

Something Old, Something, New

Text:

I John 2: 7-11

Beloved, I am writing you no new commandment, but an old commandment that you had from the beginning. The old commandment is the word that you have heard. At the same time, it is a new commandment that I am writing to you, which is true in him and in you, because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining. Whoever says he is in the light and hates his brother is still in darkness. Whoever loves his brother abides in the light, and in him there is no cause for stumbling. But whoever 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.

Introduction:

We are examining the conditions that John lays down in his First Epistle for being in fellowship with God. If we are to be in fellowship with God, we must, he says, walk in the light and walk as God's children. We do not decide for ourselves what it means to walk in the light and to walk as God's children, but God, himself, has established the necessary conditions that we must meet. First, we learned, that we must renounce sin, now we are considering the second condition: we must be obedient to God's commandments.

Last time we saw that this part of the letter was organized around three potentially true claims that are indicated by the words "whoever says". We also noticed that all of the claims are the equivalent of having eternal life. To have eternal life is John's preferred way of stating that we are in a right relationship with God, that we have been born again, that we have been saved. This is,

whether we realize it or not the most important thing that we can know. At the end of this Epistle, John will say that he has written it in order that “we might know that we have eternal life.”

It is also important to remind you of a point we made last time that our obedience to God’s commands is not the means of receiving eternal life, but the evidence that we have it. We can never repeat it enough that eternal life is God’s gift provided through the work of Jesus Christ, God’s Son on our behalf that we receive freely by believing in him. However, John is insisting all through this letter that eternal life is a present reality that demonstrates its presence in the behavior of the one possessing it. There are vital signs of the presence of eternal life just as there are vital signs of physical life. One of them is that our hearts and ears are open to the commands of our Lord Jesus Christ.

We also noticed that there is a progression in John’s understanding of obedience. He begins simply by saying that whoever says that he knows God keeps his commands, then he makes it clear what he means by keeping God’s commands when he says that whoever says he abides in him ought to walk as Christ walked. This makes the pattern of obedience clear. We have a model to follow. The new life that God has given us, the eternal life that we received via the new birth, the life made possible by the gift of the Holy Spirit is a life that is like that of Christ that demonstrates its existence by Christ-like obedience.

That is as far as we went last time. Today we are going to take up the third claim and the third element in Christian obedience; that it is an obedience of love. It flows from the love of God for us demonstrated in the work of Christ on our behalf, communicated to us by the presence of the Holy Spirit. It demonstrates itself by acts of genuine Christ-like love for others, especially our brothers and sisters in Christ that are the norm, not the exception of Christian behavior.

John will have a lot to say about love before we are finished. We will not exhaust the subject in what he has to say in this text. There are, however, some very important things to be learned from these verses that we need not just to understand, but to act upon.

I. The Old Commandment

The first question we need to answer about this text is what John means by the old commandment that is really a new commandment; what it is and why it is both old and new. If we are familiar with John's writings the mention of a new commandment will make us think of what Jesus said to his disciples in the Upper Room on the night of his arrest and betrayal In John 13: 34-35: "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." Since in the rest of the paragraph he makes the point that it is impossible to be "in the light" and not love our brother or sister, it is obvious that Christ's commandment to "love one another as I have loved you" is what he has in mind when he says he is writing a commandment to us that is both old and new.

Let us first consider why this commandment is old, and then why it is new. It is old, first of all, because the commandment to love is not original with Jesus. It is as Old as Moses who wrote in Leviticus 19:18: You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD. And in Leviticus 19:34 he writes: "You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God". These passages reinforce at least two important ideas in I John. First, that God is love. At the very heart of his being, God is love. His acts are motivated by his love. Having made humans in his own image, he has created us to love. Love was not an afterthought with God it was his first thought. It is not the command to love that is new. It has always been God's intention.

By the 1st century the Jews had come to clearly understand this. The wisest among them had reduced the law to two essential commandments, to love God, and to love one's neighbor. Jesus himself agreed with this evaluation. When he was asked: "what is the greatest commandment?" he replied: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.

This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 19: 37-40).

The other thing that is obvious in Leviticus 19, that will become very clear in I John, is that loving one another has to do primarily with treating one another as we should. One of the most common errors Christians make concerning love is thinking that it is primarily about how we feel towards one another. It is not. It is about how we treat one another. When you read Leviticus 19 you will see that it is about very practical matters of treating one another fairly and with compassion. The same will be the case in I John where loving one another is about doing what we can to meet the needs of one another. In biblical love action precedes feeling. We do what we do because it is the right thing to do. Faith in God and willingness to obey his commands prompts us to do the right thing whether we feel like it or not. Having done the right thing our feelings will then come into alignment with our actions.

The second thing to be noted about this commandment being old is found in verse 7 when John says: “an old commandment that you had from the beginning. The old commandment is the word that you have heard”. This is a reference back to what he says at the beginning of the book when he speaks of those who were eyewitness of the Life of Jesus, and that the message that he had delivered to them was the message that he had received from Jesus himself. So the commandment is new, in that it had originated with Jesus, but it is not new to them because it had been a part of the original instruction they had received. However, some of them at least seem to have forgotten the teaching they had received.

II. The New Commandment

If the commandment is not totally new, and God has always wanted us to love one another, what is new about it? It is obvious that when Jesus first gave it in John 13 he called it a new commandment as John here calls it a new

commandment. There are at least two things about it that we can think of as new. First of all there is a new demonstration. What sets it apart, as Jesus first gave it, was not the commandment to love, but the commandment to love one another as he has loved us. The words “as I have loved you” makes it new. Never before had love been demonstrated so profoundly. Jesus has taken love to a new level. He has given it a new dimension. Never again can anyone say: “I don’t know what love looks like.” I don’t know what it means to love.” Jesus has demonstrated to us in unmistakable images what God means when he says: “love one another.”

Secondly, the commandment is new because the potential for keeping it is new. Not only does Jesus give us a new demonstration of love, he also gives us a new power to love. The new life that we receive from him, the eternal life that is a gift of grace, is a new power to keep the commandments of God especially the commandment to love. The problem before Christ was not that the law was bad, but that humans were sinful and weak and unable to keep the law. This is Paul’s argument in Romans 7 and 8. But now we have received new life through the new birth and the Holy Spirit has poured the love of Christ into our hearts. This is what John means in verse 8 when he says: “At the same time, it is a new commandment that I am writing to you, which is true in him and in you, because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining.” This commandment can be true, that is realized, in us because it was first true or realized in Christ. With him a new time has been initiated. The old is passing away, the true light is already shining. What was not possible before now is possible because he has introduced a new power; a power to love.

This is the reason John says: “Whoever says he is in the light and hates his brother is still in darkness”. To be in the light is another way of saying that we possess eternal life that we have come into a saving vital relationship with Jesus Christ. If this is true then the love of Christ has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit giving us a new ability to love that we did not previously possess. This is a supernatural love that enables us to love even when love comes neither naturally nor easily.

The final thing that I would point out from this text is the practical implications of walking in love. John says first that walking in love brings orientation to our own lives and peace to the communities of which we are a part. He says that when we love we are walking in the light and we are without offence. We will not be the cause of someone else stumbling. On the other hand he says when we allow ourselves to be motivated by hatred we are like a blind man stumbling around in the dark. We are a constant threat to ourselves and to all around us.

God's love is a supernatural gift. It is not something we can create. We can only receive it as a free gift by receiving God's free gift of salvation in Jesus Christ. Having received it, it transforms us from the inside out. It gives orientation and purpose to our lives and makes us into peacemakers instead of confusion creators. John will have much more to say about this divine love that is a gift of God before we finish this book. I have not even tried to describe the love of which he is speaking, I have simply affirmed that it is a sign of the presence of grace, and that it bears the peaceable fruit of righteousness where it is present. The reason it does is because it makes us other-orientated instead of self-centered. As Christ did not come into the world "to be served, but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many", so those who know him, those who have received the gift of divine love do not live for themselves, but for others.