

Sermon: 1 John 2:3-11

Whoever you are, and whatever your situation, and whatever you think about God, and even if you don't think about God, he impacts you profoundly and most certainly more than we can possibly imagine.

He has been here always. He called the universe into existence by just his word. He created man by breathing life into dust. We depend on him for our every heartbeat. And there will come a day for every human being where we will stand before him and he will do his job, as ruler of the universe, and judge us.

So here are two questions to ask yourself at the start of this new year- one- where do you stand with God, and two- how do you know (where you stand with God)? Not what do you think about God; not what do you know about him; but where are you with God and how do you know? What is your standing with God? This is a timeless question- it's one we ask now, and one that human beings have asked throughout the ages, - it's set in our hearts- Ecclesiastes 3:11 tells us that eternity is set in the hearts of men- *and* it's a question that the recipients of this letter from John were asking in the 1st century.

They were especially asking this question because of some new teaching being introduced into the church. These

believers were meeting together to remember Jesus and striving to follow in Jesus' footsteps, just as their leaders had been teaching them since the very start of the church. And when we in the 21st century look at this letter we think of it as being addressed to the early church, don't we? Which is correct- it was- it was written in the 1st century by the aging apostle John, who had seen Jesus and listened to him and lived with him and knew him closely. But this was the next generation of the early church- John was one of the last of those who had been contemporaries of Jesus, and there was a new wave of thought and teaching infecting the church. Over time, some leaders had started to veer away from Jesus' teaching and begun to introduce their own new ideas. Hence this letter.

These breakaway teachers cared a lot about knowledge of God. That's why John doesn't say 'we know that we are *Christians* if..' or, 'we know that we are *born again* if...'. Instead he says (vs 3) 'we know that we have come to *know him* if... we obey his commands'. He's refuting some particular claims about knowledge of God. These false teachers claimed that they were enlightened with a special knowledge of God that others didn't have. Believers were questioning whether that was true and wondering how they could in fact tell where they stood with God and whether they really were Christians or in him. John

chooses language to reinforce that it is not knowledge *about* God that's important- it's *relationship with* God that really matters.

And so he gives *two solutions* to reassure those who were worried about whether they truly knew God.

His *first solution* – verses 3-6- has to do with obedience. He says 'Take a look at your life! Do your actions bear witness to your claims? Are you living in obedience to him? Do what God says, and that shows that you know him. If you disobey God then you don't know him- and what's more, you're a liar!'

Any questions?!

Here's one- doesn't that then exclude *anyone* from being able to claim to know God? Because if I look at *my* life, and ask myself if I truly obey God, then the answer has to be a resounding no. There is barely a day that goes by when I don't think a bitter thought, or say a hurtful word, or act selfishly in some way. And if, perchance, a day does go past when I manage not to do those things I can hardly congratulate myself! Because I've still neglected justice, or not been grateful- or not done any number of things that are simply my duty and that would glorify God as he deserves. It's not that I don't try! I try. I read my bible, I say my prayers. I get some things right... but not enough- not

even close. Does that mean I can't claim to know God? And in fact, what chance do I *ever* have of being able to claim to know him? Am I a liar? Is the truth not in me?

Well the good news is this- and John Calvin said it well- it is not that those who wholly satisfy the Law that keep his commandments, because no-one qualifies; rather, it is 'those who strive, according to the capacity of human infirmity, to form their life in obedience to God.'

This is not about a merely external conformity to moral standards; it's about watchful, observant obedience. It's active!

Please hear me say that John is **not** talking about salvation by works. He's not saying that by your adherence to God's commands you can earn yourself a right relationship with God. You can't. Just note that the verses we're looking at today are sandwiched in grace. See verses 1 and 2 of this chapter? "If anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defence—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world." The way you come to know God is through Jesus, the atoning sacrifice for our sins. If we have chosen to turn from sin and follow Jesus, instead of punishment for our sins, we

have Jesus as our advocate- he speaks to the Father in our defence... and there's no condemnation for us.

And then look at verse 12- "I write to you, dear children, because your sins have been forgiven on account of his name". Your sins are forgiven because of Jesus! That's how we get to know God in the first place. A relationship with God always starts with God's offer of grace to us and our acceptance of that. It starts in grace, our first act of obedience is repentance, and we go on in grace and repentance, and obedience.

So please remember as we look at this passage, that these verses are the filling in the middle of two slices of grace!!

What John *is* saying to these early Christians is don't listen to those false teachers who claim to have some sort of special knowledge of God. He's saying that *their* actions will bear witness to their relationship with God; and in fact anyone who wants to know if they know God need only look at their own behaviour- that will tell them; you; me- where we stand with God- not something mystical or mysterious or new. Not a feeling, or a vibe. It's concrete. We need to hold to this- and not listen to the voice that says our actions don't matter- they do- they're the evidence for what we believe.

What does it mean to obey God's commands? It's summed up in verse 6- it means to walk as Jesus did- that is, be like Jesus. John knew that his readers had factual information on which to base their imitation of Christ- they did- and so do we. We have Jesus as the perfect model of what obedience to God looks like- submission to God, compassion, humility, forgiveness, meekness, and confidence in his Father.

Now, I'd like to just pause for a moment and consider obedience, and what that means. Is it hard for you to be obedient? Does it sound burdensome? Is it a 'should' in your life, rather than a 'want to'?

I often wonder why I don't obey God more. I think my heart is inclined to not trust that God really is God. That he actually does love me. Deep down there's a doubt that he's up to the job. I somehow fear that living his way might turn out bad for me! I don't believe... what I believe! Is this you? Are you a little suspicious of God? What do you fear God might let you down on? He won't. Ask yourself if God is sufficient to deal with what you fear. Search the bible. Your answer will be yes every time. God is on your side- he wants good for his people! Obedience is not something to fear.

Is obedience a burden? I should give more generously. I should visit my mother. I should read my bible, I should pray. The problem with this view of obedience is that it robs us of any sense of joy in living God's way- in living *knowing* God. As soon as I say should, I imply that I don't want to. 'Should' is a joy-killer. And the Christian life *is* about joy! It's about enjoying God and who he is- everything that he is- that's worship.

I've been listening to a great Hillsong CD lately. There's one song I've listened to a lot which is almost like a love song to God. And there's a line in it that says "I live for all my days to put a smile on your face- and when we finally meet, it'll be for eternity".

Doesn't that just take away the burden of obedience?! It says, "I'm just living to please God- to delight God." It says there's relationship- I love God and he loves me, and I WANT to love him. I enjoy serving him!

Now that's Hillsong, not the Bible! But this is what the bible tells us that we're all about- what every human being is created for- to delight in God- to worship him and to take pleasure in him, and to live in a happy state of looking forward to 'the blessed hope – the glorious appearing of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ'. The apostle Paul says it like this, 'To live is Christ, to die is gain'.

It's an active happy state. Not passive. And that's what obedience is about- it's about being active in your love for Jesus. And doing that glorifies him... is that burdensome?

This raises the *second solution* to the question about how we can tell where we stand with God and whether we really know him- and the second solution flows straight out of the first. The first is that we'll obey his commands, and the *second* is one of those commands- Jesus' command to love. John says, "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..." Contradictory?!

No- he's talking about the one command that summarises the moral law of God and all the commands. It *wasn't* new because God has always been about love, right from the beginning. He hasn't changed.

It *was* new in the sense that Jesus brought together the two greatest commandments in the OT—to love God and love your neighbour as yourself—and declared that the whole teaching of the law and the prophets hung upon them; but he extended this and deepened it to require even more of his followers- teaching that a follower of his must love with self-sacrifice, even to death. It's the command in John 13:34; "A new command I give you; love

one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.” And he says in John 15:13- “My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.”

This sort of love will always be new! Not new in the sense of the false teachers new ideas about knowledge- new because of what Jesus’ love was like- revolutionary, counter-cultural, transforming!

So, the second proof of how we know where we stand with God is by our love. How are we called to love? Just as Jesus loved. Striving for no less.

You guys are good at love! I see evidence of it all the time at BHAC. Last Sunday I watched someone walk from the school gate to the hall picking up rubbish all the way. That wasn’t on the roster! They didn’t have to do that. That sort of service is love.

There are people here who turn up to church on Sunday early, just to do whatever needs to be done. There are people who pray faithfully for others at BHAC- that’s love.

So I want you to know that I’m encouraged and I’m learning as I watch some of you!

That brings us now to light and darkness- obviously an important theme- John’s already talked about it once in

this letter, and now he introduces it again, verse 8, and that's what the rest of this passage is about.

All Jews were familiar with the division of history into the 'present age' and the 'age to come'. The present age is represented by darkness- the age to come, by light. They looked forward to the age to come, and what the New Testament teaches us is that Jesus brought in the 'age to come'. It's as though when Jesus walked on earth there was a shaft of light wherever he went. That was the age to come- it had come! Whoever came into his sphere was touched by that light, that true light, the light of the world, and they were healed, and loved, and given life. A little taste of God's kingdom. A shaft of light amidst darkness. The darkness- the present age will end one day. That light remains shining in his people- the church. His love shines in us and through us- remember he tells his followers 'you are the light of the world'.

What a calling, and what a privilege! God has invested us with the very quality that Jesus had!

I like to read in bed at night. But John likes to turn the light off and go to sleep. We've discovered the solution to this is an itty-bitty book light! In the dark there is absolutely no way I could read without my itty bitty book light. I just can't! I can't see, and I can't read. It is not possible.

If we don't live in the light, we have no hope of seeing truth, or of knowing God. Darkness obscures. Light illuminates. This is a metaphor that occurs throughout the Bible. We can choose to live in the light- with God; being obedient, loving, seeing truth- OR- we can choose darkness- without God, unable to discern truth, stumbling along.

Light- darkness. Obedience- disobedience. Truth- lies. Love- hate. Acknowledge your sin- deny your sin. Know God- don't know God. It's one or the other. You cannot claim to know God and continue to live in darkness.

Have you ever heard of troglobites? A troglobite is a creature that lives in the darkest part of a cave. It is never exposed to light, and in fact it has actually adapted to living in the dark such that it has only very tiny eyes or no eyes at all.

You see my point. The more you live in the darkness, the less able you are to see. The more we go on choosing to be disobedient, choosing not to love, the less able we will become to even recognise the reality of what we're getting wrong.

On the other hand, love sees straight. The more you love, the more you know how to love. The clearer your perspective.

When you live in light you see what causes you to stumble- you see sin. You're more able to see it in your own life- Steve talked about that last week- but you're also more able to see it in the lives of others. And this is a problem, because God calls us to share our lives. And the more we live in the light, and the more we share our lives at BHAC, the more we see sin- ours, and others- and the more likely it is that we might just be hurt by the sin of our brother. And even the most godly person will encounter this challenge. The apostle Paul did!

Your brother can be hard to love! When John talks about 'your brother', he means fellow believers- anywhere and everywhere. But today I just want to apply this particularly to us at BHAC.

I've got three suggestions about living in the light. Here's what they are;

1. Very obvious! Pray for your brother. Use the directory. Pray for opportunities to serve them. Pray that they would be growing in their maturity, becoming more like Jesus. Use Paul's prayers in his letters- they're a great model. It's hard to want bad for someone you're praying good for- you know that.
2. Let go of your expectations of your brother. If you want to truly love him, or her, your expectation of

them can only be that you're going to love them, and serve them.

3. Don't allow yourself to make excuses. This is how we become blind to reality. Sometimes we make disobedient or unloving choices because we feel we're justified in it. We're tired or busy, feeling stressed, struggling through a hard time, hurt. We need to love our families. We all do it! But John doesn't give any exceptions here. Imagine the conditions that these believers lived under. I don't think that life was undemanding for them, do you? And think of Jesus. He was obedient, and showed love even as he was dying. If we claim to know God- if we want to live in the light and enjoy the benefits that that brings, we must love like that- like Jesus, without letting ourselves off the hook. Don't be a troglobite!

One final point.

If you have not yet found yourself in a situation where it's been hard for you to love your brother I want to challenge you to think about why that's so. Are you avoiding getting involved at BHAC? Are you avoiding the hard work of loving?

If you're thinking this all sounds difficult, you're right! It is. But things that have value are costly. Living in the light is worth it.

Imagine our church utterly transformed by love; by forgiveness and grace. A light, in darkness, where our community can see that we are Jesus' disciples because of our unusual, remarkable, self-sacrificing, supernatural, godly love for one another. How powerful that would be! How enjoyable- for us!!

Striving for that sort of love is obedience to God. That sort of love is evidence of a person's relationship with God. Because it is not natural to sinful man! It is proof of a divine power at work in an ordinary sinful human life, and he promises that he *will* work in us according to his good purpose.

Do you want to know where you are with God? Look at your love. Look at your actions. And keep striving, as the Holy Spirit convicts and empowers you, to walk as Jesus did, with no excuses, and live to put a smile on his face, and to delight in loving him.

And if you're not living in the light, step into it!

As we live in the light we will know God more and more; and enjoy him more and more. And isn't that exactly where we want to stand with God?

