

1 John 2:18-27
(Psalm 86:11-16; John 4:21-26)
“Abiding Truth”

Introduction

John wrote this little letter so that those who have believed in Jesus might know that they have eternal life (5:13). The letter develops and explains how to apply three tests to our life in Christ, just as we take our blood pressure, pulse and respirations to be sure that our bodies are functioning properly. John has already introduced the first two tests, the ethical and relational, how we live and how we love. Now he introduces the third test, which is the doctrinal test: the question of how we think, and what we believe. He also deals here with the context in which we know the truth and are set free through that knowledge.

Note throughout this study the beautiful balance John keeps between these things. He tells us we are not to sin, yet acknowledges that we do sin and will sin. He assures us that when we sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus the righteous one, who has offered himself in our place as a sacrifice of atonement for our sin. Yet, we are not to presume upon God’s grace and continue to go our own way. If we know the love of Christ, then that love will begin to change us from the inside out. It will express itself in self-sacrificial love for God and for one another.

Now he turns to the foundational transformation in how we think, in what we believe to be true, and therefore in how we view God and one another, as well as the world around us, a transformation that marks those who are in Christ, and who thus have reason for assurance that their sins are forgiven, that they have peace with God and hope of eternal life.

Body

1. Knowing the times (2:18).

John opens this section with the words, “Children, it is the last hour” (2:18). How can he speak in this way, and how can we, some two thousand years later, take such a statement seriously? John explains why he believes it to be the last hour: “as you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come. Therefore we know that it is the last hour” (2:18).

In order to understand these words, we must remember two things: first, John has just written these words, “The world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever” (2:17). So the context of this verse is a contrast between this present age that is doomed to pass away, and the age to come when Christ makes all things new, an age

described in the Scripture as eternity. From God's perspective, in which the Bible says a day is as a thousand years and a thousand years as a day, this time of rebellion against the Lord and against his Son is but a brief, passing moment.

And, secondly, the New Testament uniformly sees the last days as having already begun with Jesus' resurrection victory, and the age to come as having already begun in the outpouring of his Spirit on his people at Pentecost. So the intensity of John's claim that the world's last hour has already begun comes from the presence of what John calls "many antichrists." There is, in popular literature, much speculation about whom the antichrist is, and many candidates have been proposed throughout history. But the only New Testament writer to use the word antichrist is John, and he makes it clear in these verses that anyone who denies that Jesus is the Christ or that Jesus is God's Son, that person is antichrist. The presence and increasing numbers of such deniers, John sees as an indication that the present age is doomed and soon to pass away.

2. Experiencing the times in fellowship with one another (2:19-20).

This, of course, makes no sense to people whose whole frame of reference is this present age, whose dreams and hopes and desires are shaped by things that are passing away. So John reminds us that the only context for understanding the times is within the fellowship of God's people. This is very important to hear in these days when churches in the Europe and the United States (as opposed to Asia, Latin America and Africa), are emptying and even professing Christians often see no reason for committing to a local fellowship of believers.

Those who think that it doesn't matter whether one is engaged with a local church should read John's words: "They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us" (2:19). One of the marks of a believer, one of the tests of true faith that John gives us in this letter, is the one we studied last Sunday: the relational test. Those who love each other stay together, serving one another, growing together, worshiping together. So here, John says of those who have remained together, "But you have been anointed by the Holy One, and you all have knowledge" (2:20). So, it is in fellowship with one another that we understand the times: we see that this world with its promises, passions and desires, is passing away.

3. Knowing the truth (2:21-23).

Now, John comes to the heart of this third test, the doctrinal heart of the gospel, and it concerns the person and work of God's Son: "Who is the liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, he who denies

the Father and the Son. No one who denies the Son has the Father. Whoever confesses the Son has the Father also” (2:22-23).

John is not so much targeting those who do not yet know the gospel, but rather those who know it and reject it. Tragically, it is not unusual for an American, British or European church to have a pastor who does not believe much of anything that the Bible teaches about Jesus. Once great seminaries, established to promote the gospel of Jesus Christ, now often function as mere schools of comparative religion, studying the religious systems and impulses of various cultures as interesting anthropological and sociological artifacts.

Who would want a physician who did not believe that medicine was anything but superstitious folk craft? Yet we accept such pastors and teachers without understanding that they are, as John tells us here, destructive antichrists, seeking to destroy the work of the very one whom they profess to worship and serve.

4. Experiencing the truth in fellowship with the Trinity (2:24-27).

Just as we will not know the nature and meaning of the times in which we live without the fellowship of a community of Christians, so too we will not understand the truth of Christ without the fellowship of the Trinity, which is the very gift Christ gives those who are his. It was his high priestly prayer:

I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory you have given me I have given them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you love me (John 17:20-23).

Here John writes, “If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, then you too will abide in the Son and in the Father. And this is the promise he has made to us – eternal life” (2:24-25). We make the gospel too small when we make it only about forgiveness of sin. It is so much more! It is union with Christ, and in that union we receive his Spirit and are united to the Father.

As John writes here, this is eternal life, union with God, who made us for this kind of intimate fellowship that human marriage is meant to portray. The union of a man and woman in marriage is meant to picture the marriage of Christ and his people, the union of God and a renewed humanity reconciled to God in Christ.

Conclusion

Finally, we must not miss the necessity of both Word and Spirit in order to know and believe the truth. “Let what you heard from the beginning abide in you” (2:24). This clearly refers to the gospel of Christ, and to the Word in which he comes to us. Unless we feed on the Word of God, we will starve. But in order for the Word to bring us life, we need the Spirit of God, which John here refers to in these words: “But the anointing that you received from him abides in you, and you have no need that anyone should teach you” (2:27).

In his gospel, John remembered Jesus making this promise: “But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you” (John 14:26). Let the Word of God and the Spirit of God abide in you so that you may abide in him (2:27). As Jesus said to those who believed in him, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:31-32).

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