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1 John 2:3-11

Third Message

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# SHINING GOD'S LIGHT

*SERIES: WHAT GREAT LOVE!*

I'm excited by what the Lord is doing among us as a church at our 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary. As we ponder the next 25 years of our church life, it's important that we remember who we are individually and collectively as God's people. We must not lose sight of our radical distinctiveness as salt and light in the world. We are change agents. In this dark world we are called not to hide our light, but to let God's light shine out from us with such brilliance that we bring glory to our Father in heaven.

As we have been reflecting on 1 John, we can see that this is John's passion too. He does not want the believers under his care to fall prey to the pervading philosophies of the world and lose their bright light and distinctive flavor. Last week, in an effort to reassure these believers, John exposed three claims by the false teachers who were trying to lead them astray. Fundamentally, these teachers claimed that their special knowledge and lack of sin brought them into intimate fellowship with God.

John contradicted each claim and declared that one of the identifying marks of a genuine Christian is not the lack of sin, but the confession of our sin. Those who have true fellowship with God confess their sin and receive forgiveness and cleansing through Jesus Christ, our righteous advocate and atoning sacrifice.

Today, John takes issue with two more claims (claims #4 and #5) by the false teachers. They believed that enlightenment was more important than ethics and righteousness. They professed that they could have intimate fellowship with God and yet live in a way that was contrary to his character. Once again John exposes their error and contradicts their claim, revealing two more essential and identifying marks of those who have genuine fellowship with God.

John continues his argument, attacking head-on their fourth false claim, in verses 2:3-6.

**Claim #4: Fellowship with God is possible without obedience to him**

**We know that we have come to know him if we keep his commands. Those who say, "I know him," but do not do what he commands are liars, and the truth is not in them. But if anyone obeys his word, love for God is truly made complete in them. This is how we know we are in him: Whoever claims to live in him must live as Jesus did. (1 John 2:3-6 TNIV)**

This fourth claim by the false teachers is that fellowship with God is possible without obedience to him. This is similar

to their previous claim that fellowship with God is possible while walking in the darkness. John emphasizes the point that those who claim to be in God's light and yet reject obedience to him are liars. The truth is not in them. John is not simply saying that someone who fails to obey God has missed the point, but that such people are seriously disconnected from God. Jesus said:

**"No good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. Each tree is recognized by its own fruit... Good people bring good things out of the good stored up in their heart, and evil people bring evil things out of the evil stored up in their heart... "Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say?" (Luke 6:43, 44, 46).**

Just as you can tell a tree by its fruit, those who love Jesus and truly have fellowship with him as Lord bring forth the fruit of obedience in their life. As Jesus said, "If you love me, keep my commands" (John 14:15). "Whoever has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me" (John 14:21). "Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. He who does not love me will not obey my teaching" (John 14:23,24).

John says our love for God is truly made complete, it has reached its goal when it is expressed in obedience to him. Our actions speak louder than our words. Our love reaches its full bloom, not in our pious or sentimental verbal expression, but in our obedience to God's commands.

What does that obedience look like? John holds up the earthly life of Jesus as a model to be imitated. He says those who claim to know and live in God will behave like Jesus. What does it mean to live as Jesus lived? How did he live at home, at work, with friends and enemies, with neighbors and strangers?

The gospels paint a vivid and detailed picture of Jesus. His obedience to his heavenly Father did not manifest itself in a rigid, narrow, harsh and dispassionate life, focused on conforming to rules and regulations. It resulted in an attractive life full of beauty, joy, courage, spontaneity and strength. His life expressed the life of his Father. As Jesus himself said, "Very truly I tell you, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does" (John 5:19).

Jesus obeyed, not out of a sense of duty, but out of love for his heavenly Father. As Jesus imitated his Father, so too must we. The apostle Paul echoes what John is saying: "Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk

in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (Eph 5:1,2). To live like Jesus is to live full of kindness, grace and humility, walking in the way of love and obedience to God.

As we reflect on these words we must remember that John is writing to Christians who were being told by false teachers that their faith was insufficient, and their fellowship with God inadequate, because they didn't know enough. If only they had more information and deeper revelation their spiritual life would be on track.

John could not more forcefully disagree. Obedience, not knowledge, is a greater indicator of the nature of their fellowship with God. John's intent is not to induce guilt about what they do not know or shame them for times of disobedience, but to reassure them about the eternal and abundant life they have in Christ. They already know plenty about the things of God, and their light shines brightly when they obey what they already know.

If you are feeling stuck and defeated in your Christian walk, pay attention to these words from John. If you are feeling discouraged in your faith, and distant from God, don't worry so much about downloading more sermons to listen to, but simply and faithfully move forward in obedience to what you have already received from God.

We are not saved by our good works, but as we look back and see the fruit of obedience in our life, we can rejoice that we are indeed children of God who know him, love him, live like him and are loved by him. The false teachers on the other hand cannot claim to know God and be in relationship with him while at the same time rejecting obedience to him. Their conduct reveals their claim to be a lie.

Now John moves on to confront the fifth claim made by the false teachers (verses 7-11).

#### **Claim #5: Fellowship with God is possible without love for one another**

**Dear friends, I am not writing you a new command but an old one, which you have had since the beginning. This old command is the message you have heard. Yet I am writing you a new command; its truth is seen in him and in you, because the darkness is passing and the true light is already shining. Those who claim to be in the light but hate a fellow believer are still in the darkness. Those who love their fellow believers live in the light, and there is nothing in them to make them stumble. But those who hate a fellow believer are in the darkness and walk around in the darkness; they do not know where they are going, because the darkness has blinded them. (2:7-11)**

The fifth claim by the false teachers is that fellowship with God is possible without love for one another. John says this is nonsense. The command to love one another comes from the very heart and mouth of God. When Jesus was asked which is the greatest commandment in the law, he replied, “Love

the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments” (Matt 22:36-40).

This is the kind of love that was seen in Jesus, and this old command has been made new because he has made it possible for this love to be seen in us as well, “I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit” (John 15:5). This is how we live and love like Christ: we abide in him and draw our life from him.

A new day has dawned. We are indwelt and sealed by the Holy Spirit. God is doing a remarkable work in us, transforming us from the inside out. We were once darkness, but now we are light in the Lord (Eph 5:8). There is nothing in us to make us stumble. In Christ the old has gone and the new has come. We are completely new creatures.

Though we still battle against our flesh, sin and the devil, the darkness is passing and the true light of the Spirit is already shining forth from us, in “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Gal 5:22-23). To hate a fellow believer therefore is to reveal a heart void of the presence and light of the Spirit of God. Such people are blinded by their darkness. They stumble around in their sin, hating one another.

Notice there is no grey area. There is no in-between, only love and hate. We either love and live in the light, or we hate and stumble in the darkness. We may believe there are good reasons not to love a fellow believer. Maybe he or she is difficult or has harmed or offended us in some way. But if we feed and nurse our hatred instead of seeking reconciliation, healing and forgiveness, then we are walking in darkness and not in the light.

John says that living in the light and loving our brothers and sisters in Christ go hand-in-hand. Love for one another is to be so evident among us that by it we are known to be followers of Jesus. “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:34-35).

What is the mark of a Christian? It is not a well-worn Bible, or a fish sticker on the bumper of your car, or a cross necklace around your neck. The fundamental identifying trait of a Christian is our love for one another.

What does this love look like? It is so much more than just a warm feeling in your heart. A clear indication of love in action can be seen in the various “one another” commands found in the Bible. These are not a to-do list, but reveal many ways our obedience to God and love for one another come to fruition.

How do we mature in love? Where do we express the love of God within us? The Bible makes it clear we grow in love as we abide in Christ and use the gifts he has given us. Each of us is

hand-crafted to love in our own special ways. God has given each of us spiritual gifts to uniquely express our love for the Lord and each other. No one is left out. Paul said:

**Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ...From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work (Eph 4:11-13, 16).**

What a privilege, that the various gifts of the body, in unity through the Spirit, not only build-up each other but also reach out to the world in love as God shapes us and leads us into a Christ-centered life. The sacrifice of Jesus on the cross is the greatest example of love the world has ever known. It is that kind of love that we as the body of Christ must be known for.

This kind of love is not a solitary emotion or experience but is only expressed in relationship with others. Our Christian journey was never intended to be a solo experience. We are a family, and God made us for fellowship with him and with each other.

There is, however, a dichotomy at work in our life. A Gallup poll revealed that "Americans are among the loneliest people in the world."<sup>1</sup> In the midst of our busy lives, crowded workplaces and overcommitted schedules, we retreat into isolation and often feel alone. We come home from work, pull right into the garage and retreat to our kitchen and living room. For the most part we don't spend much time with our friends, and even less with our neighbors.

But our isolation comes at a price. Though we might be acquainted with lots of people, how many do we really know and how many truly know us? Yes, we are busy, but I believe an even more fundamental reason that many of us don't participate in community is because we don't want to reveal our true selves to others. We are afraid of rejection. But the family of God is to be a community of love where we welcome and accept one another. We have no higher calling than to love one another and enter into all the mess and all the joy that comes with that.

This loving and welcoming environment is the kind community the world craves. Even Starbucks knows this. They have an employment card that reads: "When you work at Starbucks, you can make a difference in someone's day by creating an environment where neighbors and friends can get together and reconnect while enjoying a great coffee experience." Starbucks, a company whose primary commodity is coffee beans, believes part of its corporate purpose is to create environments to connect people so meaningfully that it changes the quality of their lives. They understand that we all look for a place that nurtures connection with others. Their success has proven

them right. I believe as a church we can do far better than Starbucks. We have so much more to offer.

A wonderful description of our Christian experience of oneness and fellowship can be found in the early church, given in the second chapter of Acts:

**They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles. And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common; and they began selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need. Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved (Acts 2:42-47).**

The life and love expressed and enjoyed in these homes broke down the walls and became a witness to their unbelieving neighbors. The atmosphere was charged with a sense of awe, unity and praise. This is the kind of life and love we want to express as a church body. Our legacy at PBCC will not be what happens inside this church building. It will be the light and love that you shine in your home, in your workplace, at your school and on the soccer fields and parks. The home churches described in Acts became the life of the neighborhood. God was at work in their midst, and spiritual and numerical growth were evident. Who wouldn't want to investigate and participate in a community of such joy, sincerity, intimacy, generosity and love?

The warmth and glow of Christian community reminds me of the way barbecue briquettes are constructed. When you put them together, the fire glows and they get hot. If you isolate one it cools off quickly, it loses the fire. But when they stick together, there's fire, because they feed off each other. Everyone is drawn to the warmth and the light of the fire. I believe God designed us to work much the same way.

My wife Amy and I from day one of our marriage have been busy in ministry. Pastoring in Pleasanton and here in Cupertino, we had regular youth meetings and special events. But we felt something was missing. We had lots of friends, but we weren't sharing our lives with others very well. If I had to put a word to it, we sensed a deep need for "community." We yearned to "do life" together with others; to be companions on this journey of life and encourage one another toward greater intimacy with God in all the ups and downs of life; to have true fellowship with others.

We knew we couldn't wait for community to come to us. We would have to make the commitment and take the risk to open ourselves up to others. We made the first move and asked a fellowship group if they would take us in. To our delight they warmly and generously welcomed us into their community

family. It is hard to describe how much of a blessing these precious brothers and sisters in Christ are to us.

As I look to the future of PBCC, I have a passion and vision for an ever growing and vibrant small group ministry. I want everyone in our body to be in a community where they can know and be known, love and be loved, a place where they can discover and use their spiritual gifts, where they can reach out and shine their light into the world, bringing glory to God. “You are the light of the world...let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven” (Matt 5:14,16).

I know that God is already at work in many of you, drawing you away from isolation into community. In just the last few weeks alone, Mark Landrith and I have received several requests for help in placing people into home fellowship groups. This is an exciting opportunity, but I’m sad to say it’s getting harder and harder to place people because we don’t have nearly enough groups.

It is my hope and prayer that as you hear the call to love one another in community that the Lord will lay upon your heart a strong desire not only to participate in a small group but to start and lead a new one. Whether you minister as a single or couple, we need you, and we are ready and willing to support and equip you in this adventure.

We are all called to follow the example of our Heavenly Father, to live like Jesus Christ, to love supremely, sacrificially and generously. This is not the kind of love the world gives, but the kind that comes from the presence of God within us. Our faith cannot be divorced from love. Jesus insists that it is our love in action that makes such a powerful witness to the world of God’s glory.

I am reminded of the story David Roper tells of his friend who pastors a church in a small mountain community near Boise. Behind the church is a field of grass and a sandy beach that runs alongside a gentle stream. The church members like to picnic there and enjoy the beauty of that place. One day, a man in the congregation expressed concern over the possibility of the church being sued if an outsider used the property and somehow was injured. He suggested posting a sign on the site informing visitors that this was private property and warning them away. The pastor decided to post a sign. It read: “Warning! Anyone using this beach may, at any moment, be surrounded by people who love you.” What a great example! This is the message we want to declare in word and deed to those within and outside the church: “You are loved here!”

As we look to the next 25 years, we can take to heart what we have learned from John these last few weeks about who God is, who we are, and who we are to be. We are called, gifted and empowered to live and love as Jesus did. We worship, serve and are loved by a God who is light. We are children of the light, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, and given the wonderful opportunity and blessing to be messengers of the good news. Each of us is a uniquely crafted vessel, pouring out God’s love upon one another and upon the world. What a privilege!

May the Lord our God make your love increase and overflow for each other, and may your light shine so brilliantly that the world may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven. To him be all the glory now and forevermore! Amen.

1. George Gallup Jr., *The People’s Religion* (New York: MacMillan), 1989.

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