world as a good mother loves her child, then how can we honor him and walk in the light if we love the world in a way that destroys what is good and lovely, just and true?

These things are passing away

The second reason John gives for not loving the world wrongly is this: “And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.” What may seem so essential now, so necessary to our happiness and fulfillment, will soon turn to dust. If we locate the source of our meaning here, we will always be disappointed, because this world and its pleasures and promises are passing away.

Conclusion

The world passes away, in the blinding flash of a car wreck or a heart attack, or the slow grinding of old age and disease. But it passes away. Only love is left. What do you love? Whom do you love? What do you trust? The old commandment is ever new: Love one another as Christ has loved you.

Jesus said, “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34).

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