



THIS IS HIS COMMANDMENT – 1 John 3:23-4:12

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Every so often, something happens which triggers an evaluation of our lives. It might be the beginning of a new year, a change in work, an illness or death. For many people, this happened during the pandemic, and we've seen some significant, lasting changes in our society because of it. Evaluations like this cause us to ask ourselves questions such as: What is really important? Where should I focus my time, resources, and energy? What do I want to accomplish? What will make a difference?

As a part of my job, I read a lot of things about being a Christian and leading a church. Sometimes I feel like I am being pulled in many different directions as there are a lot of people out there with a lot of good ideas and they all think that what they are promoting is the most important thing! In order to sort through all these ideas, I regularly have to stop and ask God to show me what is important for myself and for our church at this time.

Part of this evaluation process involves becoming aware of what is happening in our church and in your lives. It is also important to understand the society around us and how we relate to it. But the most important thing is to listen to what God is saying through His Word.

Recently I came across a verse that jumped out at me as I read it. I can't remember what brought it across my path, but the verse stuck with me! It felt like God was speaking to me through this verse. It was the first verse we read this morning:

And this is His commandment: We must believe in the name of His Son, Jesus Christ, and love one another, just as He commanded us. (1 John 3:23)

In John's first epistle, he is writing to a church which he had been involved with and which was very dear to him. Since he had left them, they had had some problems with people who were preaching some questionable things, and this was causing discord in the church. John was writing to help them get back on track. He says many things in his letter about our relationship with God and with others, but he summarises them in this statement,

highlighting the two things He felt were key for them to focus on. If John felt that these two things were key for them, then I think they are probably key for us as well.

... believe on the name of his Son, Jesus Christ ...

First, he says we need to focus on what we believe as Christians and make sure we get this right. As we think about this, it is helpful to remember that when the Bible talks about belief or faith, it isn't referring to just intellectual assent to some facts. It is talking about what we trust and rely on, what guides our attitudes and decisions. It is like believing in gravity – we rely on gravity to keep our feet on the ground, and we choose not to jump off tall buildings because we believe that gravity will pull us towards the ground with disastrous results! John is saying that we must whole-heartedly trust the truth about Jesus Christ.

1. Importance

In these verses, he gives us some important facts we believe about Jesus:

- Jesus is God's Son (3:23) – This affirms Jesus' deity, the fact that He is God.
- Jesus came in a real physical body (4:2) – He didn't just look like a human being, he shared real flesh and blood humanity with us.
- Jesus was sent in love (4:9) – This tells us God's motivation, His deep love for us and desire to be in relationship with us.
- Jesus sacrificed His life for our sins (4:10) – The extent of our sin was great, but the extent of His love for us was greater and took Him all the way to the cross.
- Jesus gives us life with God (4:9) – All of this was in order to accomplish the end goal of giving us God's life, eternal life.

In a few minutes, we will recite the Nicene Creed together as we prepare to take communion. You will find these ideas there because these are the core beliefs that make us Christians. There are many other ideas and beliefs where we may find differences among us. But these things are central, and we must hang on to them with both hands and trust that this God and this Jesus is the rock on which we build our faith.

2. Assurance

In proclaiming these truths, John also says that those who believe differently are not from God. He draws a firm line here. If a person cannot affirm these truths, then they are false prophets who have the spirit of the "anti-Christ". In some passages in the Bible, this term is used to refer to a particular person who is in opposition to Christ and His people. Here, however, it seems more like John is saying that anyone who does not affirm these things about Jesus is not just wrong, but they are actively working against Christ. They are not neutral; they are enemies of the truth.

This could be a cause of fear for those in the church, but John is quick to assure them that they are on the winning side. It is interesting to see that John involves all three members of the Trinity in His assurance. Jesus's death reconciles us to God. God, the Father, has made us His people. And the Spirit, who lives within us, brings us God's victory. The truth is under

attack from those who deny Jesus's identity and mission, but they will not prevail. God is stronger and we join in His victory.

As Christians and as a church, one of our priorities must be on helping each other to understand the truth we find in Jesus. BELIEVE is one of the core purposes of our church – we base our lives on God's truth found in His Word. This doesn't mean that there is not room for questions and doubts. These are often how we learn and increase our trust – by testing what we believe and wrestling with things that confuse us. We seek to help each other with this through Sunday mornings, Grace Groups, and other resources we make available like the Sunrise Meditations in the Prayer Updates and on our Facebook page. We encourage each other to be reading our Bible and learning to apply its truths to our lives. There is always more to learn!

... and love one another ...

But John doesn't stop here. His next point is just as important to true Christian life. Christianity is not just a collection of facts, as important as they are. It is equally about relationships – with God and with each other. And these relationships, John says, are to be characterised by love, because that is who God is. In these next six verses, John uses the word “love” – either as a noun or a verb – 14 times! He wants to make sure we get the point.

1. Origin

God is love and the origin of all true love. This is His very essence. The three persons of the Trinity have existed for all eternity in a relationship of love, and it is out of this love that God created humanity in His image so that we could share in this love relationship with Him. All that God does is motivated by His love – even His judgement. God cannot allow sin to continue because sin goes against His loving plans for us and hurts those He loves.

Because God loves us, He took the initiative to save us and call us back to Himself. And He expects us to share His love with others. Loving others is not an optional extra for a Christian – it a core part of who we are because it is a core part of who God is. If we don't love, then we can't possibly know God.

2. Revelation

How do we know God is love and specifically that He loves us? Jesus came to earth to reveal God's love to us. He was sent by God to bring us back into a loving and life-giving relationship with God. But there was a problem – our sin came between us and God. This would stop us from ever being able to enjoy a relationship with Him, or even stand in His presence.

How did God overcome this? John uses a complex word which is translated simply as “sacrifice” in the translation we read. Some translate it as “atonement”, “expiation” or “propitiation” – none of which are words we use every day – even I had to look them up to make sure I remembered what they meant! The Greek word is “*hilasmon*” and there is much debate as to what it means and how to translate it. In secular writings it is used in

situations where a serious offence has been committed which has caused great harm and broken a relationship. *“Hilasmon”* is about doing what is necessary to pay for the offence, bring healing and make it possible for there to be a relationship again. When we talk about this in Christianity, I think there are two things involved. First, there is the necessity to satisfy the demands of God’s wrath against sin. Sin is rebellion against God and selfish behaviour against others. God is justifiably angry about sin, just as you are angry when people hurt you or those you love. This anger or wrath against sin must be satisfied by administering a just sentence against sin. Jesus’ death on the cross paid the penalty for our sin on our behalf. This is called “propitiation”. Secondly, there is the need to remove the stain of sin from us. Jesus’s death and resurrection bring cleansing from the sin that separates us from God, and this is called “expiation”. The whole process, which results in a restored relationship between us and God, is called “atonement”. I always remember this word because to “atone” means to make us “at-one” with God again.

Are these words important to know? Not really! And yet the ideas behind them do help us to have a deeper understanding of all that God did for us. Sin is a serious problem, and it took serious action on God’s part to overcome it and bring us back into relationship with Him. His love for us was so great that He gave himself for us, even to death on a cross.

3. Consequence

We see God’s love for us as He sends His Son to earth as a human being to die and come back to life again for us. But we also experience God’s love personally. Paul says that *“God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.” (Romans 5:5)* Loving others is the necessary outcome of receiving God’s love in our hearts. As we saw last week, it is not about us trying hard to love others better. We all fail miserably at that! Rather it is God’s love in our hearts that transforms us and overflows to others around us.

The final verse really got me thinking. After studying it and looking at different translations, I suggest we could translate it as follows: *“No one has ever seen God. But if we love each other, God dwells in our midst and His love reaches its fullest expression among us.” (4:12 – my paraphrase)* I think what John is saying is that although no one has seen God, there is a way that people can catch a glimpse of what God is like. Individually, we can do loving things which can show people God’s love. But when we are working together as the church - loving and caring for each other - that paints the most complete picture of God’s love. When God’s people come together and seek to share God’s love with each other, then something wonderful happens. God is there in a unique way and His love shines out as a witness to His presence and His glory.

As individual Christians and as a church, love must be a priority. If you think about it, the other two core purposes of our church – LIVE and SHARE – both have a lot to do with love. They talk about how we are allowing God to transform us to be like Him and how we live together as His people. And we don’t want to keep this all to ourselves! Our desire is to share this life we have with others.

Conclusion

As we look back at John's summary statement, I am struck by its completeness. We are people of the cross of Christ. This gives us a firm foundation of truth for our lives. We are also people of God's love. This gives us a clear direction on how to live. One without the other would be incomplete. Belief in the truth without love can make us harsh and judgemental. It reduces our Christian life to intellectual facts which in themselves will not change our lives. Love without belief in the truth becomes vague and meaningless, sometimes excusing sin to the detriment of others. Belief and love working together gives us a firm foundation and a clear direction. Or, in the picture we have used to talk about our church, belief in the truth gives us healthy roots. Love is the growth which comes from those roots as we live as God has called us and share this life with us as the fruit of our growth. To help us to continue to grow in love, I want to look some more at what the Bible says about loving one another over the next couple of weeks. My prayer is that it will strengthen our church and the ties that hold us together in God's love.