

'Living in the Light'

A teaching series in 1 John by Rev. Robert Griffith

Part 6: Christianity in Action

Many people believe that we live in a post-Christian age. I tend to agree with that assessment. The more I listen to the views expressed by people on the talk shows and in the media, the more I am convinced that the vast majority of people don't even know the simple definition of true Christianity.

There have been many surveys taken of people on the street in our country and other western countries and the level of ignorance of Christianity is staggering. The majority of responses are a long way from the truth. The view of Christianity that would perhaps top the list would be the one that says that Christianity is all about a code of conduct - keeping a set of rules and regulations. Most people think that's what the Church is all about. Most people also think that whenever these rules and regulations are broken they will be judged harshly. For them Christianity is all about our performance and behaviour – what we can and can't do.

Now to be honest, some of those views have actually been formed from attending some churches. There are many churches still which are legalistic, harsh, judgmental and filled with rules and regulations. But that is not Christianity. What's so sad is that many people have rejected Christianity based on all the misinformation they receive in some churches.

Many people have rejected Christ because the 'Christ' which they have heard about in church is not the slightest bit attractive. Worse still, many people have not heard about Christ much at all in the churches they have attended because Christ is not preached much anymore.

So, where do you find the truth about Christ? Where do you learn about true Christianity? Well, you don't find it in tradition or in many of the examples from church history. We have not always lived up to the standard of true Christianity. To find a real definition of true Christianity, you must go back to the Bible. There you will find that true Christianity rises or falls on the law of love lived out in the power of Christ living in us. The truth of Christianity is that when a person embraces Christ as Lord and Saviour and becomes His disciple, that person is transformed and empowered to love as God loves, in Christ, through Christ and for Christ.

So the question before us today is how's your love life? This is really the fundamental question for Christians to answer. Unfortunately, many people do not even know how to define love anymore. In our English language, love is a very imprecise term. We use this word in so very many different ways. In order to understand its meaning we must understand the context in which it is used.

For example, I 'love' lots of things. I love apple crumble and ice-cream. I love blue skies. I love my wife. I love you. I love lying in the sun. Now it's obvious that you love your wife or husband in a different way than you love a good meal. So it's important for us to understand just what we mean when we use this word *love* and more importantly, what it means in the Bible.

It is clear that most people have no idea what either Christianity or true love really is. But whatever love really is, we all find ourselves longing for it, for that's how God made us. It is the greatest need in people's lives.

Josh McDowell said, *"I believe two of the greatest fears people struggle with today are the fear that they will never be loved and the fear that they will never be able to love."*

True Christianity meets that need.

This is what the apostle John is getting at in his first letter we have been looking at over recent months in this series. John has been telling us how to walk in the light. He has been emphasizing the importance of fellowship with God and with one another. In this passage he gets at the truth of Christianity in action.

"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." (1 John 2:7-8)

The apostle John turns his attention to the basic commandment of Christianity. It is the law of love. He explains to us that love is old but also new. As you look at the text, it seems rather confusing. How can something be both old and new? The command to love is an old one in that it has been around since the beginning. In fact, in the Old Testament we find many commandments to love.

Listen to these words found in Deuteronomy 6:4-5: *"Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength."* This was the command to love God. And in Leviticus 19:18, *"Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbour as yourself."*

Here is the commandment to love your neighbour as yourself. These commandments had been there from the beginning. Love, you see, is not merely a New Testament innovation. Love is found from the beginning of the Bible to the end. Many people wrongly think that the God revealed in the Old Testament is wrathful, whereas Jesus is loving. But in both Old Testament and New, we see God as a God of love. Be careful not to mistake the holiness of God for a lack of love. God is holy and God is love.

So, how is this old commandment now a new commandment? Well, no doubt when John wrote these words he was thinking of Jesus' own statement recorded in John 13:34: *"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another."* But even when Jesus gave this command, it wasn't the first time these people had heard those words. So how was this a *new* command? Well it's not that the command to love is new, this is a new *application* of the command to love. The commandment is not new in its essence, but it is new in its extent. It is not new in its presence, but in its particulars. It is not new in its reality, but in its reach. This command reveals a new degree of love to be manifested. It is new because it is based on a new comparison.

Jesus said, *"As I have loved you, so you must love one another."* Here is the key. We are not to love just as we love ourselves, but as Jesus loved us. In the old command, we were to love our neighbour as ourselves. In this new command, we are to love one another as Jesus demonstrated His love toward us. This is the new extent, the new degree of love we are to demonstrate.

The question then becomes *"How did Jesus love us?"* The answer to that question is simple when we look at Jesus' life. Jesus loved us when we didn't deserve His love, when we weren't very lovable, because we needed His love. He loved us sacrificially. Listen to John 15:13, *"Greater love has no one that this, that he lay down his life for his friends."* Jesus loved us enough to lay down His life for us. What makes this love even more incredible, is that He did it when we were still dead in our sin.

Listen to Romans 5:8, *"But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."* So we see that the old command to love is now redefined into a new application of love. It is new in scope, new in degree, and new in extent. So again we ask the question, *How's your love life?* The next section of our text will help us answer that question. It will drive home the truth that love is Christianity in action.

"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."
(1 John 2:9-11)

The apostle John, in this text, refers to love and hate. It seems as if there is no middle ground for him. The point he is making is that visible Christianity is characterized by love. If you claim to be a Christian, that is, to be in the light, and you hate your brother, you reveal that you are not a Christian at all. This is the essence of the message of verses 9 and 11. John says that if you hate your brother you are still in the darkness. Now, there is a difference in *walking* in the darkness and *being* in the darkness. A Christian may sometimes *walk* in the darkness but he or she is not a *part* of the darkness. But John is saying that this person not only walks around in the darkness but he himself is in the darkness.

Now what does John mean by hate? A simple definition of *hate* is a feeling of extreme hostility or dislike for someone else. But it has been pointed out that this hatred can be expressed in two different ways. It can be an active hatred where we do or say things in order to hurt other people or it can be a passive hatred where we express ourselves by being indifferent, cold, and uncaring. So whether it is an attitude of active hostility or cold indifference, it is the hatred in our heart that's the problem. And John says that this kind of person is not a Christian, because a Christian has Christ within them and the life of Christ is incompatible with a heart gripped with hatred.

I remember counselling a woman many years ago about a physical problem which I discerned had a spiritual basis in her experience. I discovered that she hated another person and had hated her for many years. She told me the circumstances and she had without doubt been treated unjustly by this person. However, her hatred had been destroying her like a cancer for years and years. Hate had turned her bitter and rancid and it had poisoned all her thoughts.

I said to her, *"You must find it in your heart to forgive this person, as God has forgiven you."*

She looked at me and said, *"I can't forgive her, I'll never forgive her!"*

I said, *"But Jesus would say the same thing to you if He was sitting her."*

She said, *"But I can't."*

I said, *"If you can't, then you need to face the fact that you are not a Christian. Because if you can't forgive, then you've never been born again. But if you are a Christian, then I believe what you are really saying is you won't forgive. You must choose to forgive."*

She looked at me and her eyes flashed like she had just woken up deep inside. She said, *"I think you're right. I know I am a Christian, and I see that I have just been deceiving myself. I need to forgive. Will you pray for me please because I can't do this without a lot of help from God."*

So I prayed with her and God empowered her to forgive and that woman's life changed so radically she later said it was like the difference between night and day.

A true Christian can forgive because they are filled with the forgiving presence of Christ and the power of the Spirit of God. A true Christian is not only commanded to love but also given the power to love. Love is one of the marks of true Christianity. Love is Christianity in action. Love is Christianity made visible.

How do we show this kind of love? Well, if you are a true Christian, you *want* to love. But sometimes we just don't know how. There are, however, some practical ways we can demonstrate our love for one another. We can show our love for one another first and foremost by how we think about one another. The thought is the father of the deed. It says in Proverbs 23:7 that "*What a man thinks in his heart, so shall he be.*" Our thoughts run our lives. If we have critical and judgmental thoughts concerning one another we can be sure that the love of God will not be manifesting in our lives.

Loving actions must first begin in loving attitudes. We must give one another the benefit of the doubt. We must see one another through eyes of faith and hope. In Romans 15:7, we read, "*Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.*" We are to receive one another as Jesus received us. When we came to Jesus we were freely accepted as we were. We didn't have to change before Jesus accepted us. His loving acceptance of us is what changed us! We must cultivate that attitude of acceptance toward one another. This is one way we can show our love.

Another way in which we can demonstrate our love is by how we speak about and to one another. The Scriptures exhort us to speak words seasoned with grace. Words are powerful things. They can either encourage or discourage. The words we speak ought to be words of encouragement. If you become someone who always has an encouraging word people will beat a path to your door. Everyone likes an encourager. No one likes a cynical, sharp-tongued back biter. Speak words of encouragement. This is another clear way you can demonstrate your love.

We can also show our love by how we act toward one another. We must not love in word only, but also in deed. We need to think right thoughts about one another, speak right words about one another, and do right deeds for one another. Love, you see, is not only a feeling - it is also an action of the will. To give your enemy a cup of cold water is to show love. Sometimes the smallest things are enough.

But whether great or small, we cannot show love in a passive way. We must be proactive in our love. Love is something we do. Love is how we live. An act of kindness here, a good deed there - love in action. That is how Jesus lived when He was walking among us and that is the life He calls us to live when He says, "*Follow me.*"

One important action in love (and perhaps the hardest of all) is forgiveness. Forgiveness speaks volumes about our Christian walk. In the days of the American Revolutionary War there lived at Ephrata, Pennsylvania, a Baptist pastor by the name of Peter Miller who enjoyed the friendship of General Washington. There also dwelt in that town a man named Michael Wittman, an evil-minded man who did all in his power to abuse and oppose this pastor. One day Michael Wittman was involved in treason and was arrested and sentenced to death. The old preacher started out on foot and walked the whole seventy miles to Philadelphia to plead for this man's life. He was admitted into Washington's presence and at once begged for the life of the traitor. Washington said, "*No, Peter, I cannot grant you the life of your friend.*" The preacher exclaimed, "*He is not my friend, he is my most bitter enemy.*" Washington cried out, "*What? You've walked seventy miles to save the life of an enemy? That puts the matter in a different light. I will grant the pardon.*" That pastor took Michael Wittman from the very shadow of death back to his own home in Ephrata - no longer as an enemy, but as a friend. There is amazing power in forgiveness.

Finally, the promise we have, if we love one another, is that there will be nothing that causes us or anyone else to stumble within our lives. In other words, if we love, we will see clearly how to walk with Christ. It's the evidence that we are His disciples and it's the most powerful testimony of the reality of the grace of God that our world can see.

So let the power of His love liberate you today. Reject any feelings which keep you from loving. In the place of bitterness and resentment put forgiveness. Release people to be who they are. Give them hope to become who they can be.

Ask God to liberate you by placing His love in the centre of your heart. As you are liberated by His love, you will find that His love liberates those around you. Commit yourself to love in thought, in word, and in deed. You will become a powerful witness to the grace of God. You will become a new person yourself.

God is always ready to empower your choice to love as He loves. All He needs is a willing, humble heart through which He can release the power of His love.