

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	1 John		Pastor/Teacher
Number:	5		Gary L.W. Johnson
Text:	1 John 2:7-11		
Date:	February 25, 2018 (a.m.)		

THE MARK OF A CHRISTIAN

Francis Schaeffer made a profound impression on me (and on a great many people!) during my college days as a philosophy major. I read everything he wrote, and to this day I find myself going back again and again to his books. His emphasis on love being the mark of the Christian is foundational to his thought.

“Through the centuries men have displayed many different symbols to show that they are Christians. They have worn marks in the lapels of their coats, hung chains about their necks, even had special haircuts. Of course, there is nothing intrinsically wrong with any of this, if one feels it is his calling. But there is a much better sign – a mark that has not been thought up just as a matter of expediency for use on some special occasion or in some specific era. It is a universal mark that is to last through all the ages of the church until Jesus comes back. What is this mark? At the close of His ministry, Jesus looks forward to His death on the cross, the open tomb and the ascension. Knowing that He is about to leave, Jesus prepares His disciples for what is to come. It is here that He makes clear what will be the distinguishing mark of the Christian. ‘Little children, yet a little while I am with you. Ye shall seek me; and as I said unto the Jews, Where I go, ye cannot come; so now I say to you. A new commandment I give unto you, that ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another. (John 13:33-35).’ This passage reveals the mark that Jesus gives to label a Christian not just in one era or in one locality, but at all times and all places until Jesus returns. Notice that what He says here is not a statement or a fact. It is a command which includes a condition: ‘A new commandment I give unto you, that ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, *if* you have love one to another.’ An *if* is involved. If you obey, you will wear the badge Christ gave. But since this is a command, it can be violated. The point is that it is possible to be a Christian without showing the mark; but if we expect non-Christians to know that we are Christians, we *must* show the mark. In 1 John 3:11 John says, ‘For this is the message that ye heard from the beginning, that we should love one another.’ Years after Christ’s death, John, in writing the epistle, calls us back to Christ’s original command in John 13. Speaking to the church, John in effect says, ‘Don’t forget this . . . Don’t forget this. This command was given to us by Christ while He was still on the earth. This is to be your mark.’”¹

Review: John’s motivation for writing this epistle is that his readers would have fellowship with God and with His servants – the apostles. This fellowship is seen in walking in the light (1:5-7), confessing our sins (1:8-10), because Christ has made propitiation for our sins and is our advocate

(2:1-2). Our fellowship is demonstrated by keeping His commandments, thus walking as Jesus did. One commandment in particular is underscored.

- I. **THIS COMMANDMENT.** It is both *old* and *new*. Stott writes, “Is this commandment new or old? It is both. In one sense, as they read John’s Epistle, it was *no new commandment . . . but an old commandment*. They had learned it before. Indeed, they had known it from the outset of their Christian life (cf. ii. 24, iii. 11, and 2 Jn. 6 for this meaning of *from the beginning*). It was part of the ethical instruction they received from the day of their conversion. So basic was it to the teaching they received that John could even equate it with *the word which ye have heard*, literally ‘which you heard’ (*ēkousate*, aorist; *from the beginning* is not repeated in the better MSS). Brotherly love was part of the original message which had come to them. John was not now inventing it. It was not an innovation such as the heretics claimed to teach. It was as old as the gospel itself.”²
- II. **THE COMMAND TO LOVE ONE ANOTHER.** What does this mean? There are four Greek words for love. *Storge* used to describe the bond of love between members of a family. *Eros*, from which we derive words like erotic, denotes sexual love. *Phileo*, the bond of love between friends. Finally, *agape*, a giving love that describes God’s love. C. S. Lewis in his classic work on the subject, refers to them as affection, friendship, eros, and charity. His observation on charity is insightful: “That such a Gift-love comes by Grace and should be called Charity, everyone will agree. But I have to add something which will not perhaps be so easily admitted. God, as it seems to me, bestows two other gifts; a supernatural Need-love of Himself and a supernatural Need-love of one another. By the first I do not mean the Appreciative love of Himself, the gift of adoration. What little I have to say on that higher – that highest – subject will come later. I mean a love which does not dream of is disinterestedness, a bottomless indigence. Like a river making its own channel, like a magic wine which in being poured out should simultaneously create the glass that was to hold it, God turns our need of Him into Need-love of Him. What is stranger still is that he creates in us a more than natural receptivity of Charity from our fellow men. Need is so near greed and we are so greedy already that it seems a strange grace. But I cannot get it out of my head that this is what happens.”³ As Shaeffer pointed out, this is the same kind of love that Jesus commanded in John 13:34-35 and centers around meeting the pressing needs of others. This was demonstrated by Jesus’ life and death (1 John 3:16-17).
- III. **BOGUS PROFESSION.** Claiming to know God and still be lacking in love is to walk in darkness. “Since the new commandment of love is the distinctive commandment of the new age, the test of obedience is preeminently a test of love. The claim to be ‘in the light’ – once more introduced by the phrase ‘he that saith’ – is a claim to have fellowship with God. In I. 6 John has insisted that such a claim is incompatible with walking in darkness; here he insists that such a claim is inconsistent with loveless behavior. No one is allowed to imagine that he can get away with a claim to be a lover of God on the ground that this is an inward attitude, invisible to other men. The twin commandments of love to God and love to one’s neighbor are like two sides of a coin; the one is essential to the other. So the claim to ‘live in the light,’ to enjoy fellowship with the God of light, must be tested by a man’s treatment of his brother. The word ‘treatment’ should be emphasized because, as John makes clear later, it is not a matter of sentimental feelings and language, familiar in certain brands of pietism, but of loving ‘in deed and in truth’ (3.18).”⁴

CONCLUSION: Robert Candlish, in true pastoral form, draws out the implication of our text. “What is the darkness to me as regards my relation to it and my esteem of it? Or the things of darkness – what are they? I know well enough what the darkness, in this use of the word, means; what it is. It means, it is, the shutting out of God. For darkness is the absence of light. But ‘God is

light.' This darkness, therefore, is the absence of God, the shutting out of God. In whatever place, or scene, or company, God is shut out, there is darkness. Whatever work or way God is shut out from, -- that is a work or way of darkness. Whoever shuts out God from his thoughts is a child of darkness. Now I come into contact with this darkness on every hand, at every point. Places, scenes, companies, from which God is shut out; works and ways from which God is shut out; people from whose minds and hearts God is shut out; -- I am in the midst of them all; they press upon me; I cannot get rid of them. Tempting, flattering, cajoling; or trying, threatening, persecuting; they are on me like the Philistines on Samson. Worse than that, they are in me, as having only too good auxiliaries in my own sinful bosom. How do I regard them? Do I cleave to them -- to any of them? Would I have them to abide at least a little longer? Would it pain me to part with them and let them pass? Or is it this very feature about them all that they are passing, -- that the darkness which owns them all is passing, -- that I fasten upon for relief and comfort? Is it that which alone reconciles me to my being still obliged for a season to tolerate and have dealings with the darkness? For dealings with this darkness I cannot but have, I have to go down into its depths to rescue, if it may be, its victims. And I have to resist its solicitations when its ministers come to me disguised as angels of light. My soul, like the righteous soul of Lot, must be vexed with the evil conversation and ungodly deeds that the darkness covers in Sodom. I have to stand its assaults; and when reviled, revile not again. So this darkness, this shutting out of God, with its manifold influences and agencies, besets me. How do I feel towards it? Have I still some sympathy with it in some of its less offensive aspects? Am I still inclined to make terms with it, so as to disarm its hostility, and even taste, in some safe manner and degree, its friendship? Would its instant and thorough disappearance from before me, -- would my instant and thorough removal from beside it, -- be altogether welcome? Would I have it stay with me or pass from me? Is the darkness of this world, with its pursuits and pleasures and amusements, its seductions, its associations, its customs and fellowships, -- in which God is not, and therefore light is not, -- is it a lingering friend to me, or a departing stranger -- a retreating foe? 'The darkness is passing.' Is that true in me, as in Christ, with reference not merely to the darkness of this world that has such a hold on me, but also and chiefly to the darkness of my own shutting out of God; the darkness of my shutting out of God from my own conscious guilt and cherished sin? That is darkness indeed. Is it passing? Am I glad of its passing? Or am I somehow, and in some measure, loving it still? -- so loving it that I would not have it altogether or all at once pass? Say that my sin is finding me out; -- the sin, generally, of my state and character before God, or some particular sin. Say that I am falling away from my first love, or coming again under the dominion of some form of evil; -- that, in some particular matter, my heart is not right with God. So far as that matter is concerned, I would shut out God. I would put in something between him and me; some excuse; some palliating circumstance; some countervailing aspect of goodness; some plea of self-justification of some sort. That is the darkness which, in such a case, I naturally love. And I feel myself drawn to love it, even in spite of my experience of the more excellent way of guilelessness on my part towards God, and grace on God's part towards me. But is it passing -- this darkness? Is it passing with my own consent? Do I make it free and right welcome to pass? Or do I cleave to it as if I would still have a little of it to abide with me? Ah! this darkness, this shutting out of God! How apt am I, if not to ask it, at least to suffer it, to return and remain, 'Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my thoughts; and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.' 'The darkness is passing.' Is this my stay, my hope, my joy in the hour of its fiercest power? When it gathers thickest and falls heaviest, hiding God's face from me; when all about me and in me is so dark that I cannot see my signs; when a sense of guilt sinks me as in a dark pit, and 'the sorrows of death encompass me, and the pains of hell get hold upon me, and I find trouble and sorrow;' -- let me fasten on this 'thing which is true in Christ and in me, that the darkness is passing.' I am suffering with Christ, undergoing a kind of crucifixion with him. To me, as to him, -- to me conscious of sin, my own and not another's, -- the cup of wrath is presented. On me, as on him, the awful blackness of that day of doom settles down. To me, as to him, sin is indeed

exceeding sinful; and the death, which is its wages, terrible. Sold under sin, I am consciously, with a keen and nervous sensitiveness of conscience, dying that death. My faith is failing. Unbelief all but has the mastery. But 'a new commandment' is given me, and a new power, at the critical moment, to realize it as a thing true in Christ and therefore true in me, that this 'darkness is passing.' In him it is true only through his draining the cup of wrath, dying the accursed death for me. O my soul, bless thou the Lord, that it is already and most graciously true in thee, because so terribly true in him, that, without cost to thee, though with infinite cost to him, this great darkness passes away for ever!"⁵

ENDNOTES

¹ *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer: A Christian View of The Church*, Volume 4 (Crossway, 1982), p. 183.

² J. R. W. Stott, *The Epistles of John* (Eerdmans, 1975), p. 92.

³ cf. C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (Fontana Books, 1963), p. 118.

⁴ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles of John* (Eerdmans, 1970), p. 56.

⁵ Robert Candlish, *1 John* (rpt. Banner of Truth, 1974), pp. 122-125.