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*Cultivating Authentic Christian Community: A Study in 1 John*

## **Love and Hate**

**1 John 2:7-11**

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It was the night that Jesus was to be arrested that He gathered with His disciples, His leadership team, in an upper room for one last teaching session before He would be nailed to a cross. The disciples didn't know it, but this would begin the final hours before the parade of terror that would ultimately end with Jesus on the cross.

I would imagine what Jesus wanted in those hours would have been authentic community: encouragement, love, and just sharing this time with His friends before the events would unfold. But that's not what He received, because the disciples had something else on their minds – they were arguing about who was the greatest in the kingdom. Their focus was on themselves and their positioning in Jesus' kingdom.

In that culture you walked through dry, dusty streets, so when you entered into a home it was customary that the hostess or a servant would wash your feet. In this particular room there was no hostess, so it was the responsibility of the lowest member to wash the feet of the others. The problem is, when you're arguing about who is the greatest in the kingdom, nobody is going to disqualify themselves by washing somebody else's feet. So they reclined with dirty feet.

It was then that Jesus, the God of the universe, who had come in the flesh, picked up a basin of water and a towel and began to wash feet. Now obviously I wasn't there, but I would guess that at that moment the tension was off the meter – as these disciples had been severely rebuked without Jesus saying a word.

Jesus finished washing their feet, and then He said a most unusual thing. He said, "A new commandment I give you, that you love one another as I have just loved you . . . By this all people will know that you are a follower of Me, if you so love one another." (John 13:34,35) Those are very sobering words. Jesus was saying that our love for one another should be so radically different from anything you'd find in the culture that it would immediately identify us as a follower of Jesus. In order for that to happen, it would have to be so counterculture – so radically different.

Let me ask you a question: If we were to take a video of your life this past week, every moment of every day, and we were to show it on the screen, could we identify you as a follower of Jesus Christ by how you treated other people? Let's take out going to church, reading the Bible, praying before meals – those things that would give it away – and let's just look at how you treated other people. Would there be enough evidence there to clearly identify you as being different from the rest of the culture, by how you treated people at work, school, home, and in your neighborhood? That's what Jesus was talking about. That should be our identifying mark as followers of Jesus.

That is what we see want to look at today in 1 John, chapter 2. We've been studying in 1 John how to cultivate authentic Christian community, and the first thing we learned is that Jesus Christ is the cornerstone of community. The person and work of Jesus Christ is the

basis upon which we come together. That's why it is *Christian* community: we are sharing our lives *in Christ*.

The second thing we learned is that when we come together to experience our lives in Christ, because God is light, then this community must be lived in the light. That means it is authentic. It's real; it's genuine. It's not where people are pretending to be something that they're not, but they're real.

When that happens, then our sin is exposed. There is no way to experience authentic community in the light without exposing one another's sins. That is going to happen. And at that moment we either flee back into the darkness and we say, "I have no sin." Or we confess our sin, and "He is faithful and just to forgive us our sin and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." (1 John 1:9) John says if we choose to stay in the light and confess our sin, then we walk in obedience and we become like Jesus, which is the goal.

He has just finished telling us that, when he begins to talk more about what it would mean to be like Jesus. Obviously, it's to love as He loved. So in 1 John 2:7, he says, "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."

John says, "This isn't anything new. This isn't something that you've not heard before. This is an old commandment." As a matter of fact, it was thousands of years old. Go all the way back to the Old Testament, clear back to the book of Leviticus, where the Law clearly stated that we were to love the Lord our God with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength, and to love our neighbor as ourself. That was taught for thousands of years. When Jesus walked among the people, He was asked, "What is the greatest commandment?" He didn't hesitate: "To love the Lord your God with all your heart, and to love your neighbor as yourself."

That command was thousands of years old. The reason that's important is because the false teachers who were causing so much division in the church were those we've identified as the Gnostics. They believed that they were enlightened, so that's why John spends so much time talking about the metaphor of light and darkness. The Gnostics claimed they were enlightened – that they had more light – because they believed they knew more. That's what the word *Gnostic* means: "to know." They felt they were "in the know." They thought they had spiritual knowledge that was greater than everybody else, which would put them on a totally different spiritual plane than the rest of the people.

So John keeps saying, "You say you're in the light, but you're actually in the darkness." In this case he's talking about these false teachers, because they claim to have new information. They claim to be enlightened and have new revelation, and it's on that basis that they feel superior. So John is countering that by saying, "This isn't new. I'm not going to tell you anything new. This is hundreds of years old."

All too often there are people who claim to have discovered something new from this book – something that scholars for thousands of years have never been able to find – but all of a sudden somebody finds it. They write a book about it, and if you supposedly read their book it will change your life. I want to caution you to beware of that, because there's nothing new.

Our problem isn't that we need to keep running to the bookstore to find something new. Our problem is we aren't obedient to what we already know, to what's old. That's exactly the point that John is making when He says, "This isn't new." This had been around for thousands of years. The problem with the false teachers was not that they needed something new. The problem was they hadn't obeyed something that had been around a long time.

Verse 8: "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." So ... which is it? He says, "It's not new; it's old. And on the other hand, it's new." We say, "Okay, is it new? Or is it old?"

Well, actually it's both. There was a Greek word that meant "new" in the sense of chronology or time. But that's not this word. This is a different Greek word that means "new" in the sense of quality – what we would call "raising the bar." What he refers to "new" in that verse, he is saying, "This is new because it was found in Him (Jesus)."

For thousands of years people heard about the love of God and that we were to love as God loves. But it wasn't until Jesus became flesh and blood that it was clearly fleshed out as to what that would look like. When Jesus walked this earth, He modeled the love of God in human flesh. No longer did anyone have to guess what that would look like; it was there for all to see. What happened is that Jesus raised the bar of what it means to love. He set a whole new standard, so it was new in that sense.

When Jesus walked this earth, He loved the people that the rest of the world had deemed unlovable. He loved the people that the religious establishment had said were of no value. He broke through those barriers. He loved the prostitutes; He loved the tax-gatherers; He loved the sinners; He loved the poor. He loved the people nobody else would love. There were people who hadn't experienced love in years ... maybe never ... until they met Jesus. And He loved in a completely different way.

We could spend weeks talking about all the ways that Jesus manifested that love when He walked this earth, but one of the things that captures my attention every time I read through the Gospels is how sinners were so attracted to Jesus. You can't miss it. You read through the Gospels, and you can see how they flocked to Him in droves.

If we, as the Church, are supposed to represent Jesus on earth, then sinners ought to flock to us. But often they don't. Oh, we have our reasons and say, "It's because we don't compromise, and we take a stand." We have all of our reasons, but none of those hold water when you stop and think about how they flocked to Jesus. Jesus didn't compromise. Jesus didn't overlook sin. But they saw something in the heart of Jesus they couldn't resist. What they saw was that Jesus authentically loved them.

Now I think we understand, as the people of God, that we're supposed to love our neighbor. We're supposed to love the unlovely. We're supposed to love that person in our dorm, that person in our school, that neighbor, that person at work. We know that's the Christianly thing to do, so we often try to do our duty. We try to do it because that's what a good Christian should do. But that's sometimes all it is – we're trying to just keep the rules. The problem is that it isn't in our heart. We don't really love them; we're just trying to do what we think we're supposed to do. And people can read that like a book.

The difference is that Jesus loved them. Jesus *loved* them. And they knew that. You know, it's easy to love when everybody's watching and the spotlight is on. It's a different thing when nobody's there to see it – when we love the unlovely, knowing they can't probably love us back. I'm reminded of a poem by Ruth Calkin, when she says:

You know, Lord, how I serve You  
With great emotional fervor  
In the limelight.  
You know how eagerly I speak for You  
At the women's club.  
You know how I effervesce when I promote  
A fellowship group.  
You know my genuine enthusiasm  
At a Bible study.

But how would I react, I wonder  
If You pointed to a basin of water  
And asked me to wash the calloused feet  
Of a bent and wrinkled old woman  
Day after day  
Month after month  
In a room where nobody saw  
And nobody knew.

- Ruth Harms Calkin, *Tell Me Again, Lord, I Forget*

That love would have to come from our hearts. Let me illustrate it this way. There are some people who have this intrinsic quality, I'm not exactly sure what it is, but they just connect with animals. I mean, animals just come to them. Now there are other people who have a different quality with animals, and my wife has this. Animals come to them ... and bite them! But there are people who seem to have this touch with animals, and it just works. My youngest daughter, Jayme, is one of those. Cats, dogs, horses – whatever animal it is. If you were to take five people out in the country and line them up along the fence where there were horses in the field, I can tell you who they'll walk up to. I've seen it over and over again – they'll walk up to Jayme. I don't know what it is.

This last summer at Junior Camp at Maranatha, Jayme and others were walking out to the archery range to take a class. They looked into the woods and saw a doe lying in the grass there. They thought it was some type of decoy – something that they would shoot at in the archery range. So Jayme started to walk over to it, and then its ear twitched. It wasn't a decoy. But, of course, that didn't faze her. She walked right up to it and began to pet it on its back. Pretty soon that doe stood up and walked into the woods. There is something in certain people that communicates to animals that there's nothing to fear. And it works.

There was that quality with Jesus. Except in Jesus' case, we don't have to guess what it was. We know what it was. It was that He loved them; He really did. He loved them, and they flocked to Him. Jesus said to His disciples, and at the same time said to us, "That's how I want you to love one another." Immediately we would say we can't love like Jesus. But John addresses that just as Jesus did. John said, "This is found in Him and in you."

You see, part of what made this commandment new – even Jesus said, "A new commandment I give to you" – is that Jesus would ascend to the Father and He would send back His Spirit. His Spirit would dwell within His people, empowering them to love as He

had loved. His love would literally flow through us that we might love as He loved. That Holy Spirit power to love would set us apart from everyone else in the culture.

That's exactly what John highlights here: "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." He's reminding us this isn't a process. It doesn't happen overnight, but there is a process whereby the darkness is fading away and the light is taking over. In the context he means, "You are learning what it means to love like Jesus."

Verse 9: "The one who says he is in the light *{that would be these false teachers, these Gnostics, who are causing such division and hurt in the body of Christ, because they claim to be in the light}* and yet hates his brother is in the darkness until now." When he uses the word "brother," he's talking about fellow believers, part of the community of Christ. When we read verse 9, it's very easy to quickly dismiss it because we don't think we have a problem with that. There probably isn't a person here (if there is, the number would be very few) who would say, "Yeah, there are fellow Christians that I hate."

But we have to understand what the word "hate" means. The word "love" is not an emotional term. It's the word *agape*. It means a commitment of our will. It's not how we feel about it; it's what we choose to do. The word "hate" is the term that contrasts with that, and it's a word that also is not an emotional term. It's not what we think of as hate. It would be the opposite of love. So if love is thinking of others as more important than ourselves, then hate is considering myself more important than somebody else. Hate, then, is selfishness, while love is selflessness. Love says, "What can I give?" Hate says, "What can I get?"

When you think about it in those terms, it's not so easy to dismiss verse 9, because we all struggle with that. It's not talking about something we turn off and on. It's something that is a way of life. We can choose, as a way of life, to think of others as more important than ourselves, to spend more time thinking about other people and others' needs than trying to protect our own little part of the world. Our life can be dedicated to what we give, not what we get.

That type of orientation is very difficult. For example, let me ask you a question: Do you think this is a loving church? Just process that question for a minute in your mind: Do you think this is a loving church? Now process where you went with that question. Did you immediately go to how people have loved you? That reveals a certain orientation – it's all about how I have been loved. Or did you immediately go to how I have loved others? You see, my natural bent is to evaluate these things based on what I have received, how people have loved me, how people have treated me. The better orientation is to turn it the other way: How have I loved? How have I given? How have I cared? Have I thought of others as more important than myself? That's a very difficult orientation. As a matter of fact, it's impossible apart from the power of Jesus dwelling within us that will cause us to live as He lived, to love as He loved.

Verse 10: "The one who loves his brother abides in the light and there is no cause for stumbling in him." He keeps talking about loving his brother, which means loving our fellow believers. One question that arises is: Does that mean that this love is limited to them? The answer is no. But he is saying that is where it starts. If we cannot learn to love one another, then we're never going to love the unlovely out there in hostile territory. So it starts here where we learn to love one another, and then we take it to the streets.

“The one who loves his brother abides in the light and there is no cause for stumbling.” That word “stumbling” is an interesting word. It means to put a blockade in somebody’s path, or to put a snare or a trap in their way. He is obviously referring to the Gnostics – the false teachers, these spiritual elite – who were so selfish and so unkind and so unloving that they were hindering the spiritual growth of others. They were putting a stumbling block in the way. So John states it in the positive, “When you walk in the light and you love as Jesus loved, then instead of causing people to stumble, you obviously are part of facilitating and encouraging their spiritual growth.”

There are all kinds of reasons that people give for why they have dropped out of church, why this morning they’re sitting home instead of here, why they’ve become disillusioned with God. If you took all those reasons, the overwhelming majority of those would state it’s because they have been burned. They have been hurt by someone who claimed to be a follower of Jesus. The overwhelming majority would say, “That’s the reason I don’t go to church; that’s the reason that I don’t follow Jesus anymore.” They would say it’s because people who claimed to be Christians were so unloving, so uncaring, that they just became disillusioned and they quit. Somewhere along the way they got burned. I hear that all the time from people who don’t go to church anywhere. If you ask them enough questions, you find out that’s what it comes back to.

That is what it means to be a stumbling block – what he’s talking about in verse 10. For the one who walks in the light, that won’t happen. The contrast is verse 11: “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.” Again, the one who hates is the one who is selfish. The one who hates is the one who has to have his own way, the one who thinks of himself more than others, the one who is in it to *get* instead of to *give*, the one whose orientation in life is about self and not about others. John says they’re walking in darkness.

But more than that, at the end of the verse he says they don’t even know they’re in darkness. That’s the sobering part of that verse. He says they are blinded by the darkness. Now we typically think of being blinded by the light. John turns this around and says they’re blinded by the darkness. In other words, they think everything is okay. They think they’re very spiritual. They have no concept that they are actually in darkness.

These are people who would read a passage of Scripture like this, and they would affirm it and walk away without a clue that *they* are an unloving person. These are people who would sit through a message like this and think, *Boy, so and so sure needed to hear this, and so and so sure needed to hear that*, but with no sense that *they* needed to hear it.

I knew a gentleman who was very negative, very unloving, very unkind, very critical, very legalistic. No matter where he got involved in the church, it always created conflict. People’s feelings would get hurt because he always kept the pot stirred up. One time I sat down and tried to talk to him about it. As we were processing through that, he informed me that he had the gift of discernment. He felt that God had given him the gift of discernment, and that’s why everywhere he went there was this “problem.” He felt he was discerning all these things and that was kind of his role – to be critical, to be negative – what I would call unloving. Now he would never see it that way. He would read this passage and say, “That’s really true. I’m sure glad it doesn’t apply to me.”

That's what John is talking about here. These false teachers believed that they were the spiritual elite. They had no idea that they were unloving and selfish and doing so much harm to the body of Christ.

Now I don't know about you, but I don't want to live that way. I don't want my legacy to be someone who was selfish, someone who was hurtful, someone who was unkind and uncaring – who left a trail of bodies and didn't even know it. How do we keep from walking in the darkness? How do we keep from thinking everything is okay and not realizing that we have some problems we need to deal with?

Years ago, Gary Paxton wrote a song called "The Clone Affair." The song starts off saying he had a dream that he was cloned. At first he loved the clone, in every way, because the clone was just like him. It liked the same things he liked. It liked the same food ... liked everything that he liked... it was just like him. He said, "So I loved the clone." But after a very short period of time that all began to change. He began to hate the clone. He despised the clone. Every waking moment was dedicated to getting rid of the clone, because the clone was so selfish. The clone was so self-centered; the clone had to have everything his way. Finally, at the end of the song, he wakes up and realizes what it would be like to live with himself.

You know, it would be a very educational experience if, for just a week, every one of us could have a "clone affair." I think we would be shocked at what it would be like to live with ourselves. The problem is that we are deceived. We often don't see ourselves clearly. So what do we do?

Well, John has been giving us the answer all along. We live in community. Community is lived in the light. You cannot be unloving and selfish and unkind and dwell in authentic Christian community without that being exposed. It will be. And you'll have loving, caring people who will tell you there are some things in your life that need to change. As you deal with those areas and confess your sin, you will become more like Christ. You will learn to love as He loves.

But if you do not have those people in your life, if you do not dwell in authentic community, you may live in darkness. You may think everything is okay, that you have it all wired, that you don't have a problem. You may know lots of people, and you may have lots of friends. But is there anybody with whom you really share your life in such a way that these things would be exposed, in order that you might learn to love as He loved?

We've been talking a lot about these things, and some of you may be thinking, "I'm beginning to understand why this is so important. I don't even know where to start." The best place to start is in a small group. We cannot experience this kind of community as a large group. It's impossible. Even in groups of 20 and 30, it will never happen. It is something that happens in small groups. On your bulletin there is a place where you can mark a box that says, "I'm interested in more information about small groups." If you would be interested in just knowing the types of groups we have to offer – growth groups, recovery groups, service teams – we'd like you to mark that box and turn it in at the Information Center. You're not committing to anything, but you're just saying, "I'd like to know more." Somebody will contact you and tell you what we have available. That's the best way to get connected and start experiencing this type of community.

It's possible that, in the past, you may have marked that box about small groups and nobody called you. There's a piece of irony in that – someone who is longing for community turning in their form and getting ignored. We haven't been as organized as we need to be with that, and so I'm just acknowledging that. If that has happened to you in the past, please don't just think, *I tried that before and it didn't work*. We encourage you to try it again, so we can follow up and talk to you about getting connected.

There is no way that we can be what God has called us to be, to love as Jesus loved, if we do not choose to live in authentic Christian community.