

The Law of Love

a sermon in the series
Life in the Son

A sermon delivered Sunday Morning, December 16, 2012
at Oak Grove Baptist Church, Paducah, Ky.

by S. Michael Durham
© 2012 Real Truth Matters

I John 5:2-3

“By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and keep His commandments. ³ For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome.”

If you ever thought repetition was a sign of weakness in communication, think again. I remember years ago when we negotiated our contract with the radio station to air a program we had back then called Living Priorities, the radio station manager said he had a pastor at the time who liked to repeat himself often during sermons. He complained about the repetition then harkened back in his memory to a pastor whom he thought was one of the best speakers he ever heard, and he made this comment, “He never repeated himself in a sermon.”

Well, I would say that he must not have liked reading the first chapter of I John because John does nothing but repeat himself over and over again. I’d also disagree with that station manager and say repetition of ideas in a sermon is not bad but ideal. John uses repetition most effectively, as did the Apostle Paul. The most effective kind of communication is to say the same thing over and over again but in different ways.

Audiences have to fight to keep their attention, even for the best of speakers. There is a great deal of competition for a listener’s concentration; a crying baby, a child playing in the pew or someone getting up and exiting or entering the sanctuary. Distractions could come from someone leaning over and whispering something in your ear or a passed note or a note written, noticing someone asleep or someone coughing. I’ve got these not from a book, but by watching my audience. These are just some of the external competitors for your attention.

Then there are the internal competitors. Daydreaming, thinking about what you’re going to have for lunch today, thinking about the football game on TV this afternoon, worries, even thinking about what the speaker is saying. You know, you can’t put me on pause—you may wish you could—but you can’t pause the speaker to think about what he just said, and so he continues while you’re wrestling in thought with what either intrigued or confused you.

Because of all those things vying for your attention, repetition is very important. For example, how many times in this brief start to the sermon has your attention wandered? See what I mean? Repetition is very good in public speaking and it’s good in written communication, otherwise I don’t believe the Apostle John would keep repeating himself about loving one another and loving God.

Stop and think about the whole Bible. It's nothing more than a handful of truths being repeated over and over throughout Genesis to Revelation. Repetition is good because it tells you something is important and you need to pay attention, you need to take heed. So John continues to discuss loving our brothers and sisters because it's extremely important to the Christian faith. Didn't Jesus say the world would know you are His disciples because you love one another? By John repeating himself he is trying to convey perhaps what is the greatest need in the church, not love for God as much as it being demonstrated in love for one another. God loving you demonstrated in your love for one another. Jesus said we would be God's children if we loved like God does, so loving one another is huge and is worthy of repetition.

As we go to this text I want you to see that John is doing something here as he continues to repeat this theme of love. He wants to show you that in the end it's all one love.

I. ONE LOVE

In other words, God's love to you and your love to God and your love for one another, in the very end is all one. The three cannot be separated because they are inter-joined. In fact, John is showing us that your love for one another is God's love for you. Sometimes we often think of loving God as something done in a prayer closet or something super spiritual, but John wants to show us that loving God can be manifested not just in the prayer closet but in a phone call, in hands on ministry to somebody who needs your attention. It's all one love and it's the love God. How does He do that? Look at this with me, in I John chapter five verse two, our text, he starts off by stating that,

A. Love for God proves you love other people

"By this we know that we love the children of God,"

How do you know you love God?

"...when we love God and keep His commandments."

John is saying that the test, the proof you love your brothers and sisters is that you love God, and how do you know you love God? You keep His commandments. That sounds strange to us because up to this point we've been used to hearing John say, "Here's how you know you love God, you love one another," but here he reverses the order. Why would he reverse the order? In order to prove that loving God is the same thing as loving one another and loving one another is the same thing as loving God. It's all one. You cannot be here this morning and say you're a Christian and not like other Christians and not want to be around them. You can't claim to be saved if you don't love to be with brothers and sisters and invest your life in them and let them pour into you. You don't love God, says John. Now, in the chapter proceeding, John says,

B. Your love for others proves your love for God

“If someone says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar;”

In other words, I know if you're a Christian or not by if you love me, because it takes the love of God to love me. I know that. I'm confessing. Will you confess the same thing? We're not all lovable at all times, are we? So if you love me and you're not related to me—it doesn't count if you're related—it's got to be the love of God in you.

“...for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen? ²¹ And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God must love his brother also.” (1 John 4:20-21)

So the test of whether or not you love God whom you cannot see is that you love your brothers that you do see. That's this law of love here. Your love for God is exactly the same as your love for one another. Why? God gives us new life, and when that life is manifested it manifests itself in certain ways, love for God, love for one another, and God's love for me. If that life is there, you're going to know God loves you and you will be loved by God Almighty. You say you don't feel so lovable; well, we're not talking about how lovable you feel. God loves in spite of us. Will you receive that? That's the question. There are some, because of things that happened in childhood or early adult life, who find it hard to be loved, even by God. But when that new life is deposited they experience the love of God and as a result that new life will begin to create a love for Him and then a love for others. It's all one. It's the love of God manifested.

II. ANOTHER TEST OF SALVATION

Look at verse two again,

“By this we know...”

In other words, this is a test. This is how you can know if you are a Christian. John again puts us into this testing of our salvation as he's done repeatedly throughout this book. Why does he do that? Because tests of salvation are for our encouragement. First John 1:4, he begins this Epistle,

“These things we write to you that your joy may be full,”

And all in this Epistle is one test after another to test to encourage believers to know they are Christians and God has done something for them. First John 2:21,

“I have not written to you because you do not know the truth, but because you know it, and that no lie is of the truth.”

So he's writing to Christians, not unsaved people, and he gives these tests not to discourage them, but encourage.

A. Tests of salvation are for encouragement

1 John 5:13,

“These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you may continue to believe in the name of the Son of God.”

The tests we find here—if you keep God’s commandments, you love God. If you love your brethren, you love God—all these tests are for your encouragement because we have an accuser of the brethren who comes to you and to me. One of his primary purposes of being left on this earth is to test and try Christians and the number one way I think he does it in so many people is to challenge them concerning whether or not they are truly saved. He is always accusing you with your own performance, your own actions, your own shortcomings, and your own unworthiness. So John gives an epistle to believers that says, “Here, when the accuser comes to you or that untrue thought keeps being played in your mind, here is a way to answer that accusation.” and if you’re saved you’ll be able to answer it.

B. Many see tests of salvation as discouragement

When they read verses like we have this morning they say, “Oh no, here’s another test,” and they become discouraged. There are two reasons while this happens.

1. Because some people who read these, or listen to a message like this, are not truly saved so they flunk the test and therefore they are discouraged.

They flee from having their false profession tested because they don’t like it to come under a microscope. I can tell you countless times over the years where I’ve preached the Gospel in other places and you can see it on the faces, an immediate resentment from longstanding members in the church. Anger sometimes visibly demonstrated, even being heckled in Baptist churches while preaching the Gospel. Why? Because they know they can’t endure the tests of the Gospel. But let us not think that the lost are the only ones discouraged. Christians can be discouraged as well. That leads me to my second reason these tests are sometimes discouraging.

2. Faith is misdirected

Today, when men preach these tests of faith, I think they do it wrongly for the most part and put forth the wrong test—they’ll call for you to examine your works only. That is a very important statement. If you come to these tests of salvation in the Bible and look at your performance only, you will be discouraged. The best of us in this room will be discouraged because none of us obey God perfectly. None of us. And if you apply a performance-only standard to these tests and try to respond completely by what you have done or have not done, you’ll eventually be discouraged by some of these tests. Why? Because the examination is severed from the Lord Jesus Christ and His activity within your life.

Salvation is not about you performing and doing something for God like some person in a carnival doing tricks, performing for an audience. Christianity is about the activity of Jesus Christ in you, sir. When these tests are being applied John doesn’t want you to look just at what you’re doing, he wants to know if you can see what God is doing in you that produces obedience. The

test is not perfection; the test is if you see the grace of God working in you to work some of this out in your life.

John is showing you that if the life of God is in you these things will be in the process of being produced. It will cause you to walk in the light. It will motivate you to confess your sins, even publically, as we've seen demonstrated this morning. When we sin, this will lead us to the commands of God, it will motivate love for Christian brothers and sisters.

The activity may be yours, but it's the product of the life of God. That's what John is testing here: is the life of God in you? Because where the life of God is you will see certain evidences, fruits. Perfectly? No. In measure, in degree? Most definitely. That's why some Christians get discouraged when listening to this. When I study and prepare these texts, I know which ones of you I have to be very careful with, and will probably have to spend some time with afterward, because you hear these tests of salvation and immediately begin to go introspective on me and look within yourself to see everything you've done or not done and you get discouraged. Why? Because your faith is in the wrong place, your faith is misdirected—it's in you and not in Christ. Every time your faith is viewing you, eventually you'll get discouraged, or you'll be puffed up with pride.

III. YET ANOTHER TEST

Look at verse three. John gives us yet another test of salvation.

“For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome.”

A. Love for God produces obedience

He qualifies the test. The test of whether or not you love your brothers and sisters is that you love God. But how do you know you love God? You keep His commandments. That's why John says the commandments of God are not burdensome.

This one may be a little difficult to explain, but there are certain things God sometimes requires in His Word or to you personally that are not easy to do. Love your enemy? No, not easy to do, but God says in His Word that He has given us these commandments not to try to get us to do a bunch of behavioral things—activities, physical actions and trying to conform to rules and regulations—No, He says, *I've give you My commandments because I want you to run toward Me. I've given you commands like love your enemies, be like Me, be holy, because I know you can't but you don't.*

Some of us are still unconvinced that we can't pull this Christian thing off and do it ourselves so we keep trying and we keep failing. Some of us are very stubborn, or should I say *persevering*. You will not relent and say *I can't do this* then go to God and take Him at His word when He said, *I will give you everything you absolutely need to pull off this thing called the Christian because I'll be living in you and it will be My power and strength flowing through you.*

When you begin to quit trying to perform the Christian life, checking off the list, and let God

work in you, what happens? It's no longer a burden. It's no longer a heavy weight you're trying to carry.

As I said this morning to the class, you get to enjoy being led by a shepherd who causes you to lie down in green pastures and who leads you beside still waters. You can now truly enjoy your God because you know everything He's called you to do He's equipped you to do as you trust in Him. Faith is now directed toward Him. Do you see that? Let me give you a real life example.

Several years ago a young man came to my office and said he wasn't for sure if he was a Christian. I had talked with him previously and he had even confessed sins in his life, it was obvious that he probably wasn't a Christian but he was claiming to be. And that morning he was so messed up and confused that he was willing to make an appointment and come to me. He said, "I just don't know if I'm a Christian."

Well, I took him to I John immediately and started to apply these tests. I said, "Well, one of the tests the Bible says that if you're a Christian you'll love God. Do you love God?"

I was astonished by his answer. He's confused whether he's a Christian and yet he answered, "Yes, I love God."

I took him to this text, I John 5:3. "Well, let me ask you another question," I said. "Because God doesn't just ask if we love Him and have good feelings toward Him, and if we made a profession of faith to prove we love God, He qualifies it. Let me ask you, are you obeying God?"

He stopped and thought for a moment and he said, "Yes! I am obeying God."

I was even more confused because it hadn't been that long ago he confessed to me all the sins in his life and that he couldn't obey Him. I'm sitting there stunned. I didn't ask to talk to him; this guy comes to me trying to get counsel, spiritual help, and says he keeps the commandments of God.

I took him to I John 5:3 and said, "Let me ask you one more question. Those commandments that you're keeping, are they difficult, are they burdensome, are they heavy?" He looked down and wouldn't look up for the longest of time, then he grabbed his coat and walked out of the office.

He was being very religious. He was being very much meticulous in trying his best to keep the law of God, but it was a burden to him and there was no joy in it. Can a Christian come to that point? Yes, when their faith is misdirected and is no longer on God but themselves. But John is saying here that every born again Christian delights in the Law of God not because it will get them entrance into heaven or gain some blessing from God, but because they love God and want to please Him.

B. The focus must be on loving God, not on obedience

John doesn't want you to get hung up on keeping rules, he's asking you if you really love God. That's the focus. Two things happen when you focus on your obedience:

1. When the focus is on obedience, performance takes over loving God

Performance becomes the major thing—how well you’re doing or not doing. As I said a few moments ago, you will either be puffed up in pride or you will be spiritually discouraged. Why? Because the flesh cannot keep God’s law or commandments. Only by the Spirit through grace can one keep them. That’s why the Lord is more interested in the motivation of why you obey even more than your outward acts of obedience.

Doing the right thing with the wrong heart will always produce unrighteousness. It never produces godly obedience. Therefore to try to obey God without love for God is simply unrighteous. Satan is all the time tempting Christians to do the right thing for the wrong reason. So when the focus is on performance, the focus isn’t on loving God and you’re just keeping a bunch of rules and you never enjoy your God and it becomes a burden to you.

2. Spiritual frustration, discouragement and even depression will set in

Why? Because of the flesh’s inability to keep the commandments of God. The Ten Commandments are difficult within themselves. Never to lie, never to commit adultery, don’t covet, Honor your father and mother, keep the Sabbath holy, only worship God and no other idols... My goodness, our heart is a fertile ground for idolatry. Every idol can spring up overnight. Trying to keep those ten commandments are difficult, but then here comes Jesus and He not only demonstrates those ten commandments, He takes it to another level and says, “This is what I want you to do, love Me with all your heart and your fellow man as your own self.” Now who can do that perfectly? You can’t. It’s impossible to the nature of man. But if your focus is on trying to do that and not loving God, your Spiritual failure will lead to Spiritual depression.

The answer is, listen closely, let God love you. I’m repeating myself because that’s what John is doing. Every time we open this book it’s what it always comes back to—let the love of God be poured out into your heart and experience that. Why? Because it’s all one. Remember? If God loves you then you will love God and you will love one another. How do you know that you love one another? Because you love God. How do you know you love God? Because you love one another. It’s all the same thing. So the answer is not to try to love, the answer is be loved and experience His love.

I want to conclude, because there is an objection. Why would John bring up commandments in the first place, because aren’t we under grace and not the law?

C. High view of the law versus a low view of the law

Some would object to say that any observance of the law is legalism and any concern for keeping commandments is contrary to grace. In other words, they would attack my interpretation of John here as having a high view of the law which, in their minds, makes me a legalist. Anytime you bring up the word *commandment* or *law* you’re a legalist. But the truth is that is a low view of the law and that’s what makes you a legalist. A high view of the law drives you to Jesus Christ for grace.

Let me explain this. A low view of the law makes a man a legalist because it fosters an “I can do it” mentality. If the law is low enough, you look at those commandments and think, “You know, I can do that.”

It reminds me of a game I used to play with my dad when I was a little kid. He would take a broomstick or a baseball bat or some sort of a bar and he'd start real low and then I'd jump over it and then he'd raise it and I'd jump over it again until eventually I'd have to dive over it and eventually I couldn't even do that.

If the law is low enough in your view you can say, "Hey, I can jump that. I can do that," and you will be motivated by the flesh to try to keep the law. Therefore a low view of the law creates a low view of God's grace because you will not seek God and His promise to help you, but will try to do it on your own.

But a high view of the law—so high you know you can't jump that—will motivate you to run to Christ and to hide in the truth of the Gospel and to seek His grace. It fosters a high view of God's grace and what it can do for you. Listen closely. The more I see my inability to keep the commandments of God the more I go to Him in faith. Faith that He has promised to give me everything I need to obey Him. That's why it's called grace—God working in me to desire and do His will.

How high a view do you have of these commandments of God? Have they ever been so high that you were buried underneath them in despair and discouragement and said, "I can't do this"? To the Christian, I want you to hear me, that's what is keeping you from the promised land of God's victory. The mentality, the idea, that you can still jump this thing and keep His commandments. You believe God is watching you to make sure you do that, well, your view of your Father is absolutely wrong. God didn't give you these commandments so you would try to keep them, He gave you the commandments so as you try to keep them and fail you'll finally realize you need Him. That's the only way you will ever abide in Christ and rest in Him by faith.

The higher view you have of the law, the more undeserving you see you are, which motivates you to love God more because you see Him for loving you when you can't do anything He tells you to do. He still loves you and then He enables you to love Him all the more, then you're free to love one another because you know they are just like you—they can't do it either.

One of the ways you can be a more forgiving person is to remember this is what God does for you—He gives you grace and mercy. The law shows us how desperate we are for God's help. In other words, we need the law to remind us every day just how much we need the Gospel every day.

If you're not a Christian or if you're not for sure, please listen. God's law is to be kept. God gave us those commandments and He said "Do them and you will live," because those commandments reflect His heart, what's right, what's holy, what's good, what's enduring, what's beautiful; all of that is reflected in the commandments of God. Namely what Jesus taught us: to love the Lord with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and to love your neighbor as yourself. He gave that command to you knowing you would not be able to do it.

You say you can't do that, that you make it all about you, and God just keeps saying "Love God with all your heart, love your neighbor as yourself" until there comes a point when you get so tired of you that you're willing to die and let God have it all. He didn't give you those command-

ments to be mean, to restrict your life and your freedoms, He gave them to save you that they may lead you to Christ and His Gospel and set you free.

Jesus has done all of the commandments of God on your behalf. You want to obey God? Hide yourself in Jesus and cling closely to Him. Even we who are saved fail in keeping the commandments of God. What's our hope? The Gospel. Jesus suffered on my behalf and did everything required for me and satisfied God on my behalf so that when I sin today, instead of God rejecting me, you know what He does? He looks at His Son and He honors His Son by forgiving me.

Jesus did all the activity for us. If God rejects me today because of my sin then He has to dishonor His Son's sacrifice on behalf of me and He will not do that. So run to Christ. Go to Him this morning. Don't doubt it, embrace it, believe it. Stake your eternity on it and you will be saved this morning and know what true joy and liberty is. That's why John states that the proof of loving your brothers and sisters in Christ is that you love God because the more I need God, the more grace He gives me. And the more grace He gives me, the more I love Him, and the more I love Him then more I love you. That's the freedom God gives you today, so that in the end you do keep the commandment of God to love Him and your fellow man. That's the Gospel.