

Sermon File # 1043

Scripture Text: 1 John 2:7-11

Sermon Title: *The Love Test*

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On Sunday Morning 12 February 2012

At International Baptist Church of Brussels, Belgium

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the New International Version.

Sources cited in this manuscript are listed at the end.

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The Love Test

Introduction:

We continue our look into the First Letter of the Apostle John, a pastor who writes out of genuine concern for the believers in Asia Minor, that they might have assurance of their salvation in Christ, and ward off the influence and claims of false teachers in their midst. Last Sunday we noted the absolute importance of knowing God through a personal relationship with Christ, and how vitally different is a personal acquaintance with God from just knowledge about God. We have assurance of our knowledge with God through our obedience to his Word and our growth in our love for God. John implied that just spiritual and religious talk, with which the Gnostic false teachers were gifted, was insufficient and also deadly, giving a false sense of security. John says we know God through a love-obedience relationship as we follow the supreme example of Jesus Christ, actually allowing him to live in and through us.

Our text for today will make more explicit one of the tests John gives for our assurance of salvation. John the pastor gives us the love test. Follow as I read:

1 John 2:7-11.

Tests are regarded by most students and teachers as a necessary evil. The better, higher achieving students may even welcome tests as a challenge and an opportunity to demonstrate their mastery of a subject and their superiority over the rest of the class. Many students, however, find tests to be stressful, and even most teachers apparently don't like writing and grading tests. But they are a necessary way to calculate the progress of students and also to evaluate the effectiveness of the teacher. If all the students in a class fail a test, the teacher has to wonder how well she or he is teaching, or if the class is a bunch of woeful underachievers. Like them or hate them, students must take tests, and in order to succeed must prepare for them (as some of you here today may be currently doing during these weeks).

In my seminary during my student days, it was customary to begin the class, including an examination, with prayer, led either by the professor or a student. In one particular class, the professor asked a student to pray, and the student fervently implored, "And Lord, help us as we take this test." "Test?!" cried a student on the back row. "What test?" he implored, interrupting the prayer. The other students turned to look, with more amusement than sympathy, at this panic-stricken and obviously ill-informed and unprepared student. Then the praying student simply closed his prayer with, "In Jesus' name, amen," and the professor distributed the exam papers to the class, which had at least this one unprepared student.

John writes to the congregations, not as a harsh professor, seeking to trap unprepared students, but rather as a concerned pastor, wanting the people to be prepared to pass this important examination which would indicate their standing with God. He addresses the believers with the word "beloved," which says more than the weaker NIV translation "Dear friends" (7). John uses this address "beloved" 6 times in this first letter, which "accords with his stress on love" (Morris, 1263). The term "beloved" is the one which God used when expressing his love for his dear Son at his baptism and transfiguration (Matthew 3:17; 17:5, *ESV*). John reminds us that God loves us with the same love he has for his own Son (John 17:26).

God loves us far more than we know, and certainly wants us to have assurance of our standing with him as his beloved children and that we know the fullness of his love and are able to pass the love test that assures us of eternal life and our relationship with him. God doesn't want us to either panic or be surprised but rather to pass the love test that he gives us. Our passing this test is of utmost and everlasting significance. In our text John gives some criteria that test the validity of our salvation, our eternal life in Christ. Throughout the letter we'll see this test recur in different expressions, with love being a major theme in this letter. The verb for God-like love (Greek *agape*) "occurs a remarkable 52 times" in John's Epistles (Yarbrough, 83).

Let's note that God's test of our love, the love test, is first of all...

An old and new test (verses 7 & 8)

John seems to equivocate, saying first he's not writing a new command but an old one (7), then in the next verse saying, "Yet I am writing a new command" (8). The truth of the matter is, he is writing them of a command that is both old and new.

I recall from college days, especially among my fellow athletes, who were not always recruited for their academic ability, that some professors were particularly popular because they were usually assured a passing grade with minimal effort. One thing that made some professors and teachers particularly easy was their practice of always giving the same old tests. In order to prepare easily without having to master the material, one had only to obtain a copy of the test from a student who scored highly on the test the previous semester. All you had to do was to learn the same answers because the questions were sure to be the same.

On the one hand, John said that the love test was...

An old test

The love test is an old one that God has given us from the very beginning. In fact, God created man and woman, beginning with Adam and Eve, for a love relationship with him that would reflect his glory in the earth. Sin brought an estrangement from God, but his love never ceased. The Old Covenant is a story of God's rescue attempt of sinful mankind through calling a special people to know his love and to be a light to the nations of that love.

The Moral Law, the Ten Commandments, define the life that pleases God. The first four commandments tell us how to love God through worshiping and obeying him exclusively, letting him be God and Lord, and through honoring his name (Exodus 20:1-11). The next six commandments describe a life of loving one's neighbor as oneself, treating others with respect and not with exploitation, greed or envy (Exodus 20:12-17; Leviticus 19:18, 33f). And God told the Israelites to love him with heart soul and strength, with obedient love, which was to be taught to their children and successive generations (Deuteronomy 6:1-9). John says that God's people have had this "old commandment (to love one another) from the very beginning...." (Comfort, 2142).

Sadly, no one in Israel passed this love test with flying colors, and before a God of perfect love and holiness, no one came across as righteous (Psalm 143:2). God is a God of love, grace and mercy, even in the Old Covenant, and he saved those who had faith in him, and they were saved by what Christ would yet do for them on the cross. As Paul says, even under the Old Covenant, no one was saved, made right with God, by obeying the law. All have fallen short of God's perfect righteousness and are condemned by sin and in need of his pardon (Romans 3:10, 20). With both the old test and the new, God demands perfect righteousness, which is achieved,

not by moral effort, but by simple faith. All are commanded to love God and others, and yet all failed. The only hope for passing the love test is God' mercy and grace given through Christ. The old test, John says, is the message we have heard. God has always given the love test to his people, and that's the same test he has given to us in our past. He has placed us all, since the age we reached moral accountability, under the scrutiny of the love test—"Do you love me with all your being and your neighbor as yourself?"

We can't pass the test by relying on the past, on how well the Israelites did, since they all came up short. Nor can we rely on the religion or godly achievements of our parents or our previous experiences. Nor do we pass the test by copying biblical words and glibly telling God and others that we love them. The test God gives us, as John says, is...

A new test

The test God gives is new as well as old, which "stumped" those who had thought they had mastered God's test given in the Old Covenant. The legalistic religionists, like the Pharisees and the scribes, prided themselves in their strict adherence to the law, which had become redefined by their tradition. The orthodox Jew expressed his piety through his desire to see God destroy "sinners," i.e. those who didn't live up to his legalistic standards, and even thought of Gentiles as creatures created for hell (Boice, 65).

Jesus raised the standard interpretation of the old love test and declared that now his new test, based on the old one, would require more understanding and obedience in order to obtain a passing grade. Now the love test has Jesus' stamp on it because he exemplified it, gave it a richer meaning, and brought together the commandment to love God (Deuteronomy 6:5) and love one's neighbor (Leviticus 19:18), and declared that the whole teaching of the law hung upon this Greatest Commandment (Matthew 22:40). Jesus gave a definition to "neighbor" as anyone in need, not just one's fellow Jew, including a despised foreigner (Luke 10: 25-37). Jesus went so far as to say that the commandment to love includes even one's enemies (Matthew 5:43-48).

Jesus's incarnation, death and resurrection inaugurated the new age of the Kingdom, providing the power of a new life to those who follow him. Our new test requires that we live under the kingdom ethic of love that reflects the love of Christ for us, that self-giving, sacrificial love displayed most perfectly and powerfully on his cross. With the coming and victory of Jesus the old age of darkness is passing and the true light of the love of Christ is now shining (8; 1 Corinthians 7:31). When John speaks of the "true light" by which we now live, he's speaking not about the true versus the false, but rather the real substance of something (Stott, 94). The test God gives us is the test of living by the love he has for us expressed by his gift of his Son

(John 3:16), and demonstrated by Jesus, known as “the friend of sinners,” those formerly excluded from the religious establishment (Matthew 11:19).

The new test is elevated and expanded by Jesus’ interpretation and is to be expressed in our lives, by which the Holy Spirit loves others through us. Our loving as God gives us opportunities in daily life makes this commandment and test new, fresh and always up to date. This God-like love stands out in this self-loving, self-serving culture. This new love for others is a humble, servant love. Even in the first century, especially in the Greco-Roman world, humility was a “dog virtue” practiced only by the socially downtrodden. The new test of love demands we practice the redemptive love of the cross through the power of the risen Christ, who enables us through the Holy Spirit to do the “greater things” of the new age of the Kingdom (Yarbrough, 101).

The love test God gives is both old and new but also is...

A true or false test (verses 9 & 10)

During my student days I preferred simple true and false questions, because even if I hadn’t adequately prepared I still had a 50% chance of giving the right answer. But with the love test our only hope is in the grace of God. And here’s the statement: “I live in the light of God.” Then you “tick” (or “check”) the box that says either “yes” or “no.” John would say there are conditions that indicate, first...

A false answer

Your answer is false, he would say, if you hate your “Christian brother or sister” (*NLT*). It’s as simple as that, and easy for God to grade. As we noted from 1:5, John speaks of the light as expressive of God’s brilliance, beauty and moral excellence. To walk in the light of God is to enjoy peace and fellowship with him and to reflect his character through a life of forgiveness and obedience to his commands, summarized in the Great Commandment. We can try our best to live a morally upright life, but if we fail to love we’re living in the darkness, which is Satan’s realm of evil and ignorance of the truth.

Hatred for a Christian brother or sister may be difficult to detect, since hatred here is “not necessarily violent animosity,” but includes the “softer sense” of a more insidious kind of hatred (Yarbrough, 104). This hatred can mean resentment, rejecting another believer, refusing to fellowship with or be reconciled with someone in the church. It can simply mean indifference toward a brother or sister in need, simply the failure to love another believer for whom Christ died. Jesus said that unjustified anger, contemptuous language and the refusal to be reconciled is to be guilty of breaking the commandment against murder, bringing ourselves under judgment (Matthew 5:21ff).

John's and Jesus' warning against this hatred, whatever its expression, is a serious wake-up call to those of us in the church who may well be outside of saving grace. Because of his pastoral concern John is obligated to issue this warning against having a counterfeit faith that fails the practical, moral and ethical test of love (Yarbrough, 106). Jesus' picture of the sheep and the goats separated at his return in judgment, is a solemn warning that those who truly belong to him will have given evidence of grace by acts of love and mercy (Matthew 25:31-46). If your claim to belong to the light is belied by your failure to love, you've missed the point of the gospel of Christ and your answer must be false. John is declaring the truth that faith and love go together (Smalley, 64).

I Howard Marshall relates "the reaction of some members of a prominent evangelical church to their new minister: 'He is always preaching on ethics,' they said, and the implication was that he was not preaching the gospel, perhaps indeed that it was doubtful if he was a thoroughgoing evangelical. Maybe his sermons were touching them in sensitive areas. In any case," continues Marshall, "it is unlikely that they would have fared any differently with John as their minister. For the gospel is about 'faith expressing itself through love' (Galatians 5:6), and anything else," he concludes, "is counterfeit" (133).

You can't say "yes, I'm living in the light" if you're walking in the darkness of lovelessness. But there is...

A true answer

You answer the true-false question correctly if you are, says John, living in the light of God's love for your Christian brother and sister. Of course, we love with humility, realizing we need continual forgiveness for failing to love as we should, trusting God is faithful and just to forgive us (1 John 1:9). But to make our calling and election sure (2 Peter 1:10) we need to keep growing in this crowning virtue of love. John nowhere indicates that obedience and love are the conditions for salvation, which is by grace through faith alone. "Obeying God's commands is 'not the condition, but rather the characteristic of the knowledge of God'" (Marshall, 123). We seek to grow in God's mature love, becoming complete followers of Jesus (1 John 2:5f), never sinlessly perfect in this life but seeking after perfect love for God and others.

The internal evidence of this letter indicates that John was concerned about rifts and fissures in the fellowship of the churches, and calls for the believers to simply live up to the standards of grace by which they were saved. For an authentically redeemed, Spirit-transformed child of God there will be evidence that her or his profession of faith is legitimate. John knew that the genuinely converted would seek to be reconciled with those estranged or alienated from their love.

Those who gave an honest answer to this true-false test would be those taking the initiative in being reconciled/getting right with a brother or sister in the fellowship. The fruit of the Spirit features love above all else (Galatians 5:22f; Colossians 3:14),

and such love enables but also absolutely requires we live in a spirit of reconciliation (Matthew 5:21-26) with and servant-hearted submission to one another. This reconciling love is evidence we are truly living in the light of God's saving grace (Wiersbe, 58).

Our text allows for the idea that the love test God gives to everyone is...

A pass or fail test (verses 10 & 11)

Teachers have various ways of grading their students' performance and different standards for achieving certain levels, such as poor, satisfactory, average, good, and excellent. Of course, the most dreadful is a failing mark. Some more lenient teachers at times, sensing the entire class is not well-prepared, will grade on a curve. They'll take the best test results and use that as the standard for the others. Yet some classes are based simply on pass or fail, with no in between. And this seems to be the case with God's love test. In this test God sees us as either in the light (with a passing grade) or the darkness (with a failing grade). There is "no twilight," no in between (Stott, 94).

John speaks about...

A passing grade

If our life is characterized by love for our brother and sister in Christ we can be confident we are living in the light and there is nothing in us to make us stumble (10). This word "stumble" (Greek "scandalum") can refer to an offence, a scandal, or a cause of stumbling to oneself (which is the NIV translation) and/or to others (Westcott, 56).

As transformed, Spirit-regenerated people of God, we give evidence of God's grace in our lives that allows us to live in the light of God's Word and by the power of his love in us. There is nothing that can defeat us or ever separate us from God's love (Romans 8:37-39). And we can stand against the assaults of the Evil One, equipped with the full armor of God's protection (Ephesians 6:10-18).

But a passing grade requires more than what we don't do, i.e. negative holiness, but also what we do to actively express the love of God. The love of Christ in us and through us is the absolute mark of distinction of God's people (John 13:35). And that love will often be costly, if it's the love of Christ. The Good Samaritan, who embodied saving grace and eternal life, paid the price of involvement in time, compassionate care and financial investment as he attended to the needs of the Jewish robbery victim (Luke 10:25-37; Boice, 69).

Although we are saved freely by grace through faith alone, and not by works (Ephesians 2:8f), we will nevertheless be judged by works (Matthew 7:21-27; 25:31-

46). God is quite confident that his grace will express itself in our works of love (James 2:14-26).

With love we will not stumble nor will we cause others to stumble, which is probably the intent of verse 10 (contrary to the *NIV*). There will be nothing in us to cause others to stumble (Comfort, 2142). God's people who pass his love test will place no obstacle in a fellow believer's path (Yarbrough, 109). Jesus warned against this danger of causing one of his little ones to stumble (Matthew 18:6) as did Paul (Romans 14:20; 1 Corinthians 10:32).

We will be either a stepping stone for others to come to Christ or a stumbling block to keep them away (Wiersbe, 61). What seems to determine whether we're stumbling blocks or stepping stones is whether we love others with the practical, longsuffering, forgiving love of Christ. Stumbling and causing stumbling means we are receiving...

A failing grade

John pictures a professing Christian who hates his brother, stumbling around in the darkness (11), who will receive a failing grade at the Judgment. Such ones will hear Jesus say, "I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!" (Matthew 7:23). The crucial missing element is the evidence of love for one's brother or sister in Christ, which will be condemning evidence of living in the darkness, and having made a vain and empty profession of faith. The missing element that gives a failing grade is the absence of deeds, not claims. "Love unexpressed is not love at all" (Barker, 317).

We will be shown to be either children of the light, expressed through love, or of the children of darkness, who cannot express Christ-like love because they have never truly known him. Those who don't know the Lord through a personal relationship will not have the evidence that Jesus speaks about in his parable of the sheep and the goats (Matthew 25:31-46). This parable doesn't indicate there will be any who pass on a curve because everyone else did poorly. Each one of us will stand before the Judge and give an account of the authenticity of our faith, which must have expressed itself through love.

But before we stand before the Judgment Seat, we have the opportunity to examine and to test ourselves, to see whether we are in the faith, which Paul admonishes us to do (2 Corinthians 13:5). Paul says we have the opportunity now to give ourselves a trial test to see how we'll do on the final Day of ultimate testing.

While we have the mortal life, we have the opportunity to take God's test, regardless of our past sins and failures. Only the most gracious teacher would give her or his students an opportunity, after a failing grade, to make another attempt. But our God is the God of the second chance. And he can transform failures into successes. And God the teacher is also, through Christ, our enabler, guaranteeing we will pass his test, regardless of our dark and hopeless we think is our situation.

Conclusion:

In describing “the blinding power of darkness,” AT Robertson tells about a variety of fish that have for millennia swum in Echo River in the total darkness of Mammoth Cave in Western Kentucky, USA. These fish are now totally blind, having eye sockets but no eyes, having been in the darkness too long (212). Yet these fish don’t know they are blind, since they’ve known nothing but blindness.

Jesus confronted enemies who thought they had sight and spiritual insight, but because they didn’t recognize Jesus, the Light of the World, they were under the condemnation of spiritual darkness and blindness (John 9: 35-41).

Yet there is hope for those in darkness and blindness. The light of the Spirit can shine into the darkness of any heart and the blindness of any mind (2 Corinthians 4:6).

John himself is an example of the transforming power of Christ’s love to deliver us from blindness and spiritual death to sight and a life of love (Wiersbe, 48). Along with his brother James, John was a hot-tempered “son of Thunder” (Mark 3:17), who wanted to call down the fire of judgment to destroy a village (Luke 9:51-56). He also, just after Jesus spoke of his pending arrest and crucifixion, schemed with his mother and brother to gain a position of influence over his fellow disciples (Matthew 20:17-28). Yet, by the grace of God, John became known as the disciple Jesus loved, the beloved disciple (John 19:26; 20:2, 7, 20), who wrote this Letter setting forth the requirement of love for salvation assurance.

There is hope for every one of us to pass the love test, however many times we have failed it in the past. The test is old and new, but still by grace we can pass it. By trusting Christ as Savior and following him as Lord we have grace for forgiveness and faith in God that makes us right with God. We are made righteous in God’s sight and are given the free gift of eternal life and the renewing, transforming power of the Holy Spirit to enable us to live a new kind of life, one that pleases God and passes the love test.

First, we may have to check the box “false,” confessing we have not been living in the light demonstrated by love for God’s people. If we confess that sinful failure, God will forgive us and by grace transfer us into the realm of his light, enabling us to live by his love in us and through us. The test is true or false, and we can mark “true” when we are transferred, by grace to live in the light, which is made visible through a life of love for our brothers and sisters in Christ. And we will finally pass and not fail when we stand before the judgment seat of Christ, because our lives will reflect the transformative love of Christ in us.

May God help us all this day pass the love test!

Thoughts and questions for personal reflection and/or group discussion:

1. John speaks in our text about love as God's test of the authenticity of our faith, whether we are truly people of the light. How does it make you feel to think that Scripture tests and examines your faith expressed through love?
2. Jesus expanded the Jews' traditional understanding of the Great Commandment to love God and our neighbor? In what ways did Jesus expand this commandment to make it a new one?
3. Think of some people in your life circles, both inside and outside the church, that you might find challenging to love. How do you think Jesus would have you to express your love to them?
4. Most commentators say that the word "hate" in our text is not necessarily a violent hatred, but probably is a "softer," more "respectable animosity. What do you think might be included in this kind of hatred, even toward fellow believers?
5. According to Jesus' teaching in Matthew 5:21-26 and 18:15-20, who is responsible to seek/initiate reconciliation when there is a broken relationship?
6. In what ways can spiritual darkness cause us to stumble? How do we cause others to stumble?
7. What is the solution when we realize we have failed the love test? Spend some time searching your heart and your relationships, and ask God to forgive your sins and failures and give you a new desire and power to pass the love test.

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