

**"THE TEST OF LOVE"**

As we continue our study of 1 John, we come today to the second of John's three tests of true Christianity: the test of love. John tells us that we can have assurance of our belonging to Christ when our lives are characterized by love for others. This does not mean that our works are the basis of our acceptance by God. The Christian's only source of confidence before God is Jesus Christ. John made that point very clear at the beginning of this chapter, where he told us that Jesus is our advocate with the Father and the propitiation for our sins. Nevertheless, the three tests that John sets forth in this letter are of great help to us, especially at those times when we may wonder whether we really have a share in Christ and his benefits. While we lay hold of Christ by faith alone, these three tests bear witness to the genuineness of our faith. In the words of John Newton, "The question is not concerning the method of acceptance with God, but concerning the fruits of an accepted state." [*Letters*, 69] In other words, John's teaching shows us that there are two aspects of Christian assurance: an outward aspect and an inward aspect. The outward aspect is the act of looking outside of yourself to Christ in faith. And the inward aspect is the act of examining your faith in order to determine whether it is genuine or counterfeit. In theological language, the outward aspect is referred to as the 'direct act of faith' and the inward aspect is known as the 'reflex act of faith.' Our primary means of assurance is the outward aspect: looking to Christ and trusting in the objective promises of the gospel. That is where our confidence resides. But there is also a secondary, inward aspect of assurance: examining ourselves and being enabled, by the

power of the Holy Spirit, to see evidence that testifies to the genuineness of our faith.

John wrote about the outward aspect of assurance when he spoke of Christ as our advocate in 2:1-2. But in this passage he is writing about the inward aspect of assurance. He is talking about examining ourselves and looking for the fruit of faith in our lives.

The first of John's three tests of true Christianity was the test of obedience, which he described in 2:3-6 by saying that those who truly know God will keep his commandments. This is closely related to the test that John is setting forth in our text today. John says that he is writing a "commandment" to his readers, which tells us that this second test is actually a sub-species of the test of obedience.

The first thing that John here is that the commandment that he is writing is not anything new. It is a commandment that his readers heard from the beginning, from the first time they heard the gospel. We know from the context that the commandment that John is talking about is the command to love your neighbor as yourself. And this is indeed an old commandment. It is a commandment that was given to God's people all the way back in the Old Testament.

It is interesting that John would defend his message by asserting its antiquity. When you stop and think about it, this is something that would be quite counter-cultural today. We rarely hear advertisements in which a product is commended to us because it is old. Can you imagine a commercial that said, 'Forget that new MacBook Air laptop that you want. Buy the Commodore 64 instead. It is *really* old.'? Ours is a culture that lives for that which is 'new and improved.' But there is a sense in which Christians need to

beware of novelty. Our faith is an ancient faith, and its antiquity is actually a testimony to its truth. As the Lord once said to his people through the prophet Jeremiah: “Stand by the roads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way is; and walk in it, and find rest for your souls.” [Jeremiah 6:16] The good way is found on the ancient paths, not on the newly paved roads. This was a point that was more readily understood by Christians of past eras. The fourth century church historian Eusebius commended his *Ecclesiastical History* because by it “the real antiquity and divine character of Christianity will be demonstrated to those who suppose that it is recent and foreign, appearing no earlier than yesterday.” [cited in Yarbrough, 98] And Jonathan Edwards’ grandson once paid tribute to his grandfather by saying: “It was the glory of this great man, that he had no love for innovation.” [cited in Murray, *Jonathan Edwards*, 444] There is something here that today’s Christians need to recover. The main reason for our society’s fascination with novelty is due to the fact that our consumer culture thrives upon marketing that which is new. There are far too many ways in which today’s church has bought into this mindset. We need to reflect upon the fact that Christians of the past would have seen labels like ‘contemporary’ as a cause for suspicion rather than as a selling point.

After saying that he is writing about an old commandment, John turns the tables in verse 8 by saying that it is at the same time a new commandment. What does he mean by this? Is he confused? Is he having trouble making up his mind? Not at all. He is simply saying that there is a sense in which this commandment is old, and there is a sense in

which it is new. As we have just said, it is old because it was proclaimed in the gospel from the very beginning and because it was the same commandment that was given to the saints of the Old Testament. Yet there are several senses in which it is also a new commandment.

First, it is new because Jesus confirmed and exemplified it during his earthly ministry. Jesus said that the commandments to love God with all your being and to love your neighbor as yourself were the most important of all the commandments. He said that the entire law hangs on these two things. And in addition to that, Jesus made God's love manifest in a new and powerful way in his life and death. As John writes later on in this letter, "In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him." [4:9] This leads John Owen to state that "Apart from Christ no man can come to a true understanding of God's love." [*The Glory of Christ*, 19]

A second sense in which the love command is new is because of the fact that it is being realized in the lives of God's people today. It is an old commandment, but it is being experienced afresh every day as believers walk in the light of God's love. As Robert Candlish puts it, "though doctrinal Christianity is always old, experimental Christianity is always new." The doctrine of the Christian faith does not change (at least, it should not change). But the experience of this doctrine is always new in the lives of God's people.

A third sense in which the love command is new is due to the fact it is being lived out in a more powerful way now that the new age has begun to be ushered in. In other words, the commandment is new in an eschatological sense. This is what John is talking about when he says that the “darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining.” This is an example of the New Testament’s ‘inaugurated eschatology.’ You may know that the word ‘eschatology’ is the theological term that we use to refer to the study of what God has revealed about the end times, or ‘the age to come.’ Inaugurated eschatology says that, even though we still live in the present age, the age to come is already beginning to break into this age. We see this in passages such as Galatians 1:4, where Paul says that Christ “gave himself for our sins to deliver us from *the present evil age*.” We see it in the letter to the Hebrews, where it says that those who enjoy the benefits of the church’s ministry “have tasted the goodness of the word of God and *the powers of the age to come*.” [Hebrews 6:5] And we see it in 1 Corinthians 10, where Paul describes Christians as those “on whom *the end of the ages* has come.” [1 Corinthians 10:11] The Bible tells us that the age to come, the new creation that God is bringing about in Jesus Christ, is already breaking into this world. While the darkness of the present age has not yet been completely removed, the true light is already shining in the lives of those who belong to Christ.

The inbreaking of the new creation has important ramifications for the role of the law in the lives of God’s people. The law itself has not changed. As I said a moment ago, the command to love others is an old law, a commandment that God gave his people in the

Old Testament. What changes when we come to know Christ is our relationship to the law. We are no longer under the works-principle, the principle that requires our perfect obedience to the law in order to be accepted by God. We have been set free from the curse of the law. As John said at the beginning of this chapter, Jesus is at God's right hand as our righteous advocate. He has perfectly fulfilled God's law on our behalf.

This does not mean, however, that we are now free to live lawless lives. On the contrary, the risen and ascended Christ pours his Spirit upon us in order that we might be empowered to walk in God's statutes and obey his rules. As believers in Jesus Christ we belong to the age to come, not to this present age. We are children of light, not children of darkness. And the way we give expression to our heavenly citizenship is by living lives that are characterized by love. The commandment is new because it is being lived out by people who are a part of God's new creation.

Notice how John talks about this in such black-and-white terms. He says that you either love your brother or you hate him. There is no neutral ground. We might prefer to be a little more nuanced when we talk about such things, but for John it is all or nothing; it is either love or hate. And this is reflective of the contrast that exists between those who are apart from Christ and those who belong to Christ. In our fallen estate we are dominated by self-interest. But when we come into the light of Christ, we are set free from the darkness of our old nature. This is why our claim to be in Christ is tested by our treatment of others, and especially by our treatment of fellow believers.

We might wonder why John only speaks of loving your brother here. Aren't we supposed to love all people, even our enemies? Indeed we are. But we need to remember that John is writing to churches that were in danger of being torn apart by false teaching, and he is laying an emphasis upon the love that we should have for one another as members of the body of Christ. Also, even though we should extend love to all people, there is a sense in which we should show a special concern for the welfare of our fellow believers. After all, they are our brothers and sisters in Christ. They have been adopted into God's family.

It is important for us to understand what the Bible means when it speaks of love. We are living in a culture that often reduces love to a matter of sentiment. But John is not just talking about feelings here. He is talking about a love that is patterned after the love that God extends to us in Christ. And what is that love like? It is a love that is characterized by mercy, kindness, forgiveness, patience, and a willingness to endure suffering and humiliation for the sake of the beloved. To love others is to be patient and forgiving and kind in your dealings with them. To love others is to allow yourself to be inconvenienced for their sake. It means helping and caring for others, even when you do not particularly feel like doing so, even when you feel like you already have enough on your plate. Love is characterized by self-giving. As Jesus said, "Greater love has no one than this, that someone lays down his life for his friends." [John 15:13] There are many ways in which you can lay down your life for other people. You can use your spare time to serve others. You can use your abilities and resources to help others. You can take the

time to pray for others. You can go and visit others when they are sick or troubled or lonely. You can listen to others when they need someone to talk to. You can open up your home to others in hospitality. You can love others in all kinds of ways. But whatever you do, do not fall into the trap of thinking that love is just about feelings.

Closely related to this is the fact that loving other people is not the same thing as liking them. As C.S. Lewis wisely says, "Do not waste time bothering whether you 'love' your neighbor; act as if you did...Christian love, either towards God or towards man, is an affair of the will." [*Mere Christianity*, 131, 132] The way to love others is not to try to conjure up feelings of love but to act in a loving manner.

In the last two verses of our passage, John employs the imagery of light and darkness to make another important point. He says that the person who demonstrates that he abides in the light by loving others has "no cause for stumbling." And then he sets this in contrast to the man who hates his brother. The man who hates others walks around blind because he is still in the darkness. He is going to stumble. But the man who loves others will not stumble. He will not fall into temptation and error. John is telling us that the best way to avoid temptation is to give your life away in love to other people.

A genuine believer in Jesus Christ shows love towards other people, especially his brothers and sisters in Christ. This is John's second test of true Christianity. This is not to say, however, that our love for others will ever be perfect. Listen to what John Newton says about this:

“I believe they who are most under the influence of divine love will join with me in lamenting their deficiency. It is well that we are not under law but under grace; for on whatever point we try ourselves by the standard of the sanctuary, we shall find reason to say, ‘enter not into judgment with Thy servant, O Lord.’ There is an amazing and humbling difference between the conviction we have of the beauty and excellence of divine truths, and our actual experience of their power ruling in our hearts... We know that the love we bear [the brethren] is for [Christ's] sake; and when we consider his interest in *them*, and our obligations to *him*, we are ashamed and grieved that we love them no better.” [*Letters*, 68-69]

Our love will always be less than it should be. Yet even though this is true, the Spirit of God works in the hearts of all true believers not only to empower us to love, but to help us to recognize our love as Spirit-worked love. In the words of the Puritan Thomas Goodwin: “[The Spirit] writes first all graces in us, and then teacheth our consciences to read his handwriting, which we could never do without his light.” [cited in Stellman, *Dual Citizens*, 174]