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Growth

1 John 2:7–14

In the last chapter, we saw how John preaches the gospel to people with two extreme positions regarding God’s law. On one side are the legalists, who insist that their salvation comes by their own ability to keep God’s law. On the other side are the libertines, who argue that because they have been saved already, the law no longer applies to them. John refuses to give in to either side’s errors. Instead, he argues that all of us need the gospel because we have fallen short of the perfect light of God’s holiness, but that our salvation through the cleansing blood of Jesus Christ leads us toward holiness, not away from it.

Now, John transitions to describing the growth that Christians ought to expect in our lives. Practically speaking, growth in discipleship leads us deeper and deeper into love. Love is the subject that comes up again and again through this letter. Of course, John isn’t talking about some kind of fuzzy, flowery, sappy emotional love (the apostle is not a first-century hippie); he is describing a love that is far more substantial. John writes:

⁷Beloved, 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 that you have heard. ⁸On the other hand, I am

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writing a new commandment to you, which is true in him and in you, for the darkness is passing away and the true light already is shining. (1 John 2:7–8)

The commandment John is talking about in these verses is the commandment to love. Right away, John refocuses our attention on love by addressing us as “beloved” and then immediately offering a paradox: the commandment to love is so old as to have been from the beginning, but it is also brand new. Later, in verses 9 to 11, John will speak explicitly about love by contrasting those who hate their brother and are in darkness (verse 9) with those who love their brother and abide in light (verse 10).

THE OLD COMMANDMENT

John begins this section on growing in love by reminding us that the commandment to love is quite old: “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 that you have heard” (1 John 2:7).

John is not exaggerating the age of this commandment. Even when Jesus declared that to love God and to love people were the two greatest commandments, he wasn’t inventing anything new.¹ In fact, he was simply quoting two of the oldest commandments in the Old Testament law:

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 19:18)

⁴Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. ⁵You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. (Deuteronomy 6:4–5)

Speaking about these two commandments, Jesus stated, “On these two commandments depend all the Law and the

Prophets” (Matthew 22:40). In other words, he is emphasizing that all the law (and the prophets, for that matter) are commandments about love.

John wants his readers to remember that they have had the commandment to love “from the beginning” and that the commandment to love is “the word that you have heard.” If his readers were raised in Jewish homes, they would have grown up hearing, singing, and memorizing the law, so this commandment was the word they would have heard again and again and again. But even if some of his readers were Gentile converts to Christianity, John is reminding them that he had preached the commandment to love from the beginning.

HOW JESUS MADE THE OLD COMMANDMENT NEW

Then in verse 8, John suddenly seems to change his mind, now telling us that the commandment is a “new commandment.” How can the commandment be ancient but yet also new? In fact, Jesus has made the old commandment new in at least three ways.²

First, Jesus put a new emphasis on love. As we read earlier, a major emphasis in the ministry of Jesus was to show how fulfilling the Old Testament law was essentially a matter of learning to love God and to love other people. Jesus refused to get bogged down and sidetracked by legalistic discussions on the specific kinds of activity that would be permissible on the sabbath or on the proper method of hand-washing, for example. Instead, he brought new clarity to the law by reframing the entire discussion away from technicalities and toward demonstrating love.

Second, Jesus gave us a new example of love. Jesus was not like the Pharisees who “tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people’s shoulders, [when] they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger” (Matthew 23:4). Instead, Jesus modeled love perfectly and insisted that

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anyone who would become his disciple follow the example that he set. Accordingly, on the night before Jesus died, he spoke with his disciples, saying, “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” (John 13:34).

Again, Jesus is telling his disciples nothing new, since the Old Testament had always commanded love. Even so, Jesus nevertheless insists that he is giving them a new commandment. Why? Because the commandment to love now carries with it the standard set by Jesus himself: “just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another.” Jesus said this right after he had finished washing the feet of his disciples, a task reserved for the lowliest servant on hand. Jesus pointed to what he had done, and asked:

¹²Do you understand what I have done to you? ¹³You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. ¹⁴If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. ¹⁵*For I have given you an example*, that you also should do just as I have done to you. (John 13:12–15)

Here, Jesus does something extraordinary by washing his disciples’ feet, and, even more incredible, in less than twenty-four hours he would go to the utmost length for his disciples by dying for them on the cross. If we want to know what love looks like, we need to look at Jesus for the perfect example.

Third, Jesus provides a new enabling to keep the commandment. Notice how John tells us this new commandment “is true in him and in you, for the darkness is passing away and the true light already is shining” (1 John 2:8). It is odd to speak of a commandment being true. For example, if a parent told a child to clean his room, the child would not argue with his parent by saying, “That’s not true!” We don’t usually speak of commandments as being true or false.

So what does John mean by this? John is speaking about the fulfillment of the commandment, not about the

commandment itself. He is reminding us that we ourselves are incapable of keeping the law. As disciples of Jesus, we know legalism is a lie, but we also know God doesn't abolish the requirements of his law simply because we are incapable of keeping the law. Instead, he sent Jesus to fulfill the law on our behalf, in our place. The fulfillment of the commandment is true in him.

But John goes one step further, telling us that the fulfillment of the commandment is true *in us* as well. Our relationship to Jesus Christ through faith does not merely wipe our guilty slate clean so that we can have a second chance to try harder to please God—that would only plunge us right back into legalism.

In fact, the gospel does better than that. Through faith in the gospel of Jesus, God makes us righteous in Christ. Then, God gives us real spiritual growth by working in our lives by the power of the Holy Spirit. As we grow in the gospel, God actually changes us to be like Jesus so that, more and more, this commandment is true in us, just as it was true in Jesus himself.

THE LITMUS TEST OF GENUINE FAITH

Now, we need to be very clear: Jesus, and only Jesus, fulfilled the law completely through his perfect life, death, and resurrection. There is nothing more whatsoever that we need to do, or that we even could do, to bring Jesus' work to completion. We are saved completely by what Jesus has done and not at all by what we do. Salvation comes by faith alone in Christ alone as we trust Jesus to do for us what we could never do for ourselves.

But at the same time, saving faith is never alone. True, genuine, saving faith always produces growth. If we say that we have faith but our lives never reflect spiritual growth toward maturity, we need to question whether or not our faith is genuine. This isn't to say that we should spiral into

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despair every time we falter in our faith by falling back into sin, because all believers will continue to sin in this life. John even told us, “If we say that we do not have sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us” (1 John 1:8), so pretending that we do not continue to struggle with sin in our lives is not an option John leaves on the table.

So, instead of seeking perfection, John’s point is simply that we should be able to identify genuine ways that God has begun to change our lives. Of course we must acknowledge that we will never be perfect on this side of eternity, but we should be able to see growth. Remember, the libertines who believed they could reject obedience to the law altogether were just as mistaken as the legalists who believed they could be saved through their own ability to keep the law.

On that subject, we come to 1 John 2:9–11. John’s words here are hard, and they should give every sincere Christian pause:

⁹The one who says that he is in the light but hates his brother is in the darkness up to now. ¹⁰The one who loves his brother abides in the light and in him is not a stumbling block. ¹¹But the one who hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness and does not know where he is going, for the darkness has blinded his eyes.

Love is the standard of the law. But, while we are not allowed to ignore it like the libertines, we should remember that we will fail at times to keep this law perfectly. Where we fall short, we need to return to the gospel, confessing our sins and believing that the blood of Jesus, our advocate, will cleanse us of all unrighteousness. Here again, we are called to walk the path of the gospel instead of falling into error on either side, whether the error of legalists or of libertines. John refuses to soften God’s requirement that we love one another, but he also reminds us God does not save us based on our ability to keep his law.

Jesus alone can save us through his gospel, but the

salvation Jesus offers is not some Get Out of Hell Free card we put in safekeeping for the future, only to return to living our lives in the same ways that we always have. The gospel is bigger than that. As we continue to grow in the gospel, God continues to transform us away from walking in the darkness of hatred and toward abiding in the light of love. Faith alone saves, but because of the power of God’s gospel, saving faith is never alone. Real, transforming, genuine faith in Christ will always lead to good works and substantive growth in our ability to love our brothers and sisters.

But if we continue to hate our brothers and sisters without any real transformation in our hearts, and if the gospel is making no inroads to change us—not even slow progress—then we continue to walk in darkness, despite what we might say about being in the light.

THE BELOVED CHURCH

John summarizes all he has said to this point in a poem in 1 John 2:12–14:

¹²I am writing to you, little children [*teknia*],
for your sins have been forgiven for his name’s sake.

¹³I am writing to you, fathers,
for you have come to know the one *who is* from
the beginning.

I am writing to you, young men,
for you have overcome the evil *one*.

¹⁴I wrote to you, little children [*paidia*],
for you have come to know the Father.

I wrote to you, fathers,
for you have come to know the one *who is* from
the beginning.

I wrote to you, young men,
for you are strong,
and the word of God abides abides in you,
and you have overcome the evil *one*.

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In this poem, John writes with a simplicity that masks his profound insights into the gospel. To better understand what he is saying, it is important to recognize John is addressing not three classes but two, as John Calvin (1509–64) and others explain.³ The two words John uses for “[little] children” in this passage do not refer to young people but rather to the entire church. Through this letter, John uses the same two terms to address the church as a whole. He uses the word from verse 12 (*teknia*) in 1 John 2:1, 2:28, 3:7, 3:18, 4:4, and 5:21; and he uses the word from verse 13 (*paidia*) in 1 John 2:18.

In addition to addressing the church as a whole, John is addressing two classes specifically: the old (“fathers”) and the young (“young men”). The Greek language uses gender in ways that English does not, so the masculine words for “young men” and “fathers” also would include females in that category. The terms are gender inclusive, and John is actually focusing on all the old in the church and the young in the church, in addition to focusing on everyone together when he speaks about the “children.”

So what does John say to the children? He reaffirms the gospel: “your sins have been forgiven for his name’s sake” (2:12) and “you have come to know the Father” (2:14). To John, these doctrines (in systematic theology, the doctrines of justification and of adoption, respectively) are more than abstract theory—they mark the core identity of every believer. Our sins are forgiven for the sake of Jesus’ name. We have been adopted into the family of God so that God has become our Father. No wonder John opens this section by addressing the church as “beloved” (2:7), for that is what we are!

Then, John builds on this reality in his comments to the young. Not only does every believer know firsthand the precious realities of forgiveness and adoption; all young people have been made strong and have overcome the evil one, for the word of God now abides in them. Notice that Christians do not accomplish acts of strength to be saved; they are saved because Christ has accomplished all this on

their behalf, so that what is true in Christ is true in them (2:8).

So, is John describing an aggressive, headstrong Christian who is always willing to pick a fight for Jesus? Hardly. If the word of God abides in these youths, then their lives are marked by love rather than aggression: “Whoever keeps his word, truly in this one the love of God has been perfected” (1 John 2:5). Following in the footsteps of Jesus, our strength is seen in the degree to which love directs our actions.

Finally, John further connects these gospel realities to lives marked by love in his simple comment to the old: “you have come to know the one who is from the beginning.” Who is from the beginning? Jesus Christ is: “What was from the beginning...who was toward the Father and was manifested to us.... And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ” (1 John 1:1-4).

But consider what John means by knowing Jesus. Knowing Jesus means obeying his commandments, and his commandments are summarized in a law of love: “The one who says that ‘I have come to know him’ but is not keeping his commandments, he is a liar and the truth is not in him. Whoever keeps his word, truly in this one the love of God has been perfected” (1 John 2:4-5).

All we children of God—young and old—are beloved by the Father in Jesus Christ by faith through the Holy Spirit. Our sins are forgiven, and we have been adopted by the Father as sons. And all we children of God—young and old—are to walk in a manner marked not by sin and darkness but by love. This is the high privilege and calling of those who have come to know the love of God through the gospel of Jesus.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. If you had to sum up the central message of the Old Testament in one word, would you choose the word *love*? Why or why not?
2. Compare how Jesus carries forward the Old Testament's message of love with the way that Jesus makes that old commandment new. What does Jesus keep the same, and what does Jesus change in his connection with the Old Testament?
3. What does it mean when we say, "Faith alone saves, but saving faith is never alone"? How does this help clarify the middle road of the gospel between the errors of the legalists and the errors of the libertines?

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2. *Memoir and Remains of the Rev. Robert Murray M'Cheyne*, ed. Andrew Bonar (London: Dundee, 1845), 254.

CHAPTER 3: GROWTH (1 JOHN 2:7-14)

1. See Matthew 22:34–40 and Mark 12:28–34.
2. This outline is adapted from Warren Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary, New Testament*, vol. 2 (Colorado Springs: Victor, 1989), 485–91.
3. John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles*, vol. 22, trans. John Owen (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 181. See e.g., Lenski, *Interpretation of the Epistles*, 417; Wiersbe, *Bible Exposition Commentary*, 495.

CHAPTER 4: PERSEVERANCE (1 JOHN 2:15-27)

1. Augustine, “Sermon 335C: The Sermon of the Blessed Bishop Augustine on the Feast of a Martyr,” in *Augustine: Political Writings*, ed. E. M. Atkins and R. J. Dodaro (New York: Cambridge UP, 2001), 59.
2. E.g., “pride in riches” (New Revised Standard Version), or “pride in possessions” (ESV).
3. Lenski, *Interpretation of the Epistles*, 426.
4. Thomas Chalmers, “Discourse IX. The Expulsive Power of a New Affection,” in *The Works of Thomas Chalmers*, vol. 6 (New York: Robert Carter, 1840), 209.
5. Lenski, *Interpretation of the Epistles*, 427.
6. Chalmers, “Discourse IX,” 209.

CHAPTER 5: HOPE (1 JOHN 2:28-3:10)

1. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 89.
2. 1 John 2:6, 10, 14, 17, 19, 24 (3x), 27 (2x), 28; 3:6, 9, 14, 15, 17, 24 (2x); 4:12, 13, 15, 16.