

1 JOHN 2:7-11

AN OLD COMMANDMENT THAT IS NOW NEW

“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. 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. Whoever says he is in the light and hates his brother is still in darkness. Whoever loves his brother abides in the light, and in him there is no cause for stumbling. 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.”¹

Retro is in. With time, what has grown dated will come back into fashion. That is true in the world—fashions that were jettisoned become popular again, music genre that was identified with a particular age group becomes popular again or food styles that fell out of favour with the most of society comes back into favour. What is true in the world is equally true among the churches of our Lord. Churches can be surprisingly faddish; and heresies once roundly rejected spring up to plague the people of God anew. One fad that seems to spring up with dismaying regularity is reducing the Body of Christ, the congregation of the faithful, to an organisation. Thus, many among the professed people of God play musical church, moving from one congregation to another as though God had nothing to say about their life and service. Such an act is nothing less than admission of failure to love; it arises from failure to know God.

The text is focused on knowing God. In particular, those who claim to know God are called to “walk in the same way in which He walked.” And the walk of faith is not mysterious! That walk is, however, exciting; it reflects the character of Him whom we call “Father!” John is called the Apostle of Love with good reason. He emphasises the necessity of love as the essential mark of the follower of the Christ. Tragically, this defining characteristic is absent in the life of much of modern Christendom. In fact, we would be hard pressed to demonstrate love as a defining characteristic among the professed people of God in this day when church has been reduced to an optional feature of religious life. Before we examine John’s commands, it will be necessary for us to define what we are looking for.

I have the distinct impression that in the mind of most contemporary church members, love is defined primarily—if not exclusively—as an emotion. Perhaps we Christians are not able to define adequately what we mean when we speak of “love,” but most definitions we seize upon tend toward what we used to call a “warm, fuzzy.” We argued that love made us feel good; love was identified as “feeling good.” Whether we have thought through the implications or not, in modern parlance love is often reduced to a condition controlled by others. Others have the ability to show us love, but love does not lie within our purview when considering others.

That such exclusivity reflects an aberrant view becomes evident through even a cursory review of Jesus’ teaching concerning love. Here are several vital truths for those who love.

Love for the Son reveals relationship to the Father. Jesus challenged the religious leaders when they avowed that God was their Father, “If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and I am here. I came not of my own accord, but he sent me” [JOHN 8:42].

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible: English Standard Version**. Wheaton: Good News Publishers, 2001. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Love leads the one who loves to a sacrificial life. Recall Jesus' teaching on this matter. "I am the Good Shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father" [JOHN 10:14-18].

Love is revealed through obedience. Listen to Jesus on this matter. "If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you.

"I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. Yet a little while and the world will see me no more, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. In that day you will know that I am in my Father and you in me, and I in you. Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me. And he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him.' Judas (not Iscariot) said to him, 'Lord, how is it that you will manifest yourself to us, and not to the world?' Jesus answered him, 'If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. Whoever does not love me does not keep my words. And the word that you hear is not mine but the Father's who sent me'" [JOHN 14:15-24]. I will have more to say on this aspect of love in just a short while as we follow what John has written.

Finally, ***Love for Jesus is expressed in service to His people.*** Recall a familiar exchange between Jesus and Peter. "When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, Simon, son of John, do you love (*agapáō*) me more than these?' He said to him, Yes, Lord; you know that I love (*philēō*) you.' He said to him, 'Feed my lambs.' He said to him a second time, 'Simon, son of John, do you love (*agapáō*) me?' He said to him, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love (*philēō*) you.' He said to him, 'Tend my sheep.' He said to him the third time, 'Simon, son of John, do you love (*philēō*) me?' Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, 'Do you love (*philēō*) me?' and he said to him, 'Lord, you know everything; you know that I love (*philēō*) you.' Jesus said to him, 'Feed my sheep'" [JOHN 21:15-17].

Note that even affection for Jesus is revealed through service ***as He appoints.*** Even when we cannot say that we love the Master with a self-sacrificing love, He calls us to His service. Christians are responsible to serve as Christ the Master appoints; each of us has a gift and a role within the community of Faith. This is exciting precisely because it means that even when we don't feel successful, God employs us to His glory. Our feelings are of no great significance.

The love that has been shed abroad in our hearts has no sexual connotation attached to it. It does connote that we choose and act upon our choice, empowered by the Spirit living within. Remember some of Jesus' teaching on this point. In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" [MATTHEW 5:43-48].

Did you notice that love is not extended by God in hopes of receiving something in return? Likewise, we who wish to know the love of God are not to attempt to show love in hopes of gaining something in return. Love is to be demonstrated even toward one's enemy! And it is not apparent that one will gain anything from his or her enemy. Love is the defining mark of the twice-born child. This concept was emphasised once when a lawyer interrogated the Master. "A lawyer asked him a question to test him. 'Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?' And he said to him, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets'" [MATTHEW 22:35-40].

Perhaps it should not be necessary to address this one issue; nevertheless there remains one additional point that is necessary to consider. Though John specifically refers to children (the word is actually neuter), fathers and young men in **VERSES 12-14**, it should be apparent that women, whether younger or older, are responsible to love as God loves just as men are responsible to love as God loves. Love is the universal mark of one who is born from above. Focus on the words Jesus delivered as recorded in John's Gospel. "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. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" [JOHN 13:34, 35]. Discipleship is neither defined by nor restricted by sex; likewise, the evidence that one is a disciple is not determined by sex. Men are to demonstrate leadership in revealing the love of God among the people of God; but the love of God is not the domain of one sex.

While this is only a cursory review of Jesus' teaching concerning godly love—the love that is expected to mark His people—it is sufficient to suggest that there is a serious deficit of love among the faithful in this day. It is not that we don't want to love, though that may possibly be a problem, but rather it is that we preachers have done a poor job instructing the flocks in their responsibility to love as Christ loved us. We who declare the Gospel of Christ the Lord have silently acquiesced to the spirit of this dying age while neglecting the teaching of the Word. Thus, the people of God struggle to demonstrate the love of God. Perhaps the message today will take an essential step toward rectifying this glaring deficit.

THE OLD COMMANDMENT — "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" [1 JOHN 2:7]. John references what he identifies as "the old commandment"; and he is obviously speaking about love. His reference was to what was written in the Old Covenant. The Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, uses the Greek word *agapáō* frequently. Thus, the love of which John writes would have been well-known from the writings of Moses, to say nothing of what was written in the Wisdom Literature and by the Prophets.

"Love" is a central feature of God's character from beginning to end. Here are some examples of God's love and the love expected of His people taken from the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible. These passages chosen, all from the Book of Deuteronomy, are representative rather than exhaustive; they demonstrate that the concept that "God is love," is essential to understanding God's character from the beginning of God's revelation.

The first truth to notice is that those who would be identified as belonging to the LORD God were responsible to love Him because of who He is and not because of what He could give. "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall *love* the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might" [DEUTERONOMY 6:4, 5].

Listen again as the LORD God reveals God's love for Israel. "You are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his *love* on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because the LORD *loves* you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. Know therefore that the LORD your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations" [DEUTERONOMY 7:6-9]. God's love to Israel flowed from His own character; that love revealed His sovereign choice.

Loving God does not imply that He is not generous to those who love Him. God pledged on His holy character to bless His people, giving them land, increasing their wealth and protecting them from harm because they loved Him. "Because you listen to these rules and keep and do them, the LORD your God will keep with you the covenant and the steadfast love that he swore to your fathers. He will *love* you, bless you and multiply you. He will also bless the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your ground, your grain and your wine and your oil, the increase of your herds and the young of your flock, in the land that he swore to your fathers to give you" [DEUTERONOMY 7:12, 13].

God showered Israel with good things, guarding them and providing for them. Naturally, they were expected to love Him in return. "You shall therefore *love* the LORD your God and keep his charge, his statutes, his rules and his commandments always" [DEUTERONOMY 11:1].

Again, we read of God's requirement for His people to love Him. "Now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to *love* him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments and statutes of the LORD, which I am commanding you today for your good? Behold, to the LORD your God belong heaven and the heaven of heavens, the earth with all that is in it. Yet the LORD set his heart in *love* on your fathers and chose their offspring after them, you above all peoples, as you are this day. Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn. For the LORD your God is God of gods and LORD of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who is not partial and takes no bribe. He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and *loves* the sojourner, giving him food and clothing. *Love* the sojourner, therefore, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt" [DEUTERONOMY 10:12-19].

Loving God could not be divorced from loving others. The people were to serve God eagerly, avidly and assiduously. In serving God, they were to make themselves aware of others who were vulnerable among them. Not only were they responsible to ensure justice for the vulnerable, they were to love the sojourner!

Let's review just a few examples of the love John must surely have had in view by appealing to the wisdom literature. Again, these verses are not meant to be exhaustive. The first verse to which I appeal is from the Psalms of David. The verse indicates that those who love God are to exult in Him. His people are to be jubilant before the LORD their God.

"Let all who take refuge in you rejoice;
let them ever sing for joy,
and spread your protection over them,
that those who *love* your name may exult in you."

[PSALM 5:11]

Again, according to the Psalmist, those who would please God should love His commandments. Of course, loving God would indicate that we also love what He commands. The obedient child does not rebel against God's Word; but rather he embraces what He commands and gladly does His will. This is evident from even a cursory review of some of the words David wrote in the 119th PSALM.

“I will also speak of your testimonies before kings
and shall not be put to shame,
for I find my delight in your commandments,
which I *love*.
I will lift up my hands toward your commandments, which I *love*,
and I will meditate on your statutes.”

[PSALM 119:46-48]

Finally, look to the writings Solomon has provided in the Proverbs. Quoting Wisdom, which Solomon has personified, we read this statement.

“I love (*philéo*) those who *love* (*agapáo*) me,
and those who seek me diligently find me.”

[PROVERBS 8:17]

God's love is poured out on His people, and He reciprocates as they in turn reflect His love. The love God's people have received is reflected back toward God Himself.

While it is true and appropriate for us to speak of God's love and of the love we are called to reflect when we have received His love, the LORD God became quite pointed when He applied this truth to the lives of His people. God, through Moses spoke pointedly about showing love to one another. “You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason frankly with your neighbor, lest you incur sin because of him. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD” [LEVITICUS 19:17, 18].

How shall we summarise this “old commandment?” Appealing to what is written in the Law, we know that we are responsible to love God, because He is God. The evidence that one loves God is demonstrated through obedience to His commands and through showing consideration and compassion toward the vulnerable about us. How we live reveals who we are. After all, according to the Master, the second command predicated upon this first command is to “love your neighbour as yourself” [see MATTHEW 22:39]. To say you love God while refusing to love your brother is ridiculous. It is impossible to love God while being consumed with self.

THE NEW COMMANDMENT — “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. Whoever says he is in the light and hates his brother is still in darkness. Whoever loves his brother abides in the light, and in him there is no cause for stumbling. 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” [1 JOHN 2:8-11].

The “old commandment” is, at the same time, a “new commandment.” How can this be? Two words are commonly translated “new” in the New Testament. One of those words (*néos*) usually refers to some condition or item that is recent; it speaks of that which is new in time. The other word (*kainós*), though possibly conveying a similar meaning, emphasises that which is fresh or previously unknown. Obviously, these two words are synonyms, though they convey slightly different meanings in normal usage. John uses the word *kainós* in both instances in the text. He is “writing ... no new commandment”: and, yet, “at the same time, it is a new commandment.” Thus, he raises the legitimate question, how can what is not new be new?

Some have suggested that the demonstration of the newness of this commandment is threefold—to wit, (1) God demonstrated His love for mankind through giving His Son; (2) Jesus, through obedience to the will of the Father fulfilled the Mosaic Law; and (3) Jesus thus makes it possible for believers to receive eternal life, thus fulfilling the law of selfless, Christ like love.² Focus on this concept in order to discover how such a view applies to Christians in this day.

The newness John is emphasising is because the old commandment is “true in Him and in you.” Let’s tease apart what John has written so that we can understand this truth and apply it in our lives. This new commandment, which is actually an old commandment, is true in Christ the Lord. The reason it is true is “because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining.” The language turns our attention back to what John wrote earlier in this particular letter and what he wrote in the prologue of the Gospel that bears his name.

Earlier, John wrote, “This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all” [1 JOHN 1:4b, 5]. God is light! In Him is no darkness at all! Hold this thought in mind and you begin to understand what John is saying in our text. Now, think of what is written in the opening words of John’s Gospel. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men” [JOHN 1:1-4].

John also has written in the first chapter of the Gospel that bears his name, “The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John bore witness about him, and cried out, ‘This was he of whom I said, “He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me.”’) For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known” [JOHN 1:9-18].

The reason the old commandment is actually a new commandment is revealed with one word in the text—“because.” Light always vanquishes darkness; and for the believer in Christ the Lord, the conquest of the darkness has begun already. Let’s get more specific still in order to understand what John is saying. Because the Son of God has come and because He has taken up residence in your life, you are now being transformed into His likeness. Already the evidence of the transformation is being revealed in the life of believers.

² Stephen S. Smalley, **Word Biblical Commentary, 1, 2, 3 John, vol. 51** (Word, Incorporated, Dallas, TX 1989) 56

Those who walk in love are denoted by two great, unalterable characteristics that we have already seen in our study today. We have already seen that those who live in love—that is, those who are in Christ—are recognised because they “keep His commandments” [see **JOHN 14:15, 21**]. Likewise, we previously saw that those who know Christ “love one another” [see **JOHN 13:34, 35**]. These two character traits are interrelated. In fact, they are so intertwined that they are inseparable. Let me explain what I mean by that assertion.

All who are born from above reflect the character of God who is Father of all who believe in Christ the Son. Those who are not born from above may be able to mimic the characteristics of love for a brief period; but they cannot live in love because they have never known the love of God. As children of God, we are commanded, “Be imitators of God as dearly loved children and live in love, just as Christ loved us and gave Himself for us, a sacrificial and fragrant offering to God” [**EPHESIANS 5:1, 2 NET BIBLE**]. The question must be raised, how does one live in love? Again, the answer is given that the one living in love is obedient to Christ’s commandments and loves the brotherhood of believers.

The subject is so serious that I am compelled to be pointed. Living in love does not mean what many church members imagine it to mean. Many individuals associate love with characteristics such as niceness, tolerance and diversity. You no doubt recognise these to be characteristics prized as defining an idealised modern society. While these characteristics may be witnessed among the people of God, they are not necessarily reflective of love. Love is not always “nice”; sometimes love demands firmness. Love is not tolerant of that which is harmful or that which dishonours the Master. Love does not seek out diversity for the sake of diversity. In fact, love is quite restrictive. We do not elect individuals to holy office; rather we accept those whom God appoints. We do not appoint women to eldership just so we can say we are inclusive; we are concerned to adhere to biblical principles. We do not welcome people who insist on living openly in sinful relationships in order to show how broad-minded we are. We take these stands because we love the souls of lost people and because we love God supremely. Therefore, we balance love by testing against these two tests—does our love reflect obedience to the Father and do we seek to build up those whom we call brothers and sisters.

In terms of testing love by measuring against God’s commands, we may be challenged to adhere to the Mosaic Law. We recently had a man visit our faith community who wanted to argue that we were worshipping on the wrong day. He was in grave error, not knowing the Scriptures. Christ rose on the first day of the week [see **MARK 20:9**; see also **JOHN 20:19**]. Since that time, those who follow Him have generally kept the first day of the week as “the Lord’s Day” [e.g. **REVELATION 1:10**]. The first day of the week was the day on which believers came together to break bread [see **ACTS 20:7**]; this was the day when the believers would gather for worship, including receiving the gifts of God’s people [see **1 CORINTHIANS 16:2**]. Some among the faithful dissent from observing this day as a day of worship; but we are not inclined to fight over the matter, understanding what is written in Scripture. “One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord” [**ROMANS 14:5, 6a**].

Should one be inclined to insist on keeping a particular day as mandatory, despite the obvious transition given in the New Testament, do they not fall under the censure delivered to the Galatian saints? “Now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more? You observe days and months and seasons and years! I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain” [**GALATIANS 4:9-11**].

Understand that I am only giving examples and not attempting an exhaustive review of such errors. Those who wish to argue that the Mosaic Law is still to be imposed must grapple with Peter's response to individuals who endeavoured to impose the law on the Gentiles. "Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith. Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will" [ACTS 15:7b-11],

However, we must continue our study for this day. Not only is the child of God denoted by obedience to the commands of the Master, but that one who reveals the character of the Father also loves the brotherhood of believers. It is a serious error for the professed child of God to imagine that he or she can serve God while absenting himself or herself from the body. It is impossible to serve God without exhibiting accountability to others. Bluntly stated, when the believer is born from above, he or she receives a gift or gifts from the Holy Spirit.

The passage should be familiar, but it is often twisted and distorted until confusion reigns among the people of God. Consider what the Apostle Paul has written to the Corinthians. "There are different kinds of gifts, but they are all from the same Spirit. There are different ways to serve but the same Lord to serve. And there are different ways that God works through people but the same God. God works in all of us in everything we do. Something from the Spirit can be seen in each person, for the common good. The Spirit gives one person the ability to speak with wisdom, and the same Spirit gives another the ability to speak with knowledge. The same Spirit gives faith to one person. And, to another, that one Spirit gives gifts of healing. The Spirit gives to another person the power to do miracles, to another the ability to prophesy. And he gives to another the ability to know the difference between good and evil spirits. The Spirit gives one person the ability to speak in different kinds of languages and to another the ability to interpret those languages. One Spirit, the same Spirit, does all these things, and the Spirit decides what to give each person" [1 CORINTHIANS 12:4-11 NCV].³

Note the Apostle's assertion that "something from the Spirit can be seen in each person." Each believer is gifted by the Spirit. Moreover, the divine gifting is "for the common good." In other words, your gift is meant to be used for the benefit of fellow believers. Moreover, the gift(s) you have is determined by the will of the Spirit of God and not by your desire. Paul says, "One Spirit, the same Spirit, does all these things, and the Spirit decides what to give each person." These three vital truths, if heeded, will move you in the direction of pleasing God through service to His people. I have brought this point to the fore to emphasise that we who belong to God are of no value to His Kingdom work when we show no respect for His people.

In Corinth, many people sought one, spectacular gift—they wanted to speak in a foreign language to impress others; some even argued that they were building themselves through such a gift. Paul reminded them that the great purpose of any gift of the Spirit is measured by how it affects others. "Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy. For one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God; for no one understands him, but he utters mysteries in the Spirit. On the other hand, the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation. The one who speaks in a tongue builds up himself, but the one who prophesies builds up the church" [1 CORINTHIANS 14:1-4].

³ **The Everyday Bible: New Century Version** (Thomas Nelson, Nashville, TN 2005)

Surely a truth revealed in Paul's admonition to the Ephesian eldership gathered on the beach at Miletus is applicable in this instance. "Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood" [ACTS 20:28]. The church was purchased with God's own blood. To treat the assembly as optional rather than holy performs a grave disservice to the Master's sacrificial purchase. The congregation wherein the Spirit placed you, after He equipped you for some particular service, is not a mere organisation—it is the Body of Christ. We must not begin to treat His assembly, His body, as though we can join and leave when we choose to do so.

We are trained to be terribly self-centred in this day. We are distressingly thin-skinned. Even though we are Christians, we know what we want and we will demand that we receive it. If we don't get what we want, we will punish those wretches who fail to recognise our importance. We will punish them by leaving the assembly—by quitting; we'll make them pay by withholding the service to which God's Spirit appointed us and which He expects of us. In doing this we imagine that we will hurt those who failed to see how important we really are. However, when we act in this manner, are we not exhibiting pride and exalting self? How can we say we are acting in love when we are attempting to coerce others through hurting them?

In his various letters, the Apostle Paul often addressed the issue of how we are to love. Here is one example that was written to the saints in Rome. "If your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died. So do not let what you regard as good be spoken of as evil. For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. Whoever thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding" [ROMANS 14:15-19].

The immediate issue was food; the underlying issue was pride. Some within the assembly were exalting themselves against fellow believers. The former were convinced that they knew what was right and they paid no heed to how their actions might injure their brothers. Consequently, Paul exposed these as self-centred, self-important and thoughtless. Focused on their rights, they were prepared to destroy fellow believers. If these angry saints were really acting in love, they would have pursued what brought peace and what would lead to building up others. In the act of building up others, they would build themselves. So, the principle of love teaches us to ask how our actions build up the Body. The principle of love leads us to humble ourselves before the Lord and before His people.

Here's another example that merits serious consideration drawn from Paul's writing. "Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. 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. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him" [COLOSSIANS 3:12-17]. All the characteristics named in this passage are valued as righteous attitudes within the community of faith. It is applying these characteristics in our lives—and doing so in love—that is essential if God will be honoured. Love will lead us to strive to maintain unity in the Body; we will prize the harmony of saints. We will not always get our way, but we will be gentle and peaceable.

Briefly, focus on the final three verses. “Whoever says he is in the light and hates his brother is still in darkness. Whoever loves his brother abides in the light, and in him there is no cause for stumbling. 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” [1 JOHN 2:9-11].

Does it seem harsh to you to say that failure to love is to hate? Westcott correctly says, “There is no twilight in this spiritual world.”⁴ There are no halfway stages between love and hate. Those who hate, who refuse to love their brother, are consigned to utter darkness because of hating their brothers. Both are professing Christians. One hates; the other is hated. Intellectual knowledge is not called into question; rather, John is focused on spiritual knowledge of the Truth. John testifies that the one who does not love his brother is “still in darkness.” If I despise a fellow Christian, holding her in contempt, thinking ill of him, I am guilty of hatred, which is lese majesté to the One I call Master and Saviour.

We need to understand where John is coming from: Jesus says that the one who follows Him “will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” [JOHN 8:12]. When Judas departed from the Upper Room, the Word of God notes pointedly, “It was night” [JOHN 13:30]. Judas had followed Jesus for a brief period, but he finally departed and returned to the darkness from whence he had come. This is the way in which John views those who associate with the Christian community for a brief period and then quit. They never really left the darkness. John is warning believers not to succumb to a fantasy that because one has joined a church, because one has professed to believe Christ, because one is religious they must be righteous. Righteousness eventuates in love; and love is not incidental—it is essential in the Faith.

Let me conclude by focusing attention on several portions of this letter emphasising love. “By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother.

“For this is the message that you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another. We should not be like Cain, who was of the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother’s righteous. Do not be surprised, brothers, that the world hates you. We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death. Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.

“By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers” [1 JOHN 3:10-16].

“This is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us” [1 JOHN 3:23].

“Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God” [1 JOHN 4:7].

“Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us” [1 JOHN 4:11, 12].

“If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother” [1 JOHN 4:20, 21].

May God teach us to love one another. Amen.

⁴ Brooke Foss Westcott, ed., **The Epistles of St. John: The Greek Text with Notes and Essays**, 4th ed., **Classic Commentaries on the Greek New Testament** (Macmillan, London; New York 1902) 55