

## Something Old, Something New...

### *1 John 2:1-11*

We've already said that John wrote his first letter to the early Christians likely near the end of his life. Which means that John had been active for decades, most of the first century, spending and risking his life to build the kingdom Jesus had first announced to him as a young man while John sat with his brother James in his father's fishing boat. But, to our knowledge, John wrote nothing for decades and decades and then, near the end of his life, he burst into a flurry of writing, a brilliant gospel, three striking and sometimes mysterious letters, and then, after the Romans had locked him away, John recorded a series of visions he had about Jesus and heaven in a book he titled "Revelation".

So John wrote long after the other apostles, to a different generation of Christians, who were born decades after the first Jewish disciples had followed Jesus around the Promised Land, most of them back then imagining that Jesus was a new and better Moses or maybe a new and better David, come to lead old Israel into a new and better age of glory. Now Jesus himself had warned his Jewish disciples over and over again that their dreams were not God's plan, that old Israel with its temple and its priests and all its ancient customs would be gone within a generation.

So by the time John put pen to paper likely in the '80's or '90's of the first century, old Jerusalem had been destroyed, the temple gone up in smoke. The surviving rabbis and priests were all fugitives living all over the Roman Empire, following their Jewish congregations wherever the Roman had banished them. And so it fell to John, who was likely the last surviving Christian apostle, to orient the second and third generation Christian disciples in west Asia to what it meant that old Israel had been swept away. Because obviously it would have mattered to the early Christians.

After all, Israel was the place from which Jesus came. The gospel teaches that Christian Savior was the Jewish Messiah. Many of the early Christian leaders and congregants were still ethnically Jewish. And so the first orienting fact John wants the early Christians to know is that, even though Israel was gone and Jerusalem was up in smoke, nothing had essentially changed. God was still God. Right was still right. Wrong was still wrong. John put it this way, he said, *"Beloved, I write you no new commandment, but an old commandment that you had from the beginning. The old commandment is the word that you heard."*

What John teaches here is very similar to what Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's gospel. Jesus said, *"Don't imagine that I have come to abolish the Law or the*

*Prophets. I have not come to abolish them, but to fulfill them.*” So the morals and ethics God gave Moses to teach in his law were not going to be nullified by anything Jesus did, nor would they be contradicted by anything John taught some fifty years after Jesus had returned to heaven.

What God defined as light in the old commandments were the same qualities that shined through Jesus and that Jesus said should shine through us. And if Jesus and John had just left it at that, we could stop here. Right is right, wrong is wrong light is light, darkness is darkness. Both Jesus and John taught that, and we ought to believe it. But Jesus and John didn’t stop there. They both had more to say about the commandments, so we need to keep listening to them. John wrote this, he said, *“But again, I do write you a new commandment, which is true in him and in you, because the darkness is passing away and the true light already shines.”*

Now if we had John the Apostle in our congregation this morning, we could ask him, “Are you writing a new commandment or aren’t you? Because now you’ve said both.” But John’s not here, so I hope you’ll bear with me as I work some with what he wrote. I think John’s just said that the *“old commandment”*, what God has always defined as right and wrong from the very beginning still holds. The ethics and principles that have always lived in God’s heart still bind us as commandments today. But it is also true that the appearance of God the Son in human flesh has set forces in motion that will require us to understand the old commandments in a new light. There is a *“new commandment”*, John wrote, *“which is true in him [I think he means “Christ”] and in you because the darkness is fading away and the true light already shines.”*

The point being that all those ethics Moses taught in the Ten Commandments, all those principles that God meant to guide and define his good creation were fulfilled, they were brought to light by the appearance of God the Son in human flesh. What did John write about Jesus at the beginning of his gospel, he wrote, *“In him [in Christ] was life and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness does not comprehend it.”* So the world was in the dark, we were in the dark until God the Son became one of us and brought all the light, all goodness that exists in God’s heart within our reach.

Because no number of brilliant commandments were going to bring us closer to God until Jesus came and won forgiveness for us on the cross and the power to change within our reach at the resurrection. And then he ascended to heaven where he still represents people like you and me who belong to God and we’re becoming like God, yet we are still fallen, still making mistakes, still needing forgiveness and help. So our places are already reserved in heaven and God’s Spirit already lives in our hearts right here, right now. Which all adds up to mean that darkness has less power in our lives, less influence in our hearts once we’ve opened our lives and hearts to Jesus.

Or as John put it, “...*the darkness is fading away and the true light already shines.*”

And what is this new commandment that will make us fit for the new reality that is on the way when Christ returns? Jesus told us at the Last Supper, he said, “*A new commandment I give to you that you love one another just as I have loved you.*” So the thing that Jesus did that will equip us to rise above darkness and to begin to live in the light was to love us as we are, to welcome us into a relationship with him founded on the love that has always existed between him and his Father.

And the “*new commandment*” Jesus gave that brings all the old commandments into their proper place is for us to “*love one another*”. Note carefully Jesus wasn’t talking that night about loving the whole wide world, strangers and victims and perpetrators and enemies. He wants us to get around to that. Moses and Jesus both teach us to love them all kinds of people to the extent they come within our reach. But if we can’t “*love another other*” here in church, Jesus taught, if a man doesn’t love his “*brother*”, John wrote, if we don’t have each other’s backs, if we’re not there for each other, there’s no way we’re going to do better with all the other people God calls us to love.

John wrote, “*He who says he’s in the light and hates his brother is in the darkness still. He who loves his brother abides in the light and in him there’s no cause for stumbling. But he who 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.*” Modern Christians aren’t really very clear about this. We’d like to teach the world to live in perfect harmony ! But brother and sister language in the New Testament and neighbor language in the Old Testament isn’t about the world.

The terms brother and sister and neighbor in the Bible all refer to the relationships we’re supposed to maintain with other believers. And Jesus’ gospel and Moses’ law both command God’s people to love one other first, their neighbor first. The presumption being that the church is the laboratory in which real love, heavenly love is learned. It follows that if those relationships are bad, we’re not going to have enough light in our own hearts, not going to be able to see clearly enough to be much help with strangers, people who don’t know God and don’t believe that Jesus will love them the way they are and provide them with the light they need to love others.

So in God’s kingdom, love begins with the covenants, with church and marriage and family. We’re taught to love church and family first, to be there for those people first, and then to reach out to strangers and enemies and victims together, as people whose love for one another says something about light before we have to open our mouths and announce to people how brilliant we’ve become now that we know God and finally have the commandments straight. Like the Pharisee in Luke’s gospel, Thank you God that I’m not like these other people!

Love Christ, worship and serve him faithfully, love one another, show forgiveness and sacrifice and faithfulness and perseverance to our loved ones at home and at church and we'll see the light clearly enough, show the light clearly enough, so that God can use us to build his kingdom. And, of course, not a word of this "*new commandment*" Jesus taught us changes anything Moses wrote about love for God and neighbor, spouse and family. So the question becomes what has changed about the Old Testament Law now that the darkness is fading and the new light shines and a new commandment is in effect. It's a question that is involved and can get quite technical, but I'll take a first stab at it by telling you a few stories about Jesus.

In his letter to the Galatians, the rabbi turned Christian apostle, Paul, wrote that for all the ages before Christ, all humanity, Jews and pagans alike, lived under what Paul called "*elementary principles*". Jewish and pagan religion both were governed by customs and rituals that pointed toward realities that fallen men and women couldn't reach by their own devices.

There was a sense of guilt people everywhere tried to relieve by killing animals and performing rituals and washing and eating in particular ways that they imagined satisfied the invisible forces on the far side of a veil that was beyond their reach. Pagan rituals were often bizarre and violent, by definition self exalting and sensuous and corrupt. What God's people under Moses practiced spoke of a different kind of spirituality, pointed toward a higher, purer wiser Spirit than what their pagan neighbors worshiped. But even the Jewish symbols were still elementary, physical hints and shadows meant to teach the Jews of a God who was still largely beyond their reach.

Until Jesus appeared and actually lived out what it meant to love and worship God and to love and keep faith with the people God binds us to by the covenants of family and faith. And it often happened that the light and love Jesus lived out transcended the customs and rituals that had held Israel together through the centuries they waited for Jesus to cross the veil and show them what it means to live for God as the darkness of the past began to fade and the light of our eternal future began to shine.

In Mark 3, Jesus mother and brothers went searching for him because to them this traveling the countryside with strange men and women he'd called out of their old lives made no sense to them. "Come home, be a carpenter, keep faith with the trade your step father taught you. Eat with us and our families!" they likely told him. "*Look around you!*", Jesus answered pointing at his disciples, "*This is my family now! Whoever does the will of God is my mother and sister and brother!*" They likely wept at his words! But the kingdom of God, those "*one another*" relationships Jesus was busy building trumped for the moment the Jewish traditions about family businesses and family table.

Don't get confused! Jesus loved them. Kingdom and family would all come together at the cross with John and his mother. Two of Jesus' brothers would reconcile with him after the resurrection and become apostles and write letters of their own in the New Testament. But the point here is that in Jesus' kingdom a "*new commandment*" was at work that trumped Jewish customs about family.

In Matthew 12, Jesus' disciples were on the road, pressed and harassed as they labored to build God's kingdom, interweaving new commandments with ancient custom, and they slipped. They forgot themselves and stuffed grain kernels into their mouths in clear defiance of Moses' commandment that no one should ever harvest on a Sabbath. And Jesus made no attempt to defend them. Instead, he reminded the rabbi's that good faithful people, like David in 1 Samuel 21, sometimes violated Moses' rituals even in the act of faithfully serving God. The true king of Israel, Jesus taught them, is the "*Lord of the Sabbath*". David in his day was the Christ, and now Jesus a thousand years is the fulfillment of everything David's life had foreshadowed and you're worried that some of my guys are eating black market granola? "You're missing the point!" Jesus told them. "*The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath!*" The point being that Old Testament symbols were given to teach something larger than ritual at hand.

In Mark 7, another crowd of rabbi's noticed that Jesus' disciples failed to wash their hands before a meal according to the spec's the rabbi's wanted to impose on the people. Here Jesus told them, the rabbi's were two steps wrong. Their specs hadn't come from the law of Moses. What they were teaching was the sort of iggy wiggy stuff that religious people sometimes practice just to polish their own self respect because deep down they know their hearts are wrong. "Your hearts are wrong!" Jesus taught them in a sermon from Isaiah that I don't have time to repeat now.

But then Jesus went on to say that, even when our hearts are right, it is not what we eat and how we eat that brings us toward or away from God. The things we eat course through our body without affecting our character at all. So why did Moses forbid the eating of pork and shell and all sorts of other creatures. It was a symbol, a shadow of spiritual realities that had to be kept so long as Israel was bound by "*elemental principles*". But now that Christ has come, now that the realities are here, how we wash and what we eat are no longer the point.

Instead, Jesus works through a long list of character qualities that are the point: "*evil thoughts, promiscuity, dishonesty and theft, hatred and murder, infidelity, wanting what God forbids, loving what is wrong, envy, slander, pride, folly...*" These are the things that will estrange us from God and blind us to his light. And it is loving and telling the truth to God and each other that will liberate us what God calls darkness and bring us into what he calls light.