

Christians love one another

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[0 : 00] Amen. So John identifies for us here that the church can sometimes have a credibility problem in that sense of, and perhaps we have seen and heard this over the years, that the finger that is pointed, ah, the church is full of hypocrites. They say one thing and they do another. They always seem to be fighting and splitting, and often we have to hold our hands up and say, well, yeah, there's a measure of truth in that. But the other thing that John does for us is he helps us to see why that credibility problem often exists. It's because sometimes we can be very good at holding on to truth without then showing compassion and love. And John makes clear that's an ugly combination. Francis Schaeffer was someone who understood this 50 years ago.

For the Lausanne Evangelism Conference back in 1974, he wrote a paper. And in that paper, he said, the church must have orthodoxy of doctrine. So we must always hold on to truth. We must always hold to the pure doctrine that we find in God's Word. And he said, we must have an orthodoxy of community. By which he means we must practice what we preach. There must be a real community shaped by the truth of God's Word. And in this paper, he talked about the impact that the early church had as they practiced those one another's that we find in the New Testament. Love one another, encourage one another, bear one another's burdens. He said, the early church turned the world upside down because of their combination of truth and love. Because they became known very quickly for their care for the poor, for looking after abandoned children, for caring for their own widows and orphans, but also within wider Roman society. When plagues came to towns and everybody was running for their lives, Christians would often be the ones who would stay and care and showed love. John is one of these apostles who is teaching what he had seen and heard from Jesus, his Savior. And he is encouraging the church to put that into practice. And Schaeffer identifies, and you can read the church in the first four centuries especially, it grew and the mission spread because of that combination of truth and loving action. And so whenever we come to a letter like this, it is a reminder to us to recover that fundamental. Leon Morris, the New Testament Bible scholar, said that in the first century Roman world, it was very easy in every other religious society to be very religious but not particularly righteous.

That the gods of Rome did not place a high demand on the worshiper to be righteous. But John says, and Jesus says, that absolutely cannot be the case within Christianity.

We must worship the true God in the right way, and we must practice love. And so this little section reminds us that Christian faith must be shown in Christian love in a Christian way of life. To go back to Francis Schaeffer, if we speak the truth but we lack love, why would anyone listen? Our message would have no credibility. So this is a very simple reminder that we need to be both truth people and to be loving people. And in this section, John, who loves to use contrast language, will hear him use contrast language. He'll speak of the old and the new commandment. He'll speak in terms of light and dark. He'll speak in terms of love and hate. And in this section, he is applying another of his tests. We could call this the social test or the test of love, as he makes the point that love for Jesus is shown in love for our brothers and sisters in Christ. So two things for us to think about. First, that we are called to obey God's command, and that command is to love one another. Even as he introduces this section, he sets the tone.

So the NIV translates the greeting, dear friends. It's literally the beloved. And so it's setting the tone there. Here is Pastor John, and he loves these Christians. They are beloved to him.

[4 : 51] He is writing of a God who, he'll say in chapter 4, is love. And so his commands are a reflection of his character and his will. So his commands are loving commands. So the whole tone is connecting the command with love. It's interesting that he says in the first instance, I'm not writing a new command, but an old command, which you've had since the beginning. Perhaps there in his mind, he's thinking about basic to humanity being the reality that we are made in God's image. And

to be made in God's image is to be made for relationships of love. Our God is an eternal fellowship of love, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And as we are made in his image, we're made to reflect that love in the way that we love God and the way we love one another. Or perhaps he's thinking of the basic teaching of the Old Testament, Leviticus 19 verse 18, love your neighbor as yourself. Or perhaps he's thinking of the second table of the Ten Commandments, which Jesus summarizes, love your neighbor.

Or all those collection of laws about justice and care for the poor, all about love for the other. Or perhaps he's thinking back to those basic Christian doctrines that this church was taught, being taught the message of Jesus as he summarized the law as love for God and love for neighbor. Perhaps John himself had shared that message that Jesus gave to his disciples when he encouraged them to love one another. God's people are to love each other. It's an old command. But then in verse 8, he turns it and says, yet I am writing you a new command. And we say, well, how is that the case? How can it be both old and new? And look at how he continues. Its truth is seen in him.

So like our primary school football, my experience of primary school football was that every Monday afternoon for a certain period in the run-up to summer, one of my friend's dads came in to coach, to teach us. We had a horrible football pitch. We were fairly average players, and he tried very hard to teach us the basics of how to pass, how to shoot, all those kind of things, how to dribble.

I don't know how good he was as a coach, but imagine if Lionel Messi was that dad who came in and coached. Then we'd still be getting taught the basics, but all of a sudden there'd be a very different standard being on display. And John's point is that Jesus is shining the truth of love for others so perfectly that it comes to us as something altogether new, that his way of life is the way of love. And we see that in so many ways.

[8 : 06] Think about the love that he displays in the way that he taught, how radical it was, the parable of the good Samaritan. Here is love now to be extended to anyone who has need.

The practice of forgiveness. When Peter said, should I forgive someone seven times, Jesus says, no, 70 times seven. And even as Jesus explained his loving action of foot washing, that love looks like service of one another. The mission of Jesus, the lifestyle of Jesus represents a quality of love unknown and unparalleled. It is a love that welcomes sinners, those who are excluded, the tax collectors, the prostitutes, even the thief on the cross knew the love of God. A love that is so patient and forgiving to his disciples. Remember how often we find the disciples fighting for glory, how often we find them misunderstanding the nature of the kingdom, and even at the point of his arrest, abandoning him, and yet he restores them and uses them on his mission. And of course, we see the love of Jesus principally and wonderfully in his day as he lays down his life for his friends. Indeed, laying down his life to turn enemies of God into friends of God in this ultimate demonstration of self-giving, sacrificial love. Jesus shows us what love looks like in a whole new way. And so the true light shines, to use John's language, it breaks through the darkness, it reveals the beauty of perfect love.

But look again at verse 8. He says, yeah, I am writing you a new command. Its truth is seen in him. And we recognize that. We can understand that. But then he says, its truth is seen in you. Its truth is seen in the church. How can that be? Well, in love, as Jesus laid down his life, as he gave his body to be broken, his blood to be shed, he told his disciples he was establishing the new covenant. And the wonderful anticipation about the new covenant that we find in the Old Testament is that then the law would be written on the hearts of God's people. And that law is a law of love. So now the law of love is written in our hearts. And Jesus said, well, the new covenant anticipates that the Spirit would come to live in believers' hearts. And the Spirit who is God, the Spirit is the Spirit who is love. And so now the Spirit of love lives in our hearts. And so now as the people of God, we have the power of God, the grace of God to obey God's command to love. So that we too, in a lesser way, can shine the truth of this command to one another and to a watching world. So as Jesus shines the light of his love into our hearts, it empowers us to both live in the light and to practice love in our Christian family.

Sounds wonderful, doesn't it? I hope it sounds wonderful. What does it look like? What does this kind of community look like? A gospel community? When we talk about gospel community, we're imagining a church that's shaped by God's love for us in Jesus. People have been transformed by the person and the work of the Lord Jesus. I think we understand that it means much more than spending one, maybe two hours together on a Sunday. It involves committing to sharing life

together. It involves, as Bob was praying, suffering together and rejoicing together. It's us committing to die to self together, to die to sin together, a commitment to be a worshipping community growing together in faith.

Maybe my last plug for this little book, I just realized I've always misspelled his name, Caleb Batchelor, Visible Grace. Lots of copies still up there. He has in his last little chapter some practical expressions of how do we make the fact that Jesus has shown us that we've received grace from the Lord Jesus. How does that work itself out practically? He suggests that we would be a group of people who would pray for one another, and when we pray for someone, we can let them know to encourage them. We can make room in our lives for one another, find those margins, or you'll find those natural times when we can welcome others in, sharing meals, going for a walk, doing the shopping, that we can share God's Word with one another. We can talk to one another about how God's Word is speaking to us.

[13:26] We can text and we can message one another to encourage each other with the realities of God's Word. We can be creative and looking to find ways to express love for one another because Jesus has first loved us. So that's the first thing I want us to see, that we obey God's command to love one another.

The second thing is this, and it's from verses 9 to 11, we're called to walk in the light of Christ's love, which too means we love one another. Before we get to our text, just to think about coal mining for a moment. Think about coal mining in Midlothian, where this was spread all through the UK, north of England, and Wales, actually in France and the States as well. There was a period in the coal mining industry when both women and children were employed in some of the most dangerous work down the mine shafts until Lord Shaftesbury in the UK stepped in and made that illegal. And very quickly after women and children were taken out of the workforce, pit ponies were introduced. So these hard-working beasts that could maybe for 15 or 20 years largely live and work underground. But the thing with these pit ponies, because they spent so much time living in the dark, they actually lost their ability to see. When you think about the warning that we have from John in verses 9 to 11, he's talking to those who would claim to be in the light, but not really living in the light.

Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates a brother or sister is still in the darkness. Somebody who says, I'm very religious, but they're not very righteous, is to be in the spiritual darkness. Verse 11, anyone who hates a brother or sister is in the darkness and walks around in the darkness. They do not know where they're going because the darkness has blinded them. There's like that process if we're not seeing and living in the light of God's love for us in Jesus. We lose the ability to see that light. We're in this danger zone of stumbling into hidden dangers and temptations.

John puts it in very stark terms. We're in danger of instead of loving, turning to hate. To be indifferent towards others. He says that's possible even while we're claiming my doctrine is pure. So, he'd have us to examine ourselves. It's really easy to talk the talk, but can we walk the walk? So, John deliberately uses these strong contrasts. You're either in the light or you're in the darkness. You're either practicing love or practicing hate, and that's related to the character of God. There is no mixing in God. God is holy. God is light. God is holy love. And so, to be God's people is to be pursuing a life in the light, which is a life of love. And John makes plain in verse 10, anyone who loves their brother and sister lives in the light. And there is nothing in them to make them stumble. To live in the light, not just claiming to live in the light, there will be evidence of that. We will be showing love to our brother and our sister in Christ.

So, he says this living in the light, pursuing the light, is so helpful for us growing in love. We're getting to that point where I imagine I am not the only one who's counting down to October holidays. Now, perhaps some of us are going away to find some sunshine and some warmth. October's about that time where we start thinking, oh, if only we could bathe in some winter sun.

[17:43] John's message is that Christians should be those who are eager to bathe in the sunshine of God's love for us in Jesus. And as we do so, we will find our hearts being warmed so that we have love for one another. And it's only as we're living in the light of God's love for us that we will be enabled to reflect that love for us to reflect that love to one another when things get hard, when people are awkward or challenging. Two things that we can see are true. One, we need the light of Christ to see clearly. By which I mean we need to learn to see our brothers and sisters in the church as Christ Jesus sees them. It's very natural for us to reach snap judgments. But what we need is to have our minds and our hearts trained by God's Word so that we would see one another

the way Jesus does, and that we would be on the lookout for grace at work that we could celebrate. So think about what

John has already told us about a fellow believer. In chapter 1 and verse 3, a brother or sister in Christ is someone who shares fellowship with God the Father, with God the Son, with God the Holy Spirit.

Chapter 2, verse 2, a fellow believer is someone whom God has loved so much to send Christ Jesus to die to cleanse them from sin. Chapter 2, verse 1, that brother or sister has Christ in heaven representing them, praying for them, speaking to God for them, saying, I have paid for their sins in full. And the wonderful thing that we're also reminded is that when we are in Christ, we have fellowship with God, and we have fellowship with one another. And that's not something that's just true for the hour that we spend together. That's true for all of life, and that's true for eternity.

And the wonderful thing about eternity is the glorious hope that there will be no sin, there'll be nothing coming between us. But until then, do we have that spiritual eyesight where we are seeing one another through the lenses of the gospel? It's really easy, I think, to find reasons to grumble, but we need to be looking for reasons to celebrate God's grace. So we need the light of Christ to see clearly. We also need the love of Christ if we are to love deeply. Because I think when we begin to struggle to practice love for one another, and I say practice because it's an active thing, that sometimes we struggle because we lose sight of just how much God has loved us.

And so we always need to keep in view God's love for us in the gospel to let that transform us. And when we think about how God has loved us in the gospel, He has loved us so much that He has given us spiritual life when we were spiritually dead. He has forgiven us from all our sin when we deserve eternal condemnation. We have received eternal life, which is knowing life with God and with Jesus, His Son. He has written the law of love in our hearts, and He has displayed perfect love for us in the Lord Jesus. He has given us His Spirit, and the Spirit is at work in us to show us in His Word, the glory of Jesus. And He is working on our character to make us more and more like Him. [21 : 56] To be a follower of Jesus is to be beloved of God. And when God the Father looks at us, He loves us as much as He loves His Son. And we need the fuel of that love to set the fire of our love burning for one another. Because John recognizes that the church must practice what she preaches.

If we are to be faithful in our calling, then we must show love for God and His truth and love for one another. To go back to Francis Schaeffer for a moment, he continued in that article to say we must practice the content, practice the truth we say we believe, demonstrating to our own children and to the watching world that we take the truth seriously. And ultimately, that's the answer, isn't it, to the church's credibility problem. If we were to have this powerful combination of gospel truth and gospel community. And this would truly be a wonderful legacy that we would hand down to our children here in our local church. And what a witness and testimony, what a light that would shine into our dark world, which is known so often for division and hate. Increasingly, it's vengeance and not forgiveness that we see. Where people are living in loneliness and without community.

What an opportunity that we have to make a difference. So as we close, how can we do it? How can we love each other as Christ has loved us? Because I think we recognize that John is giving the church here a high calling, isn't he? He's calling us to a quality of life, a quality of love that transforms a Christian community together to become more in the image of Christ, where we are each for the other, wanting to demonstrate love, and to live in such a way together that it would make Christ seem both beautiful and compelling to the people outside our walls, who perhaps are apathetic, indifferent, or utterly ignorant of Jesus and what Christians believe. It's a high calling. Perhaps sometimes we feel the weight of that. We sense our own weakness. We sense our own failures. And our stories, I am sure, when we look back, there are times where we would confess hypocrisy and failure and indifference. We battle with sin in our hearts, and it pulls us back into that darkness and blindness. It pulls us towards hate and indifference instead of to love, to words that hurt instead of healing, where it's very easy for us to disconnect our doctrine from practically doing good to one another, to search out failings rather than put our faith into action. So what's the answer?

Well, John tells us, doesn't he? We must live in the light, the light of Christ's perfect love.

[25 : 33] He is the true light that shone in the darkness, showing us grace for the undeserving, for the unlovely, for the enemy of God, showing us His redeeming love as there on the cross He broke

the power of sin, as He secured forgiveness by giving Himself as a ransom. He showed us reconciling love, bringing us into fellowship with the God of love, giving us peace with God, giving us restoring love, as the gospel is the power that breaks down the walls of division, and instead creating communities of genuine love. It's the more that we walk in the light, that we will have the light to practice this life of love, speaking and acting with love towards our fellow believers, willing to sacrifice, willing to go the extra mile, because we've learned how to see one another, to recognize that we are blood-bought children of God, making Christ seem beautiful and good and true and vital to one another and to the watching world as we pursue real fellowship, as we seek to build gospel community, as we seek to practice the one another's, and as we pray that God would once again, through the church, through the love of the church, turn this world upside down.

Let's pray towards that end. Our Father in heaven, we once again give you thanks for the perfect love of the love of the Lord Jesus.