

The Absence of Love is the Absence of Light

1 John 2:7-11

January 19 & 20, 2013
Steve DeWitt

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. (John 2:7-11)

These are the words of the old Apostle and Pastor, John, to the people he leads and shepherds in the region of Ephesus. These people have just gone through one of the most painful spiritual experiences you can go through—a split in the church. Have you ever been through one? I have not, but people close to me have, and they would say it was a spiritually devastating experience. Why? To join a church family is just that, family. Your church is where you worship and fellowship and maintain friendships. You live and love and do life together. There can be seasons of wonderfully healthy spiritual growth and often with that, deeply meaningful relationships are built, as you serve the Lord together and see his good fruit all around. That's how I feel about you.

No doubt this had happened under the Apostle's ministry, especially the Apostle known as the Apostle of Love. This was his sweet spot—teaching, modeling, and promoting healthy horizontal relationships in the church.

In spite of this, there arose within the church a faction who didn't believe as John believed and their attitudes and actions toward John and the others was anything but loving. We can imagine the hurtful words and accusations they made as they left.

By the time John writes 1 John, they have already left. Like a spiritual doctor, John is trying to heal the wounds they left behind. Remember, John is answering the question, "How can I know if I or someone else is a Christian or not?" We've already seen that the answer is not because they say they are. If you talk the talk, you have to walk the walk. It is this walk that John describes in chapter 2. We saw last week that obedience to God's will is an evidence of genuine salvation. NOT perfection but direction. If living for sin and self is east, and repentance and righteousness is west, the Christian will be generally heading west toward the will of God. The further and longer he goes, the more confident he can be that Jesus has changed his life. The further along my life goes in the path of sin and self, the more assured I can be that I have not been born again.

John moves toward the subject which is so dear to him and which he is most famous for—love. John is going to say that the absence of love means the absence of light or to say it this way, loving others is an indication that I am regenerate and its absence indicates that I am not.

Let's make sure we understand what he means by "love." A few years ago we studied love in depth from 1 Corinthians 13. Here is what it says:

Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends. (1 Corinthians 13:4-8)

From this we defined biblical love as "self-giving for the good and joy of another." This is God's kind of love. The kind of love found within the Trinitarian relationship. It is Jesus' kind of love given to us on the cross. It is so essential to who God is that John will later say simply, God is love (1 John 4:8). God is self-giving for the good and joy of another. Christianity rejoices in a gospel message of God's love to us in Christ. Love is central to the whole of who God is and what he has done, is doing, and will do.

If this is so, would it stand to reason that love would be evident in anyone who knows and fellowships with God? John says yes.

The Love Command Never Gets Old (1 John 2:7-8)

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.

On the surface this sounds like double talk. What I am writing is not a new command and it is a new command. He gives the actual command in verses 9-10: love. This command is both old and new. How?

It is old on a few levels. It is old in that it is found in the Old Testament. Leviticus 19:18 says, Love your neighbor as yourself. Jesus called this the second most important commandment, behind only the commandment to love God. The astute reader of the Old Testament would see the command to love others as very old. It is also old in that it was apparently part of their early Christian walk. The old commandment is the word that you heard. John pastored this church on two occasions. The Apostle of Love would certainly have emphasized the priority of loving others from the beginning of their Christian walk. For them, loving others is an old and familiar command.

How is it new? He says "it is true in him and in you," We saw Jesus identified with the pronoun "he" in verse 6. Jesus is certainly the "him" in verse 8. Jesus was the incarnation of God's love. Jesus perfectly loved his neighbor as himself. In this way, it is a new commandment because Jesus fulfilled the old commandment in such a radical way as to renew it again. William Barclay gives three ways that Jesus made this command "new."

The extent to which it reached

The prevailing Jewish understanding of the need to love was those few people in your little world. Your family. Your friends. Jesus came and loved everyone. Jew. Gentile. Man. Woman. Child. The leper along the road. He was the Good Samaritan who cared for all whom life had beaten up along the path.

The lengths to which it would go

The cross made the command new because on it he loved us to the uttermost, giving all he had in love for us.

The degree to which it is realized

In him and in you, John writes. This same love that Jesus completely fulfilled is placed in every Christian. It is the love of God received by faith, placed within us and all its capacities by the Spirit. This will be the basis for his argument of love as an evidence of salvation. Jesus had it and all who are saved have it too.

Here is where the danger of last week is also the danger of this week. Last week we saw that obedience to God's commands is the fruit of salvation, not the condition for it. Our obedience is never perfect (verse 8) but it is present. Direction not perfection.

Love is like that as well. While Jesus loved perfectly, our love for others in this world will always be imperfect. To illustrate this, John uses the interesting metaphor of a sunrise: because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining. He is describing a sunrise.



Look at this picture. It is taken at sunrise—those moments each morning of transition between darkness and light. Early in the sunrise, there is light, but there is also darkness. The sun is fully shining but its effects are not complete; there is darkness and light mixed together.

John is describing with this picture a theological and redemptive truth. Jesus' life, death, and resurrection inaugurated the new age. It was the breaking out of the glory of heaven and the age to come into the present. Like light, Calvary love burst into the darkness of this world; the future kingdom of God in which truth and goodness and beauty and love will be perfect and complete. It's a cool picture. Shining like the sun on a glorious morning.

However, every sunrise has the transition between light and darkness. We are between the age of darkness and the already but not yet age of light. Like a sunrise, the darkness is disappearing and the light is increasingly shining. When we love one another and we love

our neighbor and even our enemy, those moments are like sunrays into the darkness of this world. Light and love. They always go together.

What if they don't? What if someone claims to be in the light but there is no love?

The Danger of Profession Without Love (1 John 2:9-11)

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.

Do you see the parallel? Light/Love...Darkness/Hatred

Darkness is used seven times in 1 John and "it stands for either sinful behavior or the realm in which sinful behavior predominates." (C.G. Kruse, *The Letters of John*, PNTC, p. 84.)

These are simple pictures which anyone who has ever turned on a light in a dark room knows. Before I turn on the light, there is total darkness. When I turn on the light, darkness no longer dominates. They are mutually exclusive. Light and darkness. Since God is light and all who have that light love others, the absence of love is a clearer indication of what is true in the heart, no matter what they claim.

The absence of love (hate) indicates the absence of light (darkness)

"Pastor Steve, are you saying that I have to love in order to be saved?" No. John is saying that we love because we are saved. "Does that mean unbelievers don't love?" No. The love of many unbelievers puts our love to shame. "Does that mean unbelievers don't self-sacrifice for others?" Not at all.

What it means is this, while unbelievers may self-give for the good and joy of others, no true believer will fail to love. For unbelievers, love is a wonderful maximum; for believers, it is the bare minimum. The lack of love, or what John calls hate, is a pattern of anger, bitterness, strife, divisiveness, and judgmentalism that indicates a person who does not have the light. They are in darkness.

So many people miss this as they try to define their spiritual maturity by what they don't do. The old and overused joke that "I'm a Christian because I don't smoke, I don't chew, and I don't go with girls who do" is not that different from churchgoing people who look in the mirror and evaluate themselves spiritually in terms of what they don't do. I haven't murdered anyone. I didn't cheat in the Tour de France, and I don't have any imaginary girlfriends. I must be going to heaven!

Hate is the absence of love, but love is much more than the absence of hate. Love self-gives like Jesus did. It is active. Take racism as an example. Most of us would call racism a form of hatred. What is racism really? Is it simply NOT hating people of a different skin color or ethnicity? When am I no longer a racist? Not when I stop hating, but when I can and do love people who are different than me and treat them with honor and respect.

John is going to get very practical in Chapter 3 about what self-giving love looks like: But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth. (1 John 3:17-18)

"I don't do bad things, therefore I am a good Christian." John doesn't ask if you don't do bad things. He asks, do you do loving things?

What to do With our Shadows

It is quite convicting to preach this because I have so many examples coming to my mind of where I failed to love people who disagreed with me, had a different skin color or ethnicity, annoying personality, or something else that made me standoffish. I have failed to love many times. Some of these are utterly embarrassing to me even years later. Might you have a few things too? What are they? Do they mean that we are not genuinely saved?

Let's call them shadows. Let's go back to that photo:



This is a picture of the world and it is a picture of my heart. I have spiritual light in my heart. That light is the glory of Jesus and the gospel which I have believed in and given myself to. I want to walk in the light. I want to obey God's commands. Yet I also see in my heart failures to love and obey. There is darkness in there.

Like this photo, I have shadows. Shadows are places where darkness continues to reign and the light of truth and glory have not yet conquered. These are habits and blind spots and areas my flesh clings to. When it comes to love, I have shadows in my heart where I don't self-give, I self-love. I don't sacrifice, I hoard. I don't seek others' joy, I seek my own.

What to do? I do with them the same thing I do with all my sin. I confess it. I repent. I invite Jesus to change me. And I can take comfort that the presence of shadows means the presence of light. There are no shadows in a pitch black room. If there are shadows of non-love it means that the light of God's love is there.

Then who is John describing? The person who claims to be a Christian where non-love isn't the exception, it is the rule. They stumble around in the darkness of their own bitterness and hate. There is little if any remorse for the damage they do to the church and to God's people. They will say or do whatever they want whenever they want. They do damage wherever they go. These people leave a swath of destruction behind them as they use and abuse people for their own purposes. Their words are divisive. Their actions are inflammatory. There is no gentleness about them. Wherever they go, there seems to be conflict and tension. They are like the notorious Diotrophes whose only concern was that he was number one. Their sourpuss attitude and curmudgeonly outlook and self-obsession never got beyond itself. That is hate. That is self-love.

How different is the person for whom love is the rule and hate is the exception! There is a gentleness and kindness about them. They are quick to help others in need. They pour water, not gas, on the flames of conflict. Their words are healing. Their actions are uplifting. They will be inconvenienced for the sake of others and the kingdom. There is a fragrance of selflessness about them. Haters are takers and breakers. Lovers are givers and healers.

Their whole world and perspective was transformed by the Spirit making them spiritually new which frees them from the bondage of hate and frees them to live for God and others. This love doesn't come from them; it flows through them from God to others. Imperfectly, yes. There are shadows, but darkness does not dominate.

The absence of light means the absence of love and therefore the absence of salvation. That may sound like a really negative message. But the converse is true and should assure every genuine Christian here. The presence of self-giving love assures us of the presence of redeeming light. Last week, John told us to look at the direction of our obedience. This week, we are looking at the direction of our love. The further from self it goes directionally, the greater my confidence that God is at work in my life re-creating in me the very likeness of Jesus who took up the basin and towel and washed the disciples' feet, and a few hours later, gave his life for them.

Scripture quotations are taken from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version Copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers.

© 2013 by Steve DeWitt. You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce and distribute this material in any format provided that: (1) you credit the author, (2) any modifications are clearly marked, (3) you do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction, (4) you include Bethel's website address (www.bethelweb.org) on the copied resource.