

The Commandment Christians Obey

1 John 2:7-11 Brethren, I write no new commandment to you, but an old commandment which you have had from the beginning. The old commandment is the word which you heard from the beginning. ⁸ Again, a new commandment I write to you, which thing is true in Him and in you, because the darkness is passing away, and the true light is already shining. ⁹ He who says he is in the light, and hates his brother, is in darkness until now. ¹⁰ He who loves his brother abides in the light, and there is no cause for stumbling in him. ¹¹ But he who hates his brother is in darkness and walks in darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes.

A while back, I read a book by a man who had some experience with shepherding sheep. In this book he wrote of the conspicuous difference between sheep and goats. While sheep can be occasionally contentious, for the most part they are placid and irenic animals. Goats, he noted, are very different. Goats are consistently interfering with one another, looking for a fight, prone to seek opportunities to head-butt. It seems that when Christ called his people sheep and the unsaved goats, He was perhaps referencing something of these traits. God's people love one another. Unbelievers do not and cannot.

John has now given us several signs of life. He has given us several marks that a person really has eternal life dwelling within. He has shown us that a true believer confesses his sin, he obeys God's commandments and he walks like Christ walked. He now moves to a fourth sign, which is actually just an elaboration on the previous one – that believers keep God's commandments. Since we are told to keep God's commandments, we might well ask, which ones? John's answer is in the following verses. John will show us three things here - he will show us the commandment we already know, the commandment intensified in Jesus, and the commandment Christians keep.

I. The Commandment You Already Know

Brethren, I write no new commandment to you, but an old commandment which you have had from the beginning. The old commandment is the word which you heard from the beginning.

What commandment is the commandment which every believer knows from the beginning of his or her salvation? Which commandment seems to be the summary commandment? What commandment has been known from the beginning?

Leviticus 19:18 'You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.

Now look at how Jesus took that verse:

Matthew 22:37 Jesus said to him, " 'You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.' ³⁸ "This is the first and great commandment. ³⁹ "And the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' ⁴⁰ "On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets."

When Jesus says on these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets, He means, the whole Old Testament is summarised in these two. These commandments are the essence of the whole Bible.

Paul told us the same thing:

Romans 13:8 ¶ Owe no one anything except to love one another, for he who loves another has fulfilled the

law.⁹ *For the commandments, "You shall not commit adultery," "You shall not murder," "You shall not steal," "You shall not bear false witness," "You shall not covet," and if there is any other commandment, are all summed up in this saying, namely, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."*¹⁰ *Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.*

James repeated the idea:

James 2:8 ¶ If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," you do well;

I love summary verses. When the Bible seems to become a maze of principles and precepts, there is always the helicopter view that zooms out, and takes in the whole picture with one sentence. It makes it simple. That doesn't make it easy, or even possible apart from grace. But it does make it understandable.

This commandment has been to Old Testament believers and New. It was known to us, in one sense, even before we were saved. The Golden Rule is a law which we all sense the rightness of – do to others as you would be done by.

Bernard of Clairvaux said that if you want to deny your neighbour something, make sure you deny it yourself first, so that you obey this commandment. If you want to do yourself a kindness, make sure you first do it for your neighbour as well.

So John says, I'm not telling you anything you didn't know. If you are a true believer, then you know that the essence of true salvation is being set free to love - to love God and love mankind.

But now John says something which seems to contradict what he just said. He says,

⁸ *Again, a new commandment I write to you, which thing is true in Him and in you, because the darkness is passing away, and the true light is already shining.*

So which is it? Is it an old commandment or a new one? Well, the word for 'new' in the original language does not mean *new in time*, but rather means *new in quality*. What John is talking about here is not an altogether new commandment, but an updating, an intensifying of the old commandment.

II. The Commandment Jesus Intensified

This verse sounds a bit cryptic, but its language is fairly familiar. The last part of the verse speaks of the darkness passing away and the light is shining. Well, who or what could that refer to?

John 1:4⁴ In Him was life, and the life was the light of men.

John 1:9 That was the true Light which gives light to every man coming into the world.

John 8:12¹² Then Jesus spoke to them again, saying, "I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life."

John 9:5 "As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world."

John 12:35-36 Then Jesus said to them, "A little while longer the light is with you. Walk while you have the light, lest darkness overtake you; he who walks in darkness does not know where he is going."³⁶ ¶ "While you have the light, believe in the light, that you may become sons of light." These things Jesus spoke, and departed, and was hidden from them.

When Jesus Christ came, He came as the light of the world. He came to end the darkness of sin, unbelief, worldliness and its penalties. He came as the light of truth, the light of holiness, and the light of love. The Incarnation of Jesus inaugurated a new Age. The light began to shine.

And in one sense, as Christ's church is built, the light shines more and the darkness passes away.

Now when Christ came to bring in His light, He made it clear to us what love really is. He loved His Father with all his heart, soul and mind. He loved His neighbour as Himself. Jesus Christ loved people. Could we find a better example of love? Think of how Jesus loved His disciples. Impulsive Peter, James and John wanting to call down fire on people's heads; frequent quarrels about who would be the greatest in the kingdom; slow comprehension of His teachings; failure to cast out demons; failure to stay awake in the Garden; Thomas doubting; Peter denying; all forsaking Him at His arrest. But how did He treat them?

Think of His love for the dregs of society: the tax collectors, like Zacheus and Matthew, or the woman of sin. Think of His love for children, taking them up in His arms. Think of His love for rabbi Nicodemus, or even a Roman centurion. His love for strangers in deep need – a bereaved mother, a distressed father, a blind man, lepers, lame. Think of His love for even His enemies. He prayed for Jerusalem, for the Pharisees who had utterly rejected Him. He offered Judas the best part of the Supper just before he betrayed Him. He prayed for His murderers' forgiveness on the cross.

Jesus incarnated love for us. And then, having done that, He raised the bar of love to a new level.

John 13:34 A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another.

John 15:12 ¹² ¶ "This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.

Can you see that it is the old commandment, but yet now it is receiving a new quality? No longer are you to simply love all people as you love yourself, but you are to love fellow Christians with Christ's love for you.

John says, it is true in Him and in you. This commandment to love was true in Jesus. That's why He said, "Love as I have loved you".

But it is also true *in* you. Now that would be impossible, except for some promises of what God does for you when He truly saves you.

Romans 5:5 Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us.

1 Thessalonians 4:9 ⁹ ¶ But concerning brotherly love you have no need that I should write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another;

That's why John says this commandment is also true in you, if you are a Christian.

So here is where John is going with this: True Christians keep God's commandments. Which ones? Well, all of them, but they know that all those commandments are summed up in one – love your neighbour as yourself. That's been taught since the Old Testament. But now, since Christ has come and brought a new age of love and light, that old commandment has been updated and intensified – love your brothers and sisters in Christ as Christ loves you.

And now John applies that test to people in terms of eternal life. Real Christian will obey the old commandment which has now been updated.

III. The Commandment Christians Keep

Once again, there is a claim.

He who says he is in the light,

To be in the light, is to be a Christian. Remember 1:5?

1 John 1:5 This is the message which we have heard from Him and declare to you, that God is light and in Him is no darkness at all.

So you claim you know God, you're in the truth and becoming like His holy nature, you make that claim verbally, but then –

*1 John 2:9 He who says he is in the light, **and hates his brother, is in darkness until now.***
You hate your brother – you are still in darkness.

If you hate the people you profess to be a brother or a sister to, you are in fact still in the darkness of unbelief. You cannot be a Christian if the pattern of your life is one of hatred towards His people.

There really are three 'Ls' in 1 John – Life, Light and Love. If you have true eternal Life, then you walk in the Light of who God is, fundamentally that means you love Him and His people. If you don't love God or His people, then you're not really walking in the light of who He is, which means you don't have His life in you.

Verse 11 makes that fairly clear:

¹¹ But he who hates his brother is in darkness and walks in darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes.

Notice how severe the darkness is. This person is in the darkness. They live outside of fellowship with God. Second, they walk in the darkness. They live in the realm of unbelievers. Third, they are blind as well. It is one thing to have eyes that see and to be in the dark. At least you can spot a pin-prick of light when you see it but to be blind and in the dark means that you wouldn't see the light even if it started to shine. This is the great curse of being sinners with selfish natures.

Unbelievers live in complete self-centredness. Self has grown so large, it has eclipsed the light of all other people. Everything is understood, not in relation to God, but in relation to self. And that kind of selfishness eventually becomes self-justifying, self-validating, and completely reasonable. The more selfish a person gets, the more sensible their life seems to them, the less they will allow the light of any truth to break in.

Titus 3:3 For we ourselves were also once foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving various lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful and hating one another.

Beneath the smiles and politeness of society lies a dreadful, simmering selfishness. You just have to knock the lid of the rubbish can off someone's heart by denying them something they want, or giving them something they don't want, and you'll soon smell the odour of sin and selfishness. There is no more frightening thought than a world where the selfishness of human beings is unrestrained, and every person has complete liberty to do what he wants. That will be a very nasty picture. But it is in many ways, the world people want.

And in that self-imposed prison of self-love, we become increasingly blind to our own prejudice and hatred of others. It's all explained by the actions of other people. Sin twists you. Sin perverts your judgement. The safest thing you can ever do is suspend your own judgements and let the Word of God search you, and be willing to face whatever it says about you.

We talk about blind hatred, and with good reason. When we live like that, we do not see what reality is.

John 11:9-10 Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours in the day? If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world. ¹⁰ "But if one walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him."

Martin Lloyd-Jones said this: "These people with this unloving nature are always finding problems and troubles. They always see insults where they do not exist; there is always something upsetting them, they are always being put out; they are constantly stumbling because of their unloving spirit. But, says John, they cause other people to stumble also, because as they are in this state and condition no one knows what to do with them. They are always so touchy and sensitive and they constantly run other people into trouble."

That's exactly right. And what do people start to do with someone who is like this? They avoid them. After all, if a blind man came crashing in here, wildly swinging a sword around, we'd get out the way. And when a person who is both in darkness and blind to his or her darkness comes crashing through a Christian fellowship, people get out the way. They know problems are coming, no matter what. You know that your tone of voice, your facial expression, the look in your eyes, your smile or lack thereof will all be interpreted in the most sinister light. And of course, every sermon was specifically crafted to get at them directly. D.L Moody responded to the charge that he crafted sermons for specific people by saying, if you throw a stick at a group of fighting dogs, without aiming at any particular one, the one that does get hit will be the angriest!"

And the result is that these kinds of people end up quite lonely. Their punishment for being so filled with hatred is their own life - few if any friends, no confidants, no family love. And worst of all, no real sight of Christ.

It's said that Leonardo Da Vinci had a bitter quarrel with a man while working on his portrait, *The Last Supper*. In revenge, he decided to paint the face of the man he had quarrelled with as the face of Judas, to spite the man for generations. But when he came to painting the face of Christ, he found he could not make progress. He was held back. He lost inspiration. Finally, he found the man he had quarrelled with, reconciled with him, came back and painted out the face of Judas, and painted it afresh, and then he was able to paint the face of Christ.

There is no sight of the beauty of Christ to the one filled with the ugliness of malice, envy, spite and self-centredness.

But then we see the opposite in verse 10.

He who loves his brother abides in the light, and there is no cause for stumbling in him.

The person who loves his brother is in the light - no doubt. Once again, it is not about the verbal claims, it is about the life's actions. This person loves his fellow Christians - not perfectly, but because of the presence of the Holy Spirit in his heart, because of the Word of God abiding in him, he cannot help loving the family of God. It is kin to him. It is blood. And this becomes the marker

of true salvation.

John 13:35 By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."

Such a person is not stumbling into life and stumbling into everyone, because he can see. He can see what the needs of others are. He can see when they need comfort, when they need admonishment, when they need warning, when they need encouragement. He can see when to lovingly give someone space, and when to be there. He can tell the difference between weakness and rebellion, between discouragement and unbelief. He can tell what his brothers and sisters needs are, because he loves them.

Once you can see, you start to understand what miserable lives people lead because of sin. You start to feel sorry for people instead of despising them. Once you can see, you know how great your own sin is, how big the plank is in your own eye, so you are very patient and gentle with the specks in your brothers and sisters eye. That's because you can see. When you can't, you have no patience, no tolerance, no compassion, because you haven't really felt that yourself.

If you have the life, you're in the light. If you're in the light, you'll have the love. You see what it is your brother or sister lacks, and how you can supply that. Jesus saw His disciples' feet needed to be washed. He made sure He did that. He met their needs for their well-being and joy. That's love – meeting people's greatest needs at your own expense.

Loving our brothers and sisters is what keeps us from slandering them, backbiting them, despising them in our hearts, gossiping about them, envying them, speaking evil of them, thinking evil of them, growing impatient with them, refusing to forgive them. You can take any one of the 25+ one-another commands, and if you love one another, you will learn how to do that.

Life, Light and Love. If you have the life, then you can see - you can see God's old and new commandment to love. You know it is true in Him, and it is true in you. And as a result, you seek not to be a stumbling block to others, but a person who seeks the spiritual well-being and joy of his brother or sister in Christ.