

Creekside Community Church: *Authentic Christianity: The First Letter of John*  
"What a Real Christian Looks Like (II)" 1 John 2:7-11  
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A couple of weeks ago, I read a fascinating article in the New York Times about the health hazards associated with the use of smart phones entitled, "Your Phone Vs. Your Health" by psychologist Barbara Fredrickson of the University of North Carolina. I thought the article would be the typical warnings about getting brain cancer from cell phone or walking in front of a bus while you were texting, but Dr. Fredrickson went in an entirely different direction. She wrote about how our reliance upon electronics may cost us in our biological capacity to connect with other people. , Fredrickson explains that just as when we live a sedentary life, our muscles atrophy, so also when we habitually rely on electronics to connect with others, our ability to connect socially atrophies - and this impacts our physical health. From her research, Fredrickson maintains that the more attuned to others we become, the healthier physically we become; which is one reason why people who are alone for a long time get sick. She says, "Your heart's capacity for friendship obeys the biological law of 'use it or lose it.'" If we don't regularly exercise our ability to connect with people face to face, we eventually lose the biological capacity to do so; which leads to Fredrickson's contention that the habitual use of electronic media is physically unhealthy. Think about how society has changed since the advent of the smart phone. You see it all the time, two people sitting together but texting or checking their email with very little interaction between the two of them; they're together without actually being together. Connecting electronically is very seductive. It allows us to be in control of the conversation. We only pay attention to what we're interested in as opposed to an actual conversation where we have to at least appear to be interested. It allows us to control our image and how we come across; we can edit, delete and revise what we're saying before we say it. People can't see us as we really are. Face to face relationships are often messy and demanding so its easy to sacrifice real connecting and conversations for being in control. But the evidence is piling up that only connecting electronically is bad for our health. Apparently, we are hard wired for relationships and when we don't have those relationships, we suffer for it. In fact, according to the Bible, humans were created to love; to love God and to love each other. That's why according to the apostle John in his first New Testament letter, there is no more accurate indicator of our true relationship with God than our relationships with people. We can't know God and not love people. John is writing to some confused Christians toward the end of the first century. As the message of Christ spreads through the Roman Empire, many people join the church without letting go of their former religious and philosophical beliefs. They use Christian language but the words don't mean the same things Christians mean. The pure, simple faith in Jesus and His resurrection is in danger of being watered down and assimilated into the smorgasbord of Greek and Romans religions. John was the last living apostle and one of the last people still alive to have known Jesus personally, and so he writes this letter to clarify who the real Christians are and are not. Which is why I entitled this series in 1 John *Authentic Christianity*. Because we live in an age very similar to the first century. Just as in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, many people today borrow the language and beliefs of Christianity without accepting Christ. As a result, there are many false gospels masquerading as authentic Christianity. That's why 1 John is so relevant. John tells us what authentic Christianity is and how to know for sure that we know God. And one theme that we'll see emphasized throughout 1 John is that it is impossible to truly know God and not love people. This morning I want to show you why.

Last week we learned that obedience to God marks the true Christian. In vs. 3-6 of the second chapter of John, John says that if we know God, we'll keep His commandments, if we love God, we'll keep His commandments, that if Christ is in our lives, we'll keep his commandments because as Greg taught us last week, the more we believe that God loves us, the more we'll obey Him. Now the natural question the folks who read these verses would ask at this point was, "Well John, there are a lot of commands to obey in the Bible. Any particular one you had in mind?" And John replies, "As a matter of fact there is." In verses 7-11 John focuses on God's command to love people and why our love for people is such an accurate indicator of our true relationship with God. In vs. 7-8, John will show us that love for people is our response to God and not to people; and therefore, in vs. 9-11, how we treat people reveals our actual relationship with God. Let's begin with vs. 7 and why true love is not a response to people but instead a response to God. "*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 which you have heard.*" The command John has in mind is God's command to love one another which John says is both an old command

and a new command. First, it's an old command which they have had from the beginning. Of course these Christians had heard they were to love each other from the time they received Christ. The command to love went all the way back to the beginning of God's dealings with people. In Leviticus 19:18 God said, *'You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the sons of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am the Lord.* And when Jesus was asked what the greatest commandment of the Law was in Matthew 22:37-40 *And He said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'* *On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets.*" Loving one another isn't new. So John says, "I'm not telling you anything you don't already know. For as long as you've been a Christian, you've known that God commands us to love each other.

So since we're talking about obedience as a mark of someone who knows God, John says, let's go back to the oldest and most fundamental command, the command to love. It's an old command, but at the same time, it's also a new command. *"On the other hand, I am writing a new commandment to you, which is true in Him and in you, because the darkness is passing away and the true Light is already shining."* How is the command to love one another a new command? Because Jesus redefined love. He raised the bar, taking love to a new level. You know, golf is an ancient game but every generation or so, a Bobby Jones or Jack Nicholas or Tiger Woods comes along and redefines the sport, taking it to an entirely new level. They play a different game than the golfers of their generation. They redefine their sport. They raise the bar. What was unheard of or unimaginable in previous generations becomes the new standard. Well, Jesus redefined God's command to love. We really didn't know what real love looked like until we saw it embodied in Jesus. You see, to the Orthodox Jewish rabbi in the first century, - the man who most embodied the Law of God - the sinner was a person God wished to destroy. The rabbis said, "There is joy in heaven when one sinner is obliterated from the earth." But Jesus befriended sinners and said, "There is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 100 righteous people who need no repentance." The rabbis taught that the Gentiles - all non-Jews - were created by God to fuel the fires of hell. But Jesus said God so loved the whole world that He gave His only Son so that whoever believes in Him may have eternal life. The old commandment of love was to love your neighbor as yourself - treat others the way you want to be treated, but Jesus said, John 13:34 *"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another.* Jesus raised the bar. No longer is it love people the way you want to be loved but love people the way Jesus loves them; laying down His life for His enemies, sacrificing His interests, His honor, His safety for those who hated Him. The command to love was an old command; people had known for a long time they were supposed to love each other, but it was also a new command because Christ had redefined who we were to love and the extent to which we were to love them - and finally by how we could love them. You see, everybody failed to obey the old command. Nobody was able to consistently love his neighbor as himself. But the new command can be obeyed because we're not the ones who obey it, Jesus is. That's what John means when he says, *"I am writing a new commandment to you which is true in Him and in you..."* The new commandment to love one another is true in Christ because Jesus embodies the command to love. In Christ, we see God's commandment to love fleshed out, made visible, obeyed perfectly. The new commandment to love one another is true in us because Jesus lives in us and we share His life. The old command was external and contrary to our nature. That's why we couldn't obey it. The new commandment is internal and consistent with our nature as new creations in union with Christ. That's why we can love others - because Jesus gives us the desire and the ability to love. Which is why John writes that the commandment to love is not only true in Jesus but true in Christians, *because the darkness is passing away and the true Light is already shining.* Before Jesus, the world was in darkness and ignorance, being separated from the God who is light. But in chapter 1, John told us that Jesus came to reveal God which John pictures as shining a light into a dark place. That's why John writes here that the true light is already shining and pushing back the darkness as the gospel spreads throughout the world. In a personal sense, when Jesus comes into our life, His light is in us and we begin a process of light replacing darkness in our life and personality. Goodness and righteousness replaces evil and selfishness. And John says that loving people is the natural result of having the light of Christ within us. We'll talk more about the relationship between love and light in a minute.

But here's what I want you to see in vs. 7-8. Love is our response to God. We love people, not because they're lovable or because they love us back or because of anything about them. We love people because God commands

us to love and gives us the ability to obey that command by sending Jesus to live within us. And once we understand that love is not an emotion that we feel but a command that we obey, it radically changes the way we love. If love is a command to obey then love is a choice, not a feeling. I can choose to love someone regardless of how I feel about them. If love is a command to obey, then my reason to love doesn't depend on my relationship with the person I'm loving but on my relationship with the God who commands. I don't love you because of how you look or how you treat me or because what I hope you will do for me. I love you because of what I believe God loves me and that the more I treat you the way He treats me, the more of His love I experience. He is my motivation to love people, not the people. Real love isn't based on what I feel. Real love isn't based on what I know about you that makes you lovable. Real love is based on what I know about God. Of course, this goes against what our culture teaches us about love. Our culture says that love for people isn't something you choose, it chooses you. You like what you see, or you like how you feel when you're with someone or you like how they treat you. You find yourself falling in love. But we know that kind of love is often short-lived. Because often we stop liking what we see or we like what we see in someone else better or they stop treating us the way they used to or we take the way they treat us for granted or for some other reason, we don't feel the way we used to feel any longer. We fall out of love. You know, "its not you, its me." Eventually after we go through that cycle of falling in and falling out of love several times, we realize, that's not love, that's just self-gratification. It's all about me, how I feel, how I'm benefitted - which any thinking person realizes isn't love at all. That's why real love can't be my response to you, it is my response to God. In the fourth chapter of 1 John, John writes, "We love because He first loved us." And because God never stops loving us, I never have to stop loving you. I choose to love you because I know Him and trust Him and love Him. You don't even have to love me back. Because real love is my response to God, not to you. He is my motivation to love you and He supplies the ability to love you.

Now, if love for people is our response to God, we can get a pretty accurate picture of our current relationship with God by looking at our relationships with people. John continues, "*The one who says he is in the Light and yet hates his brother is in the darkness until now.*" In chapter 1, John says God is light; and so claiming to be in the Light means claiming to know God. Anyone can claim to have a relationship with God. That's the reason John is writing. There were a lot of people in the first century church claiming to know God and to speak for God. But John says that if I claim to know God and yet hate my brother, I'm still living in the darkness - living apart from God, as if God doesn't exist. So my relationship with you reveals my true relationship with Him. If I know God, I'll love people. If I walk with God, I'll love people. If I love God, I'll love people. *The one who says he is in the Light and yet hates his brother is in the darkness until now.*" Notice that John sees our relationships with people only in terms of love and hate. For John there are no shades of gray. If we don't love our brother, we hate him. In the Bible, hatred is the absence of love just like darkness is the absence of light. Hatred is more than animosity or anger toward someone. We may ignore our brother and treat him like he's not worth our attention. Think about the way you treat the clerk, the waitress, or the woman in line in front of you at Costco. It's easy to become so self-obsessed that anybody we don't know personally or anyone we don't think we need means nothing to us. And that's hatred in the eyes of God because it's not love. Or we may regard our brother with contempt, as a fool in comparison with our intelligence or an incompetent in comparison to our ability or as a sluggard in comparison to our work ethic, or as insignificant in comparison to our value. And that's hatred in the eyes of God because it's not love. Or we may regard our brother as a nuisance; as somebody who is in our way or who's making our life difficult; who's taking up time and space, just somebody driving slow in our lane. And that's hatred in the eyes of God because it's not love. John's point here is that just because I don't lie awake nights plotting somebody's destruction doesn't guarantee that I don't hate people, If I don't choose to love people the way Jesus loved people, then I hate them as far as the Bible is concerned. And if I hate people, it is because I'm still living in the dark

*"The one who says he is in the Light and yet hates his brother is in the darkness until now."* On the other hand, "*The one who loves his brother abides in the Light and there is no cause for stumbling in him.*" Conversely, John says that if I love people - since love is a response to God - it is because I'm abiding or living in the Light, in the presence of God; I'm connected with God. Stumbling means sinning here. I drive my poor wife crazy at night. I'll get out of bed and because I don't want to open my eyes, I try to feel my way into the bathroom - and will inevitably trip over something or crash into something and wake her up. And she panics, "Honey, what's wrong." Oh nothing. Your blind husband can't find his way to the bathroom without running into something. Well, John says that just as we

tend to stumble over things in the dark, we stumble into sin when we're living in spiritual darkness apart from God. It's easier to fall into sin in the dark than it is in the light; easier to fall into sin when we hate than it is when we love. You see, love is the fulfillment of the law. The purpose of all of God's commandments is to teach us to love Him and to love people, and when we love people, we won't sin against them or cause them to sin. If I truly love you, I won't steal from you or lie to you or lust after you or envy you or try to get you to disobey God. As Paul says in Romans 13:10, *"Love does no wrong to a neighbor; love is therefore the fulfillment of the Law."* By the way, I'm finding that when I don't know the right thing to do in certain situations lately, if I just ask, "What's the most loving thing to do?" Or, "how would Jesus love this person in this situation?" usually the right thing to do becomes clear. Which is what John means when he writes, *"The one who loves his brother abides in the Light and there is no cause for stumbling in him. But the one 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."* Notice that if I love people, it is because I'm walking in the light, responding to God. If I don't love people, it's because I'm in the darkness, living apart from God. And if I'm in the darkness, I'm blindly stumbling around, not knowing where I'm going or what I'm doing...which Barbara Fredrickson's piece on smart phones brilliantly illustrates. Because most people who use smart phones believe their phone make their life better; gives them greater control of relationships; makes it easier to get things done and to save time. Who would ever guess that this wonderful convenience could be harming our health? Eroding our ability to genuinely connect with others? Isolating us and creating barriers between us and the people we really need? We're blind to the dangers. I don't even own a smart phone and I have most of the bad habits associated with their use. I want to control relationships. I want to avoid having to pay attention to people. I don't want to get too close. In fact, as I get older, I find it more and more natural to avoid people, to avoid connecting on a deeper level and just keep everything friendly, light weight and on the surface. I've gotten comfortable with emotional isolation. But because I'm surrounded by people every day, and people are often sharing their innermost thoughts with me, I had no idea until recently how isolated I had become. The darkness had blinded my eyes. I think that's what John means when he writes, *But the one 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.* Hatred - which John defines as any failure to obey God's command to love - blinds us. We can't make good decisions. We can't see what's important or be objective and rational. I was moving in an increasingly unhealthy direction and didn't even realize it. But God is light and because Jesus is in my life, the darkness is passing away and the true light is shining. And God won't leave me in the darkness. The first time I studied 1 John years ago, God shined His light on the ways I was being unloving and mean. This time, He has shining His light on some of the more subtle ways I'm failing to love; showing me how much I need to work hard to connect with people, love people, care for people, listen to people for my own good as well as for His glory.

I think that's what John means when he writes, *"the darkness is passing away and the true light is shining."* None of us is without sin. None of us loves perfectly. There's still a lot of darkness in us. The difference is, when Christ is in your life, there is light and that light is growing brighter and you can recognize areas of your life Christ wants to change. Early Sunday mornings, I go out for a walk to think through what I'm going to say at church. For part of the year, it's dark when I leave the house. But as long as I can see a little light in the east, I know I'll soon be able to see my sermon notes if I need to because the longer I walk, the brighter I know it will get. That's kind of the way it is in growing in Christ. It's not daytime yet. But it's no longer night either. The light of Christ's presence in us getting brighter. We're seeing things more clearly. So the question we need to ask ourselves today is not have we arrived in loving others the way Christ loves us, but are we progressing? Am I more loving now that I was a year ago? Am I seeing myself and others more clearly now than I used to? Am I growing in my knowledge of God and what He wants to do in my life? The apostle John was called the apostle of love because as an old man, he was known for constantly reminding his brothers and sisters in Christ, "Beloved, love one another." But John hadn't always valued love. Jesus nicknamed his brother James and him, "The Sons of Thunder" because they always seemed to be losing their tempers. But year after year of walking in the light and of getting to know God better and better transformed this angry, explosive man into the apostle of love. So let me ask you some questions. According to John, are you in the light or in the dark? How high of a priority is loving people to you? Do you love people because of who they are or because of who God is? Do you love people because of what you hope to get from them or from what you hope to get from God? Can you joyfully put others before yourself because you know you can't out give God and you're simply loving people the way He loves you? . We're going to learn a lot about loving from John and this letter. Love doesn't depend on feelings. It doesn't depend on making people lovable. It

depends on my relationship with God and knowing how much He loves me. And the better we get to know Him, the more time we spend with Him, the more we will choose to love the people around us with the love with which He loves us.

You ask, "How do you know God loves you? Is it something you feel? Is it because you're getting everything you want out of life?" God has been very good to us and I am so grateful. But the reason I know He loves me is because when I was His enemy, Christ died for me. When I was a rebel, Christ gave His life to bring me home. And then God pursued me and wooed me and would not give up on me until I surrendered myself to His love. And He has satisfied me with Himself ever since.

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