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1 John 2:3-11

Third Message

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WALKING IN LOVE

SERIES: LIVING CONFIDENTLY IN THE LIGHT

As a child, I enjoyed the television game show *To Tell the Truth*. The show centered on three guests, each claiming to be a certain individual who had accomplished something special or unusual. One of the guests was the real person, the other two were imposters. The panel of contestants would ask each of these guests certain questions and try to determine which one was telling the truth. At the end of the questioning, the contestants would give their reasons as to why they believed Guest #1, 2 or 3 was the real person. Then Bud Collyer would give his famous line: “Will the real So-and-So please stand up?” After a teasing bob up and down from the other two guests, the real one would stand. Often the audience would gasp in amazement. My brothers and I always voted and were usually wrong. The guests lied so well it was difficult to know which one was the real person. I remember thinking at times, “That’s not the real person. Guest #2 answered the questions much better than he.”

In a very crude sense, 1 John is a version of *To Tell the Truth*. The question that the apostle John asks is, “Will the real believers please stand up?” You see, a group of people had left the church, claiming to know God yet their lives and teaching were quite different from those who remained. They even tried to influence and challenge the other believers to leave the church as well. Since there was much confusion about their doctrine, it was vital that Christians know what lay at the heart of Christianity. Thus, in his later days, John recorded his final thoughts on the nature of the faith so that once and for all we would get it straight.

I mentioned to you in introducing this book that one of its primary purposes is to give those who are already believers a greater assurance as to their salvation so that they might live confidently in the light. John does this through a series of tests that we can use to determine whether or not we have been born again. In fact, there are three tests woven throughout the book, two of which we will see in chapter 2, verses 3-11. First, there is a moral test, the test of obedience. Then there is a social test, the test of love. Finally, there is a doctrinal test, the test of truth. The rest of the epistle is essentially an elaboration and application of these tests. We will become quite familiar with them before we have completed our study of this book.

So far, John has been dealing with the historical basis for our faith, the nature of what we believe as Christians. Now, he will speak to the issue of how we can truly tell whether or not someone knows God. The structure of the passage is clear. In the preceding section, John recorded three false claims of the heretics, each introduced by the phrase, “If we say that we have.” Now he introduces two positive assurances the true Christian can have with the phrase “by this we know that” in verses 3 and 5. This is a characteristic phrase of the epistle.

John’s emphasis on knowledge is purposeful. He does not say, “By this we know that we are Christians,” or “By this we know that we are born again.” Rather he says, “By this, we know that we have come to know Him.” The reason for his emphasis on knowledge is

the nature of the false teaching John is attacking. It was an early form of a heresy which later became known as gnosticism—a complex combination of pagan, Jewish, and semi-Christian beliefs. Its two primary emphases were the supremacy of knowledge and the impurity of matter. They called themselves “the knowing ones,” which is essentially what “gnosticism” means. The Greek word for knowledge is *gnosis*. To them, salvation came from an initiation into the mystical and allegedly superior knowledge that only a few possessed.

Since the gnostics made so much of this idea of knowledge, John uses it. He says in essence, “So you want to talk about knowledge... fine. What are the characteristics of one who really knows God?” The gnostics, in particular, laid claim to an intimate, mystical knowledge of God. They thought they had been enlightened with the true *gnosis*. John does not deny the possibility of knowing God, but he insists that any such experience is validated by certain consequences. In this passage, John gives two of the necessary consequences.

Let us look at the first test given in verses 3-6.

I. Becoming a Christian Produces a Desire to Obey— There is a Submissive Will

And by this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments. The one who says, “I have come to know Him,” and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him; but whoever keeps His word, in him the love of God has truly been perfected. By this we know that we are in Him: the one who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked. (1 John 2:3-6 NASB)

How can we be sure we have come to know Jesus Christ? John is speaking about the present reality of an experience that occurred in the past—the conversion experience of the believer. Notice the tense of the verbs: “By this we know that we *have come* to know Him, if we *are now keeping* His commandments.” Only by my present willingness to keep his commandments do I know that I have a valid relationship with him. Only if we obey him can we claim to have come to know him.

To know him is not just having accurate information about him. Rather it is to be intimately acquainted with him. The word “keep” expresses the idea of watchful, observant obedience. It is not the person who claims to be a Christian and to know God who is presumptuous, but he whose claim is contradicted by his life. Verse 4 says he is a liar.

Now we all have times in our lives when we have disobeyed. All of us have areas in which we struggle. John is not speaking about perfection. Remember he already warned that if we say we have no sin we are lying. But the key question is, “Are you willing to obey him?” When God makes his will clear, is your heart committed to following him? When someone confronts you with truth, what is your posture? You may have problems in your Christian life and ar-

eas in which you are particularly weak and vulnerable, but you know to whom you belong and who has the ultimate authority in your life. In your heart, what he says goes; he is the final decision-maker.

We need understand what John is not saying. He is not saying that we can know God by attempting to keep his commandments. That is impossible! We cannot reverse the order. We come to know God through faith alone, receiving his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. When we do this, he comes quietly and invisibly into our lives and begins his work in our hearts. One primary sign of his work is a change in our attitudes—a softening of our wills and a desire to obey.

Let me give you an example. I mentioned a few weeks ago that I had the privilege of being involved in a young man's conversion. He asked Christ into his life after reading about our Lord in John's gospel. I am now in the midst of doing premarital counseling with him and his fiancée. I always give couples a personality test which helps to reveal the potential adjustments they will have to make in living together. His personality test scores revealed him to be an extremely dominant, hostile person. When I asked him about this, he and his fiancée confirmed the test results and gave me examples of his behavior. However he also admitted being a bit perplexed as he answered the questions because so much had changed in his life. In fact, the test score was a bit surprising to me because I only saw a submissive will. I did not see that arrogant hostility at all. He has already experienced what John is talking about here. He has already seen God producing a submissive will and a desire to obey. There will still be struggles in his life. When he relies on the flesh, he will still act as ugly as he did before, but the issue of Lordship is settled.

There are two observations we can make about obedience from these verses.

A. Obedience Validates Our Love

John says, "Whoever keeps His word, in him the love of God has been truly perfected." Obedience in the believer perfects or completes his love. The phrase "the love of God" could be taken three ways, referring to God's love for us, to love like God's love, or to our love for God. In this context, I believe John is referring our love for God. Our love is "perfected"—it is made complete. I am sure John recalls Jesus' teaching in the upper room when he said to his disciples, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." The proof of our love is loyalty. John is saying that true love for God is not expressed in sentimental language or a mystical experience but in a submissive will, in obedience.

B. Obedience Manifests Our Relationship

John states the same principle again in a slightly different form in the latter part of verses 5-6: "By this we know that we are in Him: the one who says he abides in him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked."

Being "in Him" and "abiding in Him" are equivalent to the phrases "know Him" in verses 3-4 and "love Him" in verse 5. Being a Christian consists of a personal relationship to God in Christ—knowing him, loving him, and abiding in him, as a branch abides in a vine (John 15). Our obedience reveals our relationship.

Notice that our obedience involves obeying the example of Christ as well as his commandments—"we are to walk in the same manner as He walked." We are to live not merely by rules but by an example. We are to follow Jesus, to be his disciples.

That is the first test to determine whether we have come to know God. Becoming a Christian produces a desire to obey—there is a

submissive will. Spurgeon once said, "An unchanged life is the sign of an uncleansed heart." If there has been no basic change in one's life, there is nothing that indicates to him, or to anybody else, that he has been delivered from the bondage of Satan and the power of evil into the kingdom of God.

There is a second test revealed in verses 7-11.

II. Becoming a Christian Produces an Ability to Love— There is a Caring Heart

Beloved, I am not writing a new commandment to you, but an old commandment which you have had from the beginning; the old commandment is the word which you have heard. On the other hand, I am writing a new commandment to you, which is true in Him and in you, because the darkness is passing away, and the true light is already shining. The one who says he is in the light and yet hates his brother is in the darkness until now. The one who loves his brother abides in the light and there is no cause for stumbling in him. But the one who 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. (2:7-11)

John now applies a second test to professing Christians, which is moral not social. Since he is about to write about "brotherly love," he appropriately addresses his readers as his "beloved." In urging them to love one another, he assures them of his love for them.

John has been writing about the Christian's obligation to keep God's commandments; he now singles out one of them which he says is in one sense "old" and in another sense "new." He does not explicitly reveal the nature of this commandment, but the essence of verses 9-11 is love, and John would have remembered what Jesus said in John 13:34-35, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another." Thus, we know that the commandment he is speaking about concerns brotherly love.

Let us make two observations about this test.

A. To Be in Christ Is to Know Genuine Love

Was this commandment old or new? It is both.

It was old in that his readers had learned it before. They had known it from the outset of their upbringing. So basic was it to the teaching they had received that John could even equate it with "the word that you have heard." This commandment was first given in Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18, which instructed man to "love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might" and secondly to "love your neighbor as yourself."

The commandment was old in that it existed before Christ's coming. But it was also new in so many ways! Jesus made an old commandment new. How?

The commandment was new in the extent to which it reached. The Jews of Jesus' day had watered down the Mosaic teaching of loving one's neighbor so that they could love or hate anyone they wanted. Jesus taught in the parable of the good Samaritan that our neighbor whom we must love is anyone who needs our compassion and help, irrespective of race or rank. This was a radically new commandment to a world sharply divided by prejudice—between masters and slaves and between Jews and Gentiles. The Gentiles regarded the Jews as

barbarians. The Jews had the reputation of being the haters of the world. There also existed the chasm between man and woman. The world of that day seemed hopelessly divided, yet Jesus changed it all. Alexander Maclaren describes the change:

Barbarian, Scythian, bond and free, male and female, Jew and Greek, learned and ignorant, clasped hands and sat down at one table, and felt themselves all one in Christ Jesus. They were ready to break all the other bonds, and to yield to the uniting forces that streamed out from His Cross. There never had been anything like it. No wonder that the world began to babble about sorcery and conspiracies and complicity in unnameable vices. It was only that the disciples were obeying the new commandment, and a new thing had come into the world—a community held together by love and not by geographical accidents or linguistic affinities, or the iron fetters of the conqueror... The new commandment made a new thing, and the world wondered.

The commandment was new in the lengths to which it would go. Jesus said to love one another “as I have loved you.” In these words, we can see the radical nature of the commandment. While it is difficult to love our neighbor as ourselves, it is far more demanding to love others as Christ loves them. Our love often depends upon the lovableness of the object. The kind of love we normally express is described in a sick little poem I came across some years ago entitled “My Girl:”

Steve’s girl is rich and haughty;
My girl is poor as clay.
Steve’s girl is young and pretty;
My girl looks like a bale of hay.
Steve’s girl is smart and clever;
My girl is dumb, but good.
But would I trade my girl for Steve’s?
You bet your life I would!

The nature of Christ’s love is different. His is unconditional and sacrificial. And here we must look to the cross. For it is at the cross where we see the depth of God’s love, and it is not seen to the that degree anywhere else: “Greater love has no man than this, than one lay down his love for his friends.”

The commandment was new to the degree to which it was realized. John says the truth is seen “in Him and in you, because the darkness is passing away, and the true light is already shining.” In this verse “true” means “genuine, real.” Jesus is the true or real light of which physical light is just a reflection. Jesus is the substance of which everything else before him was shadow. And Jesus’ coming has inaugurated a new age.

All Jews were familiar with the division of history into “this present age,” and “the age to come” (Matt 12:32). The New Testament teaches that the age to come arrived with Jesus who inaugurated it. Thus, the two ages overlap. As Christians, we have been delivered out of this present evil age (Gal 1:4) and have already begun to taste the powers of the age to come (Heb 6:5; 1 Cor 10:11).

Jesus is the true light just as he is the true bread and the true vine. Therefore, true love, just like true righteousness, is seen not only in him but in those who are made alive in him as well. When Jesus said to love one another “as I have loved you,” he was speaking not only of the content of his love but also the manner.

In John’s gospel, we find the secret of how Christ loved: “Just as the Father Has loved me; I also loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments you will abide in my love; just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love.” Jesus was

able to love his disciples because he was dependent on the Father, and the Father filled his life with love. Jesus said the same is true for us now. As we stay close to Christ and live dependently on him, he will fill our lives with love; and we will love others not because they are lovable but because they get in our way, they cross our path. This is John’s point.

So this new commandment remains new because it belongs to the new age which has been ushered in by the shining of the true light in which we are all partaking. In verses 9-11, John reinforces this truth by showing that Jesus Christ, the true light, is the light of love. Therefore, to walk in the light is to walk in love. Light and love belong together, just as darkness and hatred do.

As in the first test, John gives an example. The falsity of one’s claim to be in the light is betrayed here not by disobedience, but by hatred. The genuineness of a man’s faith is seen both in his right relationship with God and with man. The second principle is found in these verses.

B. A Loving Heart Produces a Clear Eye

These verses teach us that our love and hatred not only reveal whether we are in the light or in the darkness, but that they actually contribute towards the light or darkness in which we are walking. And as a result there is no cause for stumbling in him. The one who walks in the light has more light day by day. The one who walks in the darkness is increasingly darkened.

If we love people, we see clearly how to avoid sinning against them. Hatred distorts our perspective. We do not first misjudge people and then hate them as a result; our view of them is already distorted by our darkened perspective. Only the loving heart sees straight, thinks clearly and makes us balanced in our outlook, judgments and conduct.

This was revealed to me recently while reading the true story of Teddy Stallard (*Who Changed The Price Tags?*, by Tony Campolo),¹ who by his own admission was an unattractive, unmotivated little boy. He was difficult to like. Especially for a school teacher who all day long faced his dead-pan, expressionless, unfocused stare. Although his fifth grade teacher said she loved all her students, Miss Thompson had to admit that deep down she wasn’t being honest. She didn’t like him, and she even received a certain perverse pleasure in marking his papers with red ink and writing the F’s with a flair. Her view of him was already distorted by her perspective, but she should have known better. As his teacher, she had his records, and she knew more about him than she wanted to admit:

First Grade: Teddy shows promise with his work and attitude, but he has a poor home situation.

Second Grade: Teddy could do better. Mother is seriously ill. He receives little help at home.

Third Grade: Teddy is a good boy but too serious. He is a slow learner. His mother died this year.

Fourth Grade: Teddy is very slow but well behaved. His father shows no interest.

At Christmas, her class all brought her presents in pretty wrappings, and gathered round to watch her open them. She was surprised when she received a gift from Teddy. It was crudely wrapped in brown paper loosely held together with tape. When she opened it, out fell a gaudy rhinestone bracelet with half the stones missing and a bottle of cheap perfume. The children began to giggle, but she had

enough sense to put on the bracelet and apply some of the perfume on her wrist. She asked the class, "Doesn't it smell lovely?"

When school was over and the children had left, Teddy lingered behind. He slowly came over to her desk and said softly, "Miss Thompson, you smell just like my mother. And her bracelet looks real pretty on you, too. I'm glad you liked my presents." When Teddy left, Miss Thompson got down on her knees and asked God to forgive her.

The next day when the children came to school, they were welcomed by a new teacher. Mrs Thompson had become a new person. She was no longer just a teacher; she had become an agent of God. (Notice her clear eye and changed perspective!) She was now a person committed to loving her children and doing things for them that would live on after her. By the end of that school year, Teddy showed dramatic improvement and had caught up with most of the students.

She did not hear from Teddy for a long time. Then one day she received a note that said:

Dear Miss Thompson: I wanted you to be the first to know. I will be graduating second in my class. Love, Teddy Stallard.

Four years later, she received another note:

Dear Miss Thompson: They just told me I will be graduating first in my class. I wanted you to be the first to know. The university has not been easy, but I liked it. Love, Teddy Stallard.

Finally, she received another note:

Dear Miss Thompson: As of today, I am Theodore Stallard, M.D. How about that? I wanted you to be the first to know. I am getting married next month, the 27th to be exact. I want you to come and sit where my mother would sit if she were alive. You are the only family I have now; Dad died last year. Love, Teddy Stallard.

Miss Thompson went to that wedding. She deserved to sit where his mother would have sat; she had earned that right. She had done something for Teddy that he could never forget.

I must admit that this truth is not only difficult for you to hear, it has had a profound impact on my own life as well. It wasn't that many years ago, I had to admit that, although my family knew intellectually that I loved them, in many ways they did not feel my love. God had to do some major surgery in my life to teach me what was really important.

Parents, do you know what your children need? More than any books on parenting, more than any techniques, they need to see a mother and father with a submissive will and a loving heart. Those two things will foster the genuine faith of your children more than anything else you can do.

This is also what your neighbors long to see. In fact, this is what the world is waiting to see. Jesus told us: "By this will all men know that you are my disciples when you have love for one another." This love is ours in the person of Jesus Christ who freely gave of himself for us. If you were the only person on earth, he would have died for you. We are all Teddy Stallards.

At Christmas, we are often at a loss as to what to give to people. Let me close offering a few suggestions: This year give some of yourself away. Give an hour of your time to someone who needs you. Give a note of encouragement to someone who is down. Give a hug of affirmation to someone in your family. Give a meal you prepared to someone who is sick. Give a word of compassion to someone who suffered a loss. Give an act of kindness to someone who is often overlooked. And maybe our neighbors won't be so amazed when the real believers do stand up.

1. Though widely circulated as factual, the story of Teddy Stallard is actually a work of fiction: "Three Letters from Teddy" by Elizabeth Ballaney, published in *Home Life* magazine in 1976.

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