

“The Darkness Is Passing Away”

The Third in a Series of Sermons on John’s Epistles

Texts: 1 John 2:3-11; Isaiah 6:1-10

The contrast between Christianity and false religion is as apparent as the contrast between light and darkness. John the Apostle, must deal with certain men who have departed from the faith, and who were now denying that Jesus is God manifest in the flesh. To expose their errors, John uses a simple contrast. God is light. Darkness cannot exist in his presence, because light casts out darkness. Since Jesus Christ is God manifest in the flesh, Jesus is that light which has come into the world. That light which gives life, enables God’s people to walk in the light, even as Jesus is the manifestation of the light. And since light casts out darkness, so too Christ’s coming in the flesh means that wherever the word of life is proclaimed, darkness passes away.

As we continue our series on the Epistles of John, we are now making our way through the second chapter of John’s first epistle. In this section of John’s letter (vv. 1:5-2:29), John describes four ways in which Christians demonstrate that they are walking in the light. The first of these four conditions is the necessity of repenting of our sin. We discussed this last time as we made our way through 1 John 1:5-2:2. The second condition mentioned by John—that Christians must be obedient to God’s commandments—is found in verses 2:3-11. This is our topic in this sermon. The third condition is spelled out in verses 12-17. John says that Christians must reject all appearance of worldliness, which refers to both the lusts of the flesh and the desires of the eyes. The fourth condition—that we must hold fast to the truth in the presence of antichrists—is spelled out in the balance of the chapter (vv. 18-29). According to John, these things are characteristic of all those who live in the light of the word manifest in the flesh.

Since I spent a fair bit of time on background material for the epistles of John in the previous two sermons—in which I explain why I am approaching these epistles in the way that I am—I would ask you to listen to them, if you haven’t yet heard them. Throughout these epistles, John (the apostle) is dealing an early form of Gnosticism, in which it is argued that a dualism exists between spirit (good) and matter (which is evil). In this dualistic scheme of things, the Christian doctrine of the incarnation of Jesus Christ is an impossibility because God (pure spirit) could not in any sense be manifest in human flesh (because flesh is material, and therefore evil). This is why John opens this epistle with the emphatic declaration that Jesus is God manifest in the flesh. John has seen Jesus, heard Jesus, and even touched Jesus. The good news (of the gospel) is that Jesus has come as a flesh and blood Savior.

But those whom John describes as men “who went out from us” were denying that Jesus was God manifest in the flesh—one of the fundamental truths of the Christian faith. In order to explain Jesus’ earthly ministry, these false teachers were forced to contend that while Jesus was fully God, he only took the form (or appeared) as a man. In other words, while fully divine, Jesus was some sort of phantom or apparition, and was not truly human (no flesh, blood, or bones). This is the heresy of docetism. The whole point of Jesus being God manifest in the flesh is that he came to offer himself up as a propitiation for our sins. A propitiation is a sacrifice which turns aside God’s wrath through the shedding of real blood, and through a truly broken body. But a docetic Jesus cannot make such a sacrifice. A phantom Jesus cannot shed real blood. Furthermore, a Jesus who only appears in human form cannot obey the law of God so as to fulfill all righteousness. The docetic Jesus cannot save flesh and blood sinners. John calls those who teach such a thing, “antichrists.”

Another important trait of this early Gnosticism is the idea that enlightenment comes to only a few who discipline themselves to learn the secret insights into the teachings of Jesus, not made public to everyone. Apparently, such esoteric knowledge about Jesus was being taught by those who had departed from the faith. Given John's focus upon both the death of Christ (who is God manifest in the flesh) and his present advocacy for us in heaven, it is clear that the gospel is grounded in historic and very public events—not some sort of “secret knowledge.” This is why those for whom Christ died must walk in the light. Light casts out darkness. And light can be easily observed.

Given the series of sharp contrasts John sets upon in 1 John 1:6-2:1 (which we discussed last time), we can be very sure that some sort of antinomianism was being taught by these false teachers mentioned by the Apostle. More than likely those who had departed from the faith were teaching that since Jesus had come bringing new revelation regarding the purposes of God, the old covenant was no longer binding. This means that Christians were no longer bound to obey God's commandments (the law). No doubt, also present was the idea that the once enlightened, people claimed to be able to rise above their sin, hence they saw no need of a flesh and blood Savior. Christianity was transformed from a religion grounded in what God has done in history to save us from our sin, into a religion based upon secret teachings and personal enlightenment. Such a religion is, of course, no longer Christianity.

This explains why in verses 8 and 10 John openly challenges those who see no connection between what they believe and how they live. “*If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us*” (v. 1:8), and then again in verse 10, “*If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.*” Not only are those who claim to be without sin self-deceived, even worse, John says they make God out to be a liar. Not only does this indicate that John is concerned about antinomianism, but this also explains the necessity of why those who walk in the light cannot just do what seems right in their own eyes. People who are self-deceived, and who make God out to be a liar, are not in any position whatsoever to teach others about what God does or does not require.

So, with that background in mind, we turn to our text, 1 John 2:3-11.

Before we look at John's statement in verse 3, “*And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments,*” we need to keep in mind that which John has just stated in verses 1-2. “*My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.*” Throughout this epistle we find direct imperatives that Christians must be obedient to the commandments of God. But we must be very careful not to treat these imperatives apart from John's equally clear comments (indicatives) that Christ's death is a propitiation which turns aside God's wrath toward all of our sins, and that Jesus is presently our advocate before the father in heaven.

John is not some sort of perfectionist—that Christians can cease from all sin. But he is a realist. While he gives us this exhortation so that we will not sin (2:1), at the same time he says “*but if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.*” John fully expects that those who are Christ's will walk in the light, unlike the false teachers who live in darkness. But the apostle establishes the truth of what Jesus does for his people—dying for them, and interceding for them—before telling them to obey the commandments of the Lord. This is the classic distinction between the indicative mood (a statement of fact) and the imperative mood (a command). It is only after reminding us of what Christ has done for us (indicative), that John tells us what we are to do (keep God's commandments) *because* Christ has died for us, and is presently making intercession for us. Only those who are already Christ's will

strive to obey God's law. Only Christians worry about whether or not they have been obedient enough. A Christian walks in the light, and light exposes that which is hidden—namely our sin. A non-Christian who walks in darkness never even has this struggle with sin and obedience. Why? Because they cannot see (in the light of God's word) how sinful they truly are.

As for verse 3 itself, John is very direct—those who walk in the light (those for whom Christ has died and now intercedes) are to keep God's commandments. Striving to obey God's law is one of the sure tests by which we know we are Christians. By way of contrast, people who walk in darkness have no interest in obeying God's commandments. The reason why John speaks about the need to obey the commandments in the way that he does, flows directly out of the error with which he is dealing.¹ People who had been taken in by docetic heresy were inclined to believe that what mattered was the “soul,” not the body.

As long as the soul was pure, obeying the commandments of God was not important. If people believed that Jesus was a new revelation of God (but not truly human) and that he came to do away with the emphasis upon things physical, then what really matters was gaining knowledge of religious secrets which would set people free from all things worldly (material). This disdain for the flesh (and all things material) is characteristic of these kinds of proto-gnostic sects. This is why these who rejected Jesus as God manifest in the flesh, were often characterized by indifference to things the Bible regards as sinful.

Therefore, it is vital that John point out the obvious difference between walking in the light and living in darkness. Lest we overlook the obvious shot at those stressing “esoteric” or “secret” knowledge, John reminds his readers that through obedience to the commandments, *by this we know that we have come to know him*. This the first of 25 times in this epistle when John uses the verb “to know.” Christians “know that we know.”² This is because we trust in a true flesh and blood Jesus, whom John has seen, heard, and touched. No doubt, John is taking up the language of his opponents, and using it to demonstrate that our faith is not based upon secret and esoteric teachings (so-called “gnosis”). We know what we know, because God's commandments were not revealed to a few who gained knowledge of the hidden principles of the universe. No, God came down to Mount Sinai and published his law on two stone commandments which were then enshrined in Israel's constitution and history—the Sinaitic covenant.

According to the Apostle Paul, these same commandments were written upon every human heart (cf. Romans 2:14-15). When they were published on the two stone tablets given to Moses, that which was written upon the heart, was now revealed for all to see and understand. These commandments are the very reflection of God's holy, loving, and righteous character. As Paul says in Romans 7:12, “*so the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.*” These commandments are known to everyone, they are not hidden. Therefore, when John speaks of God as light, he is surely thinking of these commandments as the revelation of God's will. And those who are Christ's, will walk in the light of the word made flesh—i.e., they will strive to obey God's commandments. But never forget that we will strive to obey the commandments *only* because Christ has already died for us (turning aside God's wrath) and because he is presently interceding for all his people as our advocate.

Christians (especially those in the Wesleyan-holiness tradition) often go off the rails when they press John by asking him, “is God demanding perfect obedience of us?” John is not speaking about

¹ Smalley, 1, 2, 3, John, xxiii-xxiv, 43.

² Smalley, 1, 2, 3, John, 44-45.

sanctification, or to the question of whether Christians can rise above all sin (perfectionism). John is simply setting out a contrast between Christians (who walk in the light), and those who have departed from the faith (who walk in darkness). Christians know what the light is, because the word has been revealed in history. If they are in Christ, they will strive to walk in that light. But those who chase after secret knowledge and embrace the docetic Jesus, will have no interest in obeying the commandments. They prefer to live in darkness. They love their esoteric secrets more than the word manifest in the flesh.

While John frames his argument in the positive—we know that we know because we obey the commandments—it might help us understand the force of his argument better if we frame it in the negative. Those who walk in darkness, do not strive to obey the commandments. Therefore, it is easy to tell who such people are. Despite their claim to be “in the know” they are not interested in God’s law, nor does their conduct comport with what the law requires.³ John is not telling Christians that they must be perfect. Rather, he is pointing out that the contrast between a Christian and those who have departed from the truth is as obvious as the difference between light and darkness.

The declaration in verse 3 sets the stage for three traits which should characterize any Christian’s behavior (especially in contrast to those who walk in darkness).⁴ The first of these is found in verse 4. *“Whoever says ‘I know him’ but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him.”* John is not speaking about how one makes progress in the Christian life. He’s simply stating that Christians will strive to keep God’s commandments—those who claim to know God, will seek to obey his commandments. Those who claim to be Christians (the enlightened ones who have rejected the doctrine that Jesus is God in the flesh) will likewise not be interested in obedience, as much as they will be interested in “secret knowledge.” The one is very public, the other is not. Those who claim to know the deeper truths, and who yet have no concern about obedience to the commandments are liars. They demonstrate by their conduct that they do not know God. Again, John is moving away from the hidden/secret, to the public/concrete. John’s basic point is one of contrast. When we look at someone’s conduct, we can usually see how “enlightened” they truly are. If they are indifferent to commandments while claiming to be Christians, then they are liars. They walk in darkness.

The second thing that should characterize someone who knows God is that the love of God is perfected in them. Says John in the first part of verse 5, *“but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected.”* Again, it is vital that we catch John’s point. He connects “keeping” (obeying) to God’s word. John’s use of logos (“word”) has a dual reference here—both to the written word (Scripture) and to the word manifest in the flesh (Christ).⁵ A Christian who obeys God’s word is obeying a published document, and God manifest in the flesh. Such a person’s conduct is plain for all to see, and there is absolutely nothing hidden or esoteric about any of this.

John also says that God’s love is perfected (or completed) in those who obey God’s word. I take this to mean that God’s love for us is completed when those for whom Christ has died, and for whom he intercedes, manifest God’s electing love and grace toward them through their own personal obedience to

³ Stott, The Letters of John, 94-95.

⁴ Smalley, 1, 2, 3, John, 46.

⁵ See the discussion in; Smalley, 1, 2, 3 John, 48.

the commandments.⁶ In other words, God's eternal love toward sinners—that which motivated him to send Christ to suffer and die for us, and then to serve as our advocate, is made complete through our love of God (out of gratitude) because of that which Christ has done for us. Our love of/toward God is the manifestation of God's prior love for us. This is John's point in 1 John 4:10. *"This is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins."* In this epistle, John says that our love for God is perfected through our obedience to his commandments. John's stress falls upon that which we do, not any secret, esoteric "knowledge" we might possess.

In the latter part of verse 5 and in verse 6, John speaks of the third thing which should characterize all Christians. *"By this we may know that we are in him: whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked."* Again, John pushes his reader back to their own certainty in Christ—that which they know because the word of life has been manifest in the flesh. John's readers know this to be true, because out of love for God, they strive to obey his commandments. Because they walk in the light, just as Jesus walked, they know that they are in Christ, and that they abide in him. "Abiding" is a major theme in John's Gospel and is discussed in John 15. Not only does John speak of the necessity of "abiding in Christ," John also reminds us how this is possible while we remain sinners. *"You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you"* (John 15:16). God has chosen those whom he will save, and those whom he has chosen, will abide. They will bear fruit. John's point here (in the context of refuting proto-Gnosticism) is that those who are Christ's will walk in Christ's light, i.e., they will strive to obey God's commandments. Why? Because God chose them, Christ died for them, and now he intercedes for them.

In verses 7-11 John fleshes out his point with more specifics. If Christians are to obey the commandments of God, those commandments can be summarized by the two tables of the law, love of God and love of neighbor. Believers are called to walk in the light as Christ is in the light. Therefore, believers must love their brothers and sisters in Christ. The importance of this should be clear to those to whom John is writing, as they have witnessed so-called brothers and sisters departing from the faith out of the misguided quest for "knowledge." But those who walk in the light, will follow the example of Christ, and love their brothers and sisters, for whom Christ died, and for whom he is now interceding.

John speaks affectionately to his audience in verse 7 as his beloved (or dear friends). *"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."* John has nothing new to reveal to his reader—in this he distinguishes himself from those false teachers whose primary claim was that they had all kinds of new doctrines and commandments. John is clearly speaking of the law, which his readers (especially those Jewish Christians in the congregation) had from the beginning. God gave the law to Adam in Eden, it is written on the hearts of everyone. Nothing new here at all. That law teaches us that we must love God and neighbor—very mundane and basic stuff. Not nearly as exciting as some new and secret revelation about the hidden mysteries of the universe. Just love God and your neighbor.

And yet in verse 8, John speaks of a new command. *"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."* John is of course referring to Jesus' words as recorded in John 13:34. *"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one*

⁶ Stott, *The Letters of John*,

another.” John’s point is that Jesus commanded nothing new when he told us to love one another. But as the author of the law, Jesus wanted to ensure that his disciples understood that the decalogue was itself founded upon love of God and love of neighbor (cf. Deuteronomy 6:5; Leviticus 19:18).⁷

In fact, Jesus was the fulfillment of the command to love God and neighbor, as demonstrated through his own obedience to God, his love of neighbor, and through his sacrificial death, in which he voluntarily laid down his life for his own people. In Jesus we see the very embodiment of this commandment. The commandment to love God and neighbor is old, being enshrined in the law. With the coming of Christ, that commandment is made new, in the sense that Jesus alone fulfills that commandment, indeed embodies it. That is why John can say, that the obedience of Jesus (that which is “true in him”) is likewise seen in those who walk in the light. Those who have been given life by the word made flesh, will in turn love their brothers and sisters, even as Jesus has loved them. In this, the law is fulfilled and God’s work in us is perfected.

When John speaks of darkness passing away because the true light is already shining, he’s speaking in eschatological terms. This present age is characterized darkness. This world (this age) is destined to perish. Darkness passes away because Jesus is the true light of the age to come. His coming (as the truth) exposes error. His coming reminds us that this world (the darkness) is passing away. His coming is the very embodiment of love, and just as light casts out darkness, so too the coming of Jesus casts out hate. Everything associated with the darkness of this age will pass away.

John elaborates upon this a bit more in verses 9-11. *“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.”* Light and love, darkness and hatred, go hand in hand. Those in Christ are characterized by love and truth. Those in darkness are characterized by hatred and ignorance of the things of God. Those who walk in light, will love their brothers and sisters. Those in darkness will not. Those who walk in the light of God’s word will not stumble. But those who walk in darkness (as depicted in Isaiah 6:9-10, part of our Old Testament lesson), not only will hate those who see in Jesus the word manifest in the flesh, but they will have no idea of where they are headed. As Isaiah says, they cannot understand, they are dull, and they are blind. Because they walk in darkness, John says, they have become blind to the truth. They may claim to have knowledge, but they are ignorant about those things which God has revealed. And everyone can see it but them. *“Keep on hearing, but do not understand; Keep on seeing, but do not perceive.”*

What, then, do we say by way of application?

John opened this epistle by reminding his readers that Jesus is God manifest in the flesh. John knows this to be true because he has heard Jesus preach, seen him perform miracles, and has even touched him with his hands. John has pointed out that those who deny that they are sinful are self-deceived and make God out to be a liar. Although John has written this epistle “so that we will not sin,” John knows that we will. This is why he reminds us that Jesus came in the flesh to offer up himself as a propitiation for our sins, as well as serve as our advocate in heaven. All of these things require a flesh and blood Savior (the word of life manifest in the flesh), not a docetic Jesus who simply appears in human form.

⁷ Stott, The Letters of John, 98.

Since the false teachers were claiming to be without sin and were indifferent to the commandments of God, John's response to this false teaching is to simply contrast true Christians with those who have embraced the phantom Jesus of the antichrist. The contrast between the two groups is as apparent as the contrast between light and darkness. Those who are Christ's will walk in the light—they will obey God's commandments and love their brothers and sisters in Christ. Those who are not Christ's will manifest darkness and hatred. This is how we know that we know. There is nothing secret about this. It is all out in the open. God has made his will perfectly clear in his word and through the person of his son. Jesus is God come in the flesh. He has suffered and died for us, and serves as our advocate in heaven.

Christianity is a religion of flesh and blood, a religion of obeying published commandments, and loving our brothers and sisters in the rub of daily life. Christianity is a religion of law and gospel, properly balanced indicatives (what God has done for us) and imperatives (what we must do because we are Christ's). Christianity is not a religion of secrets or techniques. No, Christianity is a religion of light, not things hidden in darkness. And whenever God's light comes into the world, through the person and work of Jesus Christ, the darkness is passing away before our very eyes.