

Assurance by Love

1 John 2:7-11

Introduction

In the previous passage, John says that our assurance of salvation comes by obedience: “Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments” (2:3). Our obedience is the fruit of our salvation; it is strong evidence to us. Our obedience further demonstrates that God’s love for us reaches its goal in us—to turn us to love Him (2:5, cf. 4:19). And so, being in Him, we should walk as He walked (2:6, cf. 1:7). John now goes on to explain more that the commandment we keep which particularly is evidence for us of our salvation is the command to love one another.

An Old Commandment

John’s command to his readers is not something he is making up (not a “new commandment”), but rather an old commandment consistent with the gospel that had been preached to his readers (2:7). It is the message (or word – Gr., *logos*) they heard from the beginning. It is explicitly tied to the gospel in 3:23. It’s an old commandment, because Jesus Himself gave it decades before this letter was written (John 13:34-35, 15:12). And beyond that, it hearkens back to the law of the old covenant as well (Lev. 19:18). Jesus says that this is one of the great commandments on which hang all the law and the prophets (Matt. 22:37-40), and Paul reiterates this by saying love is the fulfillment of the law (Rom. 13:8-10, Gal. 5:14). This is the old and stable and foundational rule of life for the people of God: love one another.

A New Commandment

At the same time, it is also a new commandment (2:8). Jesus Himself calls it this in John’s gospel (13:34). How is it new if really it is one of the great commandments? It is new because it never grows old and because it constantly must be renewed the hearts and lives of the people of God. The tendency and temptation of our flesh is to operate under the rule of self-love. The commandment to love one another was new for the eleven disciples with Jesus in the upper room because they needed to submit themselves to it again in the face of pending persecution. It was new for the Christians in the communities John writes to because they needed to be reminded of it, and it needed to be renewed in them. And it is a new commandment for us because we need to hear it again and again.

John says this new commandment is “true in Him and in you.” This reminds us that our love for one another stems from Jesus’ love for us. He is both our model (John 15:12) and the cause (1 John 4:19). It also hints at the idea that the commandment is new in the sense of renewal and not in the sense of being something novel. It is already true in the readers, and yet it needs to be written to them again. The true light is already shining in them, and the darkness is passing away. Yet, they need to be spurred on and encouraged and assured by way of this reminder.

The Test

And so, the love of the brethren is a litmus test for our love for God (2:9-10). John presents a claim (similar to previous claims) that some make to be in the light; and yet, they hate their brother. Their hatred disproves their claim. John will later say that the lack of love for one another calls into question our love for God (4:20-21). There is such a thing as righteous hatred (e.g., Ps. 139:21-22, Pr. 8:13), but that is not in view here. This darkness-

walking hatred of another takes many forms, and some are surprising. It can be proud (Luke 18:9), angry and murderous (1 John 3:10-15, Matt. 5:21-22), holding a grudge (Lev. 19:17), deceitful (Pr. 26:24-26), or excusing sin (Pr. 26:28, Lev. 19:17; cf. Pr. 13:24).

On the other hand, “he who loves his brother abides in the light.” Loving your brother means you are walking as Jesus walked (2:6). Love is longsuffering and kind, thick-skinned and gracious, rejoices in the truth and not in sin (1 Cor. 13:4-7). Love covers a multitude of sins (1 Pet. 4:8). Love lays one’s life down (John 15:13, Eph. 5:25ff). Love fulfills the law of God (Rom. 13:10). John lays these things out as the test for your assurance of salvation: Do you love your brother? Do you love those close to you? Is your life marked by the kind of love that Jesus has for you? Can others look at you and tell that you are Jesus’ disciple, not by what you say, but by how you love?

Stumbling in the Dark

If love (biblically applied and defined) is the fulfillment of the law, then when we practice that love, we are keeping God’s law. “Great peace have those who love Your law, and nothing causes them to stumble” (Ps. 119:165). The man who loves his brother has nothing in front of him to stumble him (2:10). On the other hand, the one who hates his brother bumbles around blinded by the darkness. “Hatred makes us stupid.”¹ When the seed of hatred or malice or enmity has taken root, you are vulnerable and have made yourself weak to stand against the next temptation—and there will be a next one. Sin lies at the door, and its desire is for you, as the Lord told Cain (Gen. 4:7).

When there is disagreement or a need to confront a brother, to do so in love is to see clearly. You see where you are going, and there is no cause for stumbling. But if it is not done in love, if you hate your brother, you can’t see where you are going. You are blind, and you will trip and stumble and sin in all kinds of other ways.

Conclusion

Loving or hating your brother is a gospel issue, because to claim to be in the light and hate your brother is to misrepresent Christ. If you call yourself a Christian, then you are saying to the world that you are walking as Christ walked. But if you are hating your brother, you are not at all walking like Christ walked. This has application for us in all kinds of relationships, all kinds of disagreements, all kinds of aspects of living together as the body of Christ. Are you stumbling around in the dark? Then stop and evaluate your relationships, first with those closest to you. Do you love them? Does that relationship reflect the love of Christ? Or are you harboring hatred, malice, anger, bitterness, frustration, or impatience against them?

The answer, as always, is Jesus. If you’ve been walking in darkness, the only way out is to come to Jesus, to be cleansed and forgiven. You can hang on to that hatred and remain blind. Or you can confess it, love your brother by the power of the Spirit, and receive assurance that you abide in the light.

¹ Leithart, *From Behind the Veil*, 66.