

## **“An Old and New Commandment” (1 John 2:7–11)**

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“How do you know?” That’s a simple but very important question. There are all kinds of “How do you know?” questions:

“How do you know which career to pick?”

“How do you know who you should marry?”

“How do you know your life matters?”

“How do you know someone loves you?”

“How do you know everything will be okay?”

“How do you know whom to trust?”

“How do you know what happens after death?”

“How do you know you’re a good person?”

“How do you know what God is like?”

“How do you know that you truly know God and have a right relationship with him?”

We started studying John’s first letter a few weeks ago, and one of things that John wants the readers of this letter to know is whether they truly know God or not. He wants them to be certain that they are God’s children, that they have right relationships with God and therefore have eternal life.

Throughout this letter, John gives us a series of tests. In chapter 1, he says that if we say we don’t have sin, we’re deceived, we don’t know God, and we’re calling God a liar. John’s point is that every human being who has walked this earth has a sin issue. We all have rebelled against God. Well, every human being except one, and that’s Jesus.

In the beginning of chapter 2, John says Jesus is our advocate and atoning sacrifice. He says that we can know we know Jesus if we keep his commandments. If we say we’re Christians but don’t obey Jesus, we’re liars and the truth is not in us.

That’s a strong statement. It’s so strong that we should naturally ask, “Which commandments is John referring to? Which commandments must we obey to demonstrate that we’re followers of Jesus and children of God?” And that leads us to today’s passage, which is really a continuation of John’s thought.

Today, we're looking at 1 John 2:7–11. I'll read the whole passage first, and then go back and explain it.

<sup>7</sup> 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. <sup>8</sup> 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. <sup>9</sup> Whoever says he is in the light and hates his brother is still in darkness. <sup>10</sup> Whoever loves his brother abides in the light, and in him there is no cause for stumbling. <sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>1</sup>

John begins this paragraph by saying that he is not writing a new commandment, but an old one that his readers have already heard. But it's also a new commandment. What does John mean? How can the commandment be both old and new?

To understand what John is getting at, we must think of Jesus' own words. In the Gospels, Jesus makes it clear that the two greatest commandments are to love God and love others. When he is asked which is the greatest commandment, he says

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. <sup>38</sup> This is the great and first commandment. <sup>39</sup> And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. <sup>40</sup> On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets” (Matt. 22:37–40).

Jesus sums up the Old Testament commands with these two: love God with your whole being, and love your neighbor as you love yourself. These are not new commandments, but old ones. They're both found in the Old Testament. The first is found in Deuteronomy 6:5; the second one comes from Leviticus 19:18. It seems clear that Jesus wants anyone who will follow him to observe these two commandments. They're not new commandments. They are what God has always expected of his people. I'm sure that this is what John and the other apostles preached when they told people about Jesus.

So, if this commandment is old, how can it also be new? Well, Jesus himself said it was. In John's Gospel, on the night before Jesus died, he washed his disciples' feet. This was an act that symbolized what he was about to do for them; in dying on the cross, he was going to wash them of their sins. This is what happened after he washed their feet. Let's read John 13:12–17:

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

<sup>12</sup> When he had washed their feet and put on his outer garments and resumed his place, he said to them, “Do you understand what I have done to you?” <sup>13</sup> You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. <sup>14</sup> If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. <sup>15</sup> For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you. <sup>16</sup> Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. <sup>17</sup> If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.

Jesus also washed his disciples’ feet as an example. They should wash each other’s feet because he washed theirs. Of course, the meaning of the event has now changed. He’s not saying that we can wash each other of our sins. He means that we should serve one another. In that age, washing another’s feet was a practical act. When you wear sandals on dusty roads, your feet get dirty. In our day, we don’t need to wash one another’s feet, but there are certainly other practical deeds that we can do for each other to serve one another. The point is that Jesus expects his followers to serve one another, just as their master, Jesus, served them. And Jesus’ followers—his servants—will be blessed if they do what he says.

Several verses later, then, Jesus says he is giving them a new commandment. In John 13:34–35, he says,

<sup>34</sup> 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. <sup>35</sup> By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

The commandment is simple: love one another. How is that new? Doesn’t Leviticus 19:18 says to love your neighbor as yourself? Yes, it does. But look carefully at Jesus’ command: “just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another.” The newness of the command is that Jesus himself has modeled it for them. God himself has become man and showed his people what love really looks like. The newness of the command is that Jesus has demonstrated and embodied this love.

Let’s look at one more passage in John’s Gospel. This is John 15:12–17:

<sup>12</sup> This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. <sup>13</sup> Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. <sup>14</sup> You are my friends if you do what I command you. <sup>15</sup> No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. <sup>16</sup> You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father

in my name, he may give it to you. <sup>17</sup> These things I command you, so that you will love one another.

Again, Jesus commands his followers not just to love one another, but to love one another as Jesus has loved them. The greatest love is this: to lay down one's life for his friends. We'll talk more about this as we look at 1 John 3. The point that we need to remember now is that Jesus loved us, and that should be our motivation to love others. Jesus laid down his life for us. He had our best interests in mind. He did what we most needed.

That gives us a clue as to what real love is about. So many people talk about love these days, without knowing what it really means. Love is giving someone what is best. Love is more of an action than a feeling. Love is caring for another person. It is giving that person what he or she needs.

To know how to love, we need to know what a person's greatest need is. Really, to love someone, we need to know what the purpose of life is. If the purpose of life is to "be happy," then loving another person will mean doing whatever is necessary to make a person feel happy. If the purpose of life is to minimize pain, then loving another person means doing whatever is necessary to make a person not feel bad. But if the purpose of life is to know God and have a right relationship with him, then loving another person means doing whatever is necessary to help that person know God and to help that person have a right relationship with God.

That's what Jesus does for us. He helps us know God by being the clearest revelation of God there has ever been. He is the true image of God (2 Cor. 4:4; Col. 1:15). According to the book of Hebrews, "He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature" (Heb. 1:3). And Jesus does what is necessary to put us into a right relationship with God. Our problem is that our sins have separated us from God. We aren't born into this life with a nature that seeks after God. We make other people or other things—or, usually, ourselves—the most important things in our lives. But God should be the most important part of our lives. We don't live like this, however. We turn from God and do what we want to do instead of what he wants us to do. This leads to all kinds of bad things for us. God's commands are given for our good, but we think we know better and we do things that are harmful to us. To get back into a right relationship with God, we need someone to wash us of our sins. And Jesus does that for us. Everyone who trusts Jesus is cleansed of their sins and put back into a right relationship with God.

Before we think more about what that love looks like, let's consider another reason why this command to love is new. Look again at verse 8 of 1 John 2: "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." The commandment is new because it's true in "him," Jesus. As I said earlier, this commandment to love is embodied by Jesus. But John says it's also true "in you"—in Christians. How is possible that this kind of love is true in Christians? John gives us the answer: "because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining."

John means that the true light of the world, Jesus, has come. And when Jesus came, died for our sins, rose from the grave, and ascended into heaven, he poured out the Holy Spirit. This is a new era. It is the age of the new covenant, which was promised in the Old Testament (Jer. 31:31–34). God has written his law of love on the hearts of his people (Jer. 31:33). God has cleansed his people of their sin, given his people new hearts, and put the Holy Spirit inside of them (Ezek. 36:25–27). People of faith in the Old Testament loved one another, but now we can love one another to a greater extent because of Jesus' example and through the power of the Holy Spirit, who now lives in God's people.

Who are God's people? Well, one way to know who God's people are is to think of the test that John gives us. Let's read again verses 9–11:

<sup>9</sup> Whoever says he is in the light and hates his brother is still in darkness.

<sup>10</sup> Whoever loves his brother abides in the light, and in him there is no cause for stumbling. <sup>11</sup> 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

On the positive side, whoever loves his (or her) brother (or sister) abides in the light. That is John's way of saying that such a person truly knows God, who is light. In that person "there is no cause for stumbling." That's the translation of a Greek word (σκανδαλον), from which we get the word "scandal." John means that a person who really loves others doesn't put obstacles in their path to God.

On the negative side, however, those who say they know God but actually hate their brother or sister are still in darkness. That is, they don't really know God. They are spiritually blind. "Hate" may seem like a very strong word. It's perhaps a bit of hyperbole, a clear contrast to love. To fail to love someone the way that God wants us to love is to hate another person. This

“hate” doesn’t have to be active. To fail to feed your child is to hate your child. You don’t have to actively do something bad, like physically abuse the child, in order to hate the child. All you have to do is withhold something good that the child needs. In the same way, when we withhold love from others, we hate them.

When we think of these verses, we need to remember what the Bible says about love. Real love is helping others know God and have a right relationship with him. If we don’t help other people know God, or if we end up teaching false things about God, we are hating another person. We are withholding an ultimate good from others. If we are stumbling blocks to other people, getting in the way of a true relationship with God, then we’re hating a person. In short, if we encourage people to sin, to not repent and put their faith in God, we are hating that person. We aren’t being truly loving.

Real love isn’t doing whatever makes some feel good. Real love isn’t necessarily minimizing another person’s pain, or making them feel “happy.” Real love is helping someone know God and have a right relationship with him. In fact, when we truly love someone, that person might not initially feel good at all. Real love can feel bad at first.

I say that because today, it is assumed that love involves making another person feel happy. How often do we hear parents say, “I just want my children to be happy”? Now, being happy isn’t wrong. But true, lasting happiness can only be found in God. The world’s version of happiness is like eating a candy bar. God’s happiness is a daily serving of the finest food. The world’s happiness may seem delicious, but it doesn’t last. It doesn’t nourish our souls. The happiness that comes from God is better for us and it never ends. So, loving parents should say, “I want my children to have the ultimate happiness of knowing God and having their lives transformed by him.” They should say, “I want my children to know Jesus and follow him.”

Love is never opposed to God’s commandments. In fact, to love someone truly is to love them according to God’s commandments. We see that in another passage in the New Testament, Romans 13:8–14:

<sup>8</sup> Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. <sup>9</sup> For the commandments, “You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,” and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” <sup>10</sup> Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.

<sup>11</sup> Besides this you know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. <sup>12</sup> The night is far gone; the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. <sup>13</sup> Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy. <sup>14</sup> But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

Notice that in this passage, Paul brings together love and law. He mentions some of the Ten Commandments (don't commit adultery, don't murder, don't steal, don't covet—Commandments Seven, Six, Eight, and Ten) and says that they are summed up in the commandment to love our neighbors (Lev. 19:18). True love is not wronging your neighbor according to God's moral law. When we sin, we harm our relationship with God and we hurt others. But when we love others, we observe God's laws, and this is good for us and for them.

Paul also says, like John, that the era of darkness is passing away. He urges us to walk in the light. And that means not fighting, not being jealous, not being drunk, and not engaging in sexual immorality. It's an era of love, but this is a love marked by discipline and self-control. It's not a love that says, "Do whatever makes you happy." It's a love that says, "Do what God wants you to do, and then you'll truly be happy."

So, what does this mean for us? How should we live in light of this passage?

First, I want us to see what our motivation for loving others is. John tells us that true Christians love their brothers and sisters. He means that we should love other Christians. But we also know that Jesus tells us to love our enemies (Matt. 5:43–48; Luke 6:27–28). We can think of many reasons why we should love other Christians. We should love them because Jesus died for them and redeemed them. God chose them and they are precious in his sight. They are part of the body of Christ, and we should love Christ's entire body. They are part of the bride of Christ, and if we love Jesus, we'll love his bride. But it seems that the motivation here is Jesus' example of love. He loved us first, and we should love others in that same way. God loved us while we were his enemies (Rom. 5:6–10), and we should therefore love our enemies.

That kind of motivation to love is very different than the world's motivation to love. If you ask people who are not Christians why they should love others, you will get different responses. Some who belong to other religions may say, "God commanded us to love." And while God does command us to love, it's not just some arbitrary command. The true God commands us to love because he is love and he showed his love for us in his Son, Jesus.

Other people may say that we should love others in order to get something from them. This is a pragmatic, utilitarian sort of view. If everyone did nice things for one another, then life would go better for all of us. There are two problems with this view. One, it's not the definition of love that the Bible gives us. Love isn't necessarily "being nice" or "doing good" in a vague, undefined way. Love is helping other people know God, helping them have a right relationship with God, and also helping them experience something of God's goodness. Too often, we think of love as simply doing something that others want. If we do to others what they want, perhaps they'll do to us what we want. And that reveals the second problem with this approach to "love." In the end, it's selfish. It's ultimately focused on the self and what we can get. But true love focuses on others, first on God and then on other people.

My point is that we should have the right motivation to love. God loved us in Christ, and therefore we should love others because we have been changed and moved by God's love. If you want to know what this love is like, read 1 Corinthians 13:4–7:

<sup>4</sup> Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant <sup>5</sup> or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; <sup>6</sup> it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. <sup>7</sup> Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Recently, I had a friend visiting from out of town, another pastor. As we were talking about life, he said that when he reads that passage, he wonders if he's ever loved someone else. It's true that our love for others will always fall short of God's love for us. But we should still aspire to this kind of love. When we understand how God has loved us, we will love others. God loves us even though we're not very lovable. He loved us before we loved him. He loves us more than we love him. God's love is patient and bears all things. God's love for his children bears and endures their foolishness, their waywardness, and their lack of love. God's love is forgiving.

The second thing I want to talk about is how we can love others. I want us to think about this in three categories: How we can help others know God; how we can help others experience something of God's love and goodness; and how we can help others have a right relationship with God.

One, we can love others by helping others know God better. Christians are commanded to do this. The apostle Paul writes, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God" (Col. 3:16). When we teach each other, when we share



passages from the Bible, when we remind each other of who God is, we love each other. And that love should extend to non-Christians. Teaching them about God is an act of love.

Evangelism isn't primarily about making us feel good, or boosting numbers. It's an act of love.

Two, we love others when we give them a glimpse of God's love and goodness. Most of our acts of love could be placed in this category. Serving other people in practical ways gives others a glimpse of how Jesus serves us. Cooking a meal for others gives them a hint of how God has prepared a table for us, how God provides our daily bread, and how God is preparing an end-time feast for his people. Of course, whatever meal we make isn't those things, but it's a shadow of those things. It can help point people to the real thing. The same is true of any act of lovingkindness.

Sometimes those acts can be very practical. I recently read the story of a woman who was married and had young children. She and her family were in the process of packing to move from one state to another. At that time, she heard that her brother and his family died in a car crash. Her mother told her to come as soon as she could. This involved getting on a plane. She and her family were trying to prepare to leave to see her mother and to go to her brother's funeral and they were struggling to get organized.

This woman said that many of her friends told her, "If there's anything I can do, let me know." They were good intentioned, but she and her family were so distraught that they couldn't think straight. They didn't know what to ask for. They were so overwhelmed by the chaos of their life and their grief that they couldn't think straight.

But a man from church showed up at her door and said, "I've come to clean your shoes." The woman was confused. She asked him to repeat what he said. He explained that when his father died, it took him hours to clean and shine the shoes of his many children. He knew this woman would have a similar need. So, he asked for all the shoes in the house, then he sat down on the kitchen floor, spread out newspaper, and cleaned and shined each shoe. This grieving wife, mother, and sister said that not only did this act of love help her pack her family to leave for the funeral, but it also helped her restore a sense of order to her mind. This man's simple act of cleaning shoes helped her focus on other tasks that enabled her to pack.<sup>2</sup> That is love. This man knew what this woman needed and he gave it to her, without seeking anything in return.

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<sup>2</sup> Madge Harrah, "This Powerful Story Will Convince You to Stop Saying, 'Let Me Know if You Need Anything,'" *Reader's Digest*, December 1983, <http://www.rd.com/true-stories/inspiring/let-me-know-if-you-need-anything/amp>.

We should know each other well enough to know what each one of us needs. And when we act to give each other what we need, we're giving each other a glimpse of God's goodness and love. In fact, God often loves us through the acts of others. And God almost always provides for us through other people. So, when we do good for others, we're doing the work of God.

The third way we can love others is by helping them have a right relationship with God. We can't die for the sins of others. And there's no need to do that, because Jesus' death on the cross can and will pay for the sins of any who turn to him. But we can help each other stay on track in our relationships with God. When we encourage people to sin, we're being stumbling blocks to each other. We're getting in another person's way of having a good relationship with God. But when we help correct each other, we're actually loving one another. Think of Jesus' love for his disciples. Jesus' love wasn't a sappy, nostalgic sort of love. Jesus' love wasn't always a "nice" love. Jesus loved his disciples so much that he corrected them. He rebuked them. When we challenge each other, it's not unloving. When we see another person sin and we do nothing, we're withholding something good from that person. When we see people running away from God and we're silent, we don't love that other person. In fact, according to John, we're hating that person. Correcting a person in a patient, kind, and respectful way is actually an act of love.

If you are a Christian, you must love other Christians and even your enemies. You can't truly love God without loving other people. That means we can't be indifferent to each other's needs. I don't know about you, but I struggle with this and I find it challenging.

We also can't hate others. You can't live in the light if you hate other people. Hatred has a way of blinding us. Hate keeps us from seeing the truth. If you have experienced the love of God in Jesus, love others, whether they are your brothers and sisters in Christ or whether they are your enemies.

If you are not a Christian, I would urge you to think about this love that God has shown us. God loves us so much that he sent his one and only Son, Jesus, to be our Savior. Jesus lived the perfect life that we don't live, and he laid down his life for us as an atoning sacrifice. His death pays the penalty for our failure to love God and others. Everyone who trusts Jesus, everyone who truly loves Jesus, and everyone who follows him is forgiven of that failure to love. Everyone who is united to Jesus will experience God's love forever. Everyone who has the Holy

Spirit in their life is adopted as God's child and will never be disowned. That is a love that you can experience today if you turn to Jesus in faith.