

1 John 2:3-11

Introduction

For a while, after I left school, I worked as a cashier in a bank. I was one of those people dressed in a smart uniform with a smile on my face, who you would come to see to take money out of your account, or to pay money in. And as I handled people's money, occasionally fake coins would turn up. Most commonly pound coins.

When that happened, I would have to break the news to the customer that they couldn't pay the coin into their account after all because it was worthless... which was frustrating for them.

But then it got worse. I would also have to tell them that they couldn't have the coin back because I had to withdraw it from circulation. They couldn't just go away and palm it off on someone else. They were a pound less well-off than they thought they were.

Perhaps you've found yourself in that situation.

We can think something's valuable only to find out that it's worthless. It's important to be able to tell the difference between what's authentic and what's fake. That's why John wrote this letter, that we're studying together.

John was one of the original followers of Jesus, called the apostles. These followers were eyewitnesses of Jesus. For three years, they had lived with Jesus and followed him wherever he went. They had been in close contact with Jesus and were able to give first-hand accounts of all that he had said and done, including his death and resurrection. And their message is that we can know God through Jesus.

John was writing nearly 2000 years ago. But that desire to know God is one that many of us still share today. Not everyone, of course. But there are many who are open to the possibility of God's existence and want to know who God is. Perhaps that's what brought you along to our service this morning.

To know God is the most valuable thing in the world.

We talk about knowing someone in different ways. We might talk about knowing King Charles, for example. What we probably mean by that is that we know lots about him. We've read about him in the media. Perhaps we've listened to the things he's said. We know that he's passionate about the environment. He loves his children and grandchildren. And we've probably watched all the pomp and ceremony surrounding his coronation. That's probably what we mean when we claim to know King Charles. We know him in the sense of knowing about him.

But imagine that Prince William is the one who's talking about knowing King Charles. Well, he would be using the word in a very different sense. He would be talking of King Charles as his father. He knows him personally. He has a personal relationship with him and knows that he's loved by him.

And that's the sense in which John is speaking of knowing God here.

The apostles' message is that you and I can have a relationship with God, as our heavenly Father. We can know him personally and know that we're loved and cherished by him. And that relationship comes by believing their testimony about Jesus, his Son. Indeed, the apostles' message is that the *only* way to have a personal relationship with God the Father, is through Jesus the Son.

The problem is that other people were going around, also claiming to be followers of Jesus, also claiming to know God. But they were teaching a message that was in stark contrast to the one the apostles were teaching. They were fakes. They neither knew God the Father nor his Son, Jesus Christ. Their message had no value. And there was a danger of being taken in by them. It's a problem we still face today.

John wants us, his readers, to understand what a genuine disciple of Jesus looks like.

He wants us to understand this, because he wants us to be assured that we are genuine disciples of Jesus and truly know God through him. And he wants us to avoid being led astray by those who claim to be disciples of Jesus but aren't.

In this letter, he gives us various tests to distinguish what's authentic from what's fake. And in the passage we're looking at this morning, he gives us two simple tests. They are two marks of genuine disciples of Jesus.

He says, firstly, genuine disciples *live* like Jesus. And he says, secondly, genuine disciples *love* like Jesus. So, those are our two headings as we look at the passage together.

Firstly then, genuine disciples live like Jesus.

Genuine disciples live like Jesus

Please look down with me at verses 3 to 6. John says this of those who claim to know God the Father.

We know that we have come to know him if we keep his commands. Whoever says, 'I know him,' but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in that person. But if anyone obeys his word, love for God is truly made complete in them. This is how we know we are in him: whoever claims to live in him must live as Jesus did.

The evidence that someone has truly come to know God is obedience. They will strive to obey God's word and keep his commands.

Our obedience doesn't bring us into a personal relationship with God. We can't earn a relationship with God as a reward for our obedience. It's faith alone in Jesus which brings us into relationship with God... it's faith in his death on a cross for the forgiveness of our sins. But our obedience is evidence that this relationship exists and is real.

Obedience isn't a very popular idea these days, and probably never has been. People fear that obedience is degrading and humiliating.

But this isn't cold, legalistic obedience. It isn't forced or fearful. It's the willing obedience that comes from having a relationship with someone you trust.

When I was a teenager, I reached that golden age... not 18, but 17. What a great day it is when you turn 17 and receive your provisional driving licence. And my dad, very kindly, and very bravely, offered to take me out for driving lessons. I think his hair probably *had* started to turn grey before I started those driving lessons, but I couldn't swear to it.

During those lessons I listened carefully to every word my father spoke, and I obeyed him without hesitating... or at least, I tried to.

I did that because I recognised three things about my father. Firstly, he was my *father* and had an inherent authority over me. It was right that I obey him. Secondly, he was an experienced driver. He knew far more about driving a car than I did. Thirdly, he loved me and wanted only the best for me. I trusted that obeying him was for my good. And I suppose I could add a fourth reason for obeying my dad. And that's because I wanted to please him and earn his praise.

That's the kind of obedience which comes from having a personal relationship with someone you trust. And that's the kind of obedience which is evidence that someone has a personal relationship with God.

The person who truly knows God bows to his authority. They recognise that God knows what's best in all circumstances. And they trust that his will for them is full of goodness and blessing. Such a person obeys God and longs to please him and earn his praise.

That's how Jesus lived. He submitted to his Father's authority, did only what his Father told him, and trusted his Father's will. In John's Gospel he says, '**I always do what pleases him.**' (John 8:29).

And those who truly know God will strive to do the same. They know that obeying God and being guided by him is the best way to live.

It's obedience that flows out of our love for our heavenly Father. That's why John says that if we obey God, then our love for God is truly made complete. Our love for God completes its work in us when we obey his commands.

To disobey God, on the other hand, is to reject his authority, to claim that we know better than he does, and to doubt that his ways will bring us blessing. The person whose lifestyle is characterised by disobedience to God's word doesn't know God at all, John says, no matter what they might claim.

We do not truly know God unless we live like Jesus and obey God's commands. In fact, John is very strong on this. Anyone who claims to know God but doesn't do what he commands is a liar, he says.

If your life is marked by love for God, faith in his gospel promises, and an earnest desire to obey his commands, then John wants you to be assured that your relationship with God is real and valuable. To know God is to possess life in his eternal kingdom. There's nothing more precious.

But if you call yourself a Christian and that's *not* what you find, as you look at your life, John's prompting you to ask yourself why that is. It is possible to deceive ourselves about our relationship with God. John's saying, look at the evidence of your own life and be honest. How hungry are you to know your heavenly Father better? How regularly are you reading his word, the Bible, and letting him teach you and guide you? How seriously do you take the things he says to you in it? How do you respond when his word challenges the way you think and behave? Based on the evidence, is your claim to know God real? If not, then hear the invitation of the gospel once again: repent of your sin, come to the Father through faith in his Son, and lead a new life in joyful obedience to him.

Genuine disciples live like Jesus.

And that means, secondly, genuine disciples love like Jesus.

That's our second heading: Genuine disciples love like Jesus.

Genuine disciples love like Jesus

Please look down at verse 7. John writes:

Dear friends, I am not writing you a new command but an old one, which you have had since the beginning. This old command is the message you have heard. Yet I am writing you a new command; its truth is seen in him and in you, because the darkness is passing and the true light is already shining.

Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates a brother or sister is still in the darkness. Anyone who loves their brother and sister lives in the light, and there is nothing in them to make them stumble. But anyone who hates a brother or sister is in the darkness and walks around in the darkness. They do not know where they are going, because the darkness has blinded them.

The command that John's referring to here is a command that came first from the lips of Jesus.

In John's Gospel, Jesus says: **'A new command I give you: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.'** (John 13:34-35)

It's a command which the original recipients of this letter had known since the beginning of their Christian life... since their conversion. As the disciples preached the gospel, they pass on this command with it. And it's not a new command. Those who truly know God have always been characterised by love for God's people.

But what *is* new is the way in which this command found its true expression in the life of Jesus. At no other time in history has this command been lived out with such depth and reality than in his life. We could barely imagine the true meaning of love if it were not for him. He loved the outcasts, whom others despised and looked down on. He loved the poor and needy, whom others overlooked. He loved his enemies and showed compassion to the broken-hearted. He loved sinners and invited them to follow him. His was a selfless, sacrificial love, which sought the good of others. And it took him ultimately to the cross, where he laid down his life for you and me.

The true meaning of love was seen in Jesus. And now it should be seen in you and me... if we are his disciples.

This is the family likeness of all God's people.

When a couple have a baby, one of the first things people want to know is who they look like. Do they look like the mother or the father? Who do they take after? It's a question we all ask.

And among God's people, the family likeness should be clear.

God is love. And those who know him as their Father will share his likeness. They will love as he loves.

Back in the 70s, the Christian singer, Amy Grant, wrote a song called Father's Eyes, which captures something of that thought. She sang:

When people look inside my life, I want to hear them say

She's got her Father's Eyes

Her Father's Eyes

Eyes that find the good in things

When good is not around

Eyes that find the source of help

When help just can't be found
Eyes full of compassion
Seeing every pain
Knowing what you're going through
And feeling it the same

It's a simple test.

Is my claim to be a Christian borne out in the way I treat my fellow believers?

Could a visitor observe our relationships in the church and see love like Christ's being lived out among us?

John speaks of light and darkness.

If we live in the light of Christ, and know God as our Father, then we will love one another. And in doing so we will make God's love known to the world. Our love will be evident in our words and actions.

But if our words and actions are consistently unloving, if we harbour hatred and scorn in our hearts, then we're still in the darkness and don't know God at all, John says.

We won't love one another perfectly, all the time. But nonetheless, it's a simple test. It's black and white.

There's no twilight zone in which we can tolerate a lack of love towards our fellow believers or be indifferent about each other's wellbeing.

If we are truly living in the light of Christ, then we will strive to love one another in a very tangible and visible way. And when our words and actions are less than loving we will apologise and make amends.

Again, John is prompting us to examine our lives and to see where the evidence is pointing. How do our relationships in the church shape up?

If you're struggling to love someone in the church, then decide now to pray for them every day this week, and then see what happens. Remember that they are a child of God, for whom Christ died, and give thanks for them. It's very difficult to pray for someone every day like that and not to find that your heart warms towards them.

John wants us to examine our hearts and to love one another like Jesus.

But John also has another reason for writing: he's warning us to be careful who we listen to.

There are many who claim to know God and to teach about him. They may be highly intelligent, well read and very knowledgeable. They may seem to be very spiritual. But,

John says, if their lives are marked by a lack of obedience to God or a lack of love for his people, then their claim to know God is a lie.

Be alert. Look at the evidence. Don't be taken in by them.

They are blind guides, John says in verse 11, who are walking around in darkness and don't know where they're going.

Conclusion

So here are two tests of genuine disciples.

They live like Jesus, in obedience to God's commands.

They love like Jesus, with a love that's selfless and sacrificial.

It is these who truly know God.

And it's worth making one final point before we end. These two marks of genuine faith are never in opposition to each other.

We often hear the slogan 'Love wins!' especially in the sexuality debate... as though love trumps everything else, even obedience to God. But that simply isn't true.

John presents these two tests side by side.

Obedience to God can never be an excuse for treating others in an unloving way.

But likewise, love for others can never be used to justify disobedience to God.

For those who truly know God, obedience to his word and love for his people will always go hand in hand.

Let's pray.

Loving, heavenly Father, thank you for making yourself known to us so clearly in your Son, Jesus Christ. Thank you for making it possible for us to know you and relate to you personally, through faith in him. Please work in us a genuine desire to obey your commands and a genuine love for your people. Please forgive our failings on account of the blood of Jesus, shed on the cross. And please help us to make you known to the world, so that others may come to know you too, as their loving Father. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.