



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of Dan Duncan

1 John 2:3-11

1 John 2

"The Mark of the Christian"

TRANSCRIPT

[Message] Thank you, Mark, and good morning. We are continuing your studies in John's first epistle and we're in chapter 2. We began it last week of that very interesting, profound, significant passage, verses 1 and 2, where John informs us that we have a propitiation in Christ and we have an advocate in Christ. We have one who has paid for our sins and one who is praying for us. And here's how we can know He's ours.

He says in verses 3-11, "By this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments. The one who says, 'I have come to know Him,' and he does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him; but whoever keeps His word, in him the love of God has truly been perfected. By this we know that we are in Him: the one who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked.

"Beloved, I am not writing a new commandment to you, but an old commandment which you have had from the beginning; the old commandment is the word which you have heard. On the other hand, I am writing a new commandment to you, which is true in Him and in you, because the darkness is passing away and the true Light is already shining. The one who says he is in the Light and yet hates his brother is in the darkness until now. The one who loves his brother abides in the Light and there is no cause for stumbling in him. But the one who hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness,

and does not know where he is going because the darkness has blinded his eyes."

May the Lord bless this reading of His word and bless our time of study in it together. Let's bow together in prayer.

[Prayer] Father, we do give You thanks for this time together. What a great privilege it is to be with the saints, be with Your people, be with believers in Jesus Christ on a Sunday morning. It's a great privilege to open Your word and study it and feed ourselves on this. This is how we're nourished in the faith. This is how we grow. This is what we need desperately. We need it on a Sunday morning. We need it every morning of the week, every day. We need to be studying Your word, feeding on it, teaching ourselves what God's inherent word has to say to us. Sixty-six books of revelation and all of it feeds our souls.

And yet we're not alone in that effort. The Spirit of God is within us. Every believer in Jesus Christ has been sealed with the Spirit. We have the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, who protects and guides us, teaches us, and instructs us in His word. And I pray that He'll do that this morning to each one of us, that He will illuminate our minds and give us a clear sense of what the text is about.

But not only that, that He would apply it to each one of us. It's easy to read things, and if we ponder it well, we'll understand it. But then we must live it and that's a major point that the author makes in the passage that we look at this morning. And it speaks to each one of us individually. Lord, may we be doers of Your word. Help us to be that. So we look to You to bless, Lord. We pray for Your blessing and we pray that You would instill within us a desire to be obedient men and women and in that obedience love one another.

What a challenge that is, but that's what we need, Father. And we look to You to bless it, because ultimately, Lord, we are recognizing just in the fact that we are in this moment in prayer, looking to You. We recognize that the life that You have commanded us to live and directed us so clearly to live is a supernatural life. It

comes from You ultimately. We're not left to our strength and our own devices. You've given us the Spirit of God and You put the Spirit of God in hearts that have been regenerated, renewed, made new altogether. So You've equipped us. Father, bless us; enable us. And so we pray for Your blessing as we look at this great text of scripture this morning, that You teach us it and build us up in the faith.

But Lord, we pray also for the material needs we have. We pray for those who are sick, those who are recovering from surgery. We pray for those that are discouraged. Life can get very discouraging. It was discouraging for those people to whom John wrote this letter. It's discouraging in lots of ways. We're faced with challenges in life and I pray for those who are dealing with all of that, that You'd encourage them and build them up in the faith and strengthen them. Help them to remember the great promises that we have.

Bless those who are without work. Open doors of opportunity for them. Provide and bless. We remember particularly the young people this week as they're in South Texas ministering. May they be genuine ambassadors of Christ. May they work hard at what they do and may they present a faithful witness of our Savior to those around them. And may it be an enjoyable and spiritually fortifying time for them.

Bless our nation. Bless our government. Bless all of those that You've placed in authority over us. Give them wisdom, skill at the national level, the state level. Father, You blessed this land greatly. We pray that You continue to bless it. Now bless our time together as we continue to worship in song and then worship in study as well. Bless us. We pray in Christ name. Amen.

[Message] On the last night of Jesus's life, at the last supper, while He was celebrating the Passover with His disciples, He did something shocking, something that caused Peter to object. He got up from the table, stripped down to His waist, knelt down with a bowl of water, and washed the disciples' dusty feet. When He finished He

robed Himself, returned to the table, and explained to an amazed group of men what He had just done.

He said as their teacher and Lord, He had set an example for them. A few moments later He said, "A new commandment I give you: Love one another." Love's a wonderful word, wonderful subject. We love books and poems about love. We love songs and shows about falling in love, unrequited love. People are in love with love. But what is love? Jesus said love is washing each other's feet. Maybe literally, but certainly figuratively. Love is more than feelings. It is service - humbly helping one another.

Now as far as I can tell from reading John 13, when the Lord finished His sanitizing service, there were 24 clean feet around the table and two feet were still dusty. Not one of the 12 got up, took the bowl, and washed His feet. But one got up, left the table, left the room: Judas. He wanted to do with what Jesus was saying. He went out into the darkness.

Some 60 years later when John was an old man, the events of that evening were still on his mind. As he wrote to encourage the fellow Christians who he affectionately calls "my children," he tells them "the one who loves his brother abides in the Light; the one who hates his brother is in the darkness."

That new commandment to love one another is the mark of the Christian. It is the characteristic commandment of the church in the age of grace. It distinguishes between those who are genuinely God's people and those who are false. And John was contending with false brethren. He was contending with men like Judas. He later calls them antichrists.

They were a **sizematic** group that had left the church to follow a teacher and his new gospel - a bloodless and loveless gospel that denied the work of Christ for a kind of cold intellectualism. But it promised a lot. It promised a perfect, sinless life through secret knowledge that made its possessors masters of the universe and gave them fellowship with God.

There's evidently a lot about this that was both intriguing and intimidating. They were confident in their claims to be an elite class of spiritual people who knew God and they promised enlightenment. Now I suppose false teachers have done that always. *The Christian Century* is a magazine that for most of the 20th century was the voice of liberal mainline Protestant denominations. Its editor for 39 years was Charles Clayton Morrison, who stated the magazine represents the Christian intelligentsia of all churches.

Well, that's both pompous and intimidating. We're the smart ones; you're not. We're sophisticated; you Bible-believing evangelicals are naïve. It's a kind of Gnosticism. It's what these ancient heretics did, and there's evidently a lot about them that intrigued these Christians to whom John was writing, and in fact made such an impression upon them that they were doubting that they were genuine Christians, that they doubted their own salvation.

That's what John answers in his letter, by explaining that those who know God and have fellowship with Him walk in the light. God is Light and those who walk with Him reflect that light. They exhibit the character. They exhibit the attitude and the truth of God. Those are what have been called the tests of life. There are three tests of life that John applies in this letter. There is the test of orthodoxy, the test of obedience, the test of affection - or we could put it the doctrinal test, the moral test, and the test of love.

And here in 2:3-11, John stresses the last two of those tests - obedience to God and love of the brethren. Both are inseparable and both are proof of life, proof of genuine life, of eternal life. He begins in verse 3, "By this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments." Now it's important to notice what John does not say. He did not say, "By this we have come to know Him, we keep His commandments." We come to know the Lord, whom to know is life eternal, through faith alone, in the gospel of Christ alone.

It's all by grace. It's by believing in the person and work of the Son of God. What John is saying is this is how we know that we know.

This is how we know that we know God. This is one of the proofs we have for establishing that we really God and have a personal relationship with Him - obedience. Make no mistake, the gospel is clear. It is a gift.

We don't earn it by our works. We don't earn it by our deeds or our sacrifices. It is only by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ that we are saved. He and He alone is our propitiation, as John has just said. But those who are saved are different from the people they once were. They are a new creation. That's what Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 5:17. All things are new.

And that is reflected in our character. It's reflected in our behavior. We keep His commandments - not perfectly, of course. John's already said that we sin and we sin daily. We're to confess our sins. But we also have an advocate, Christ. He's praying for us. He's praying for us constantly. He's praying for us in our weakness. He's praying for us in our failure. He never stops praying for us. He's praying for us right now. But we pursue obedience. Obedience is what we want. Or as one of a write puts it, we are in active sympathy with God and with His will.

Now go back to the upper room where Jesus washed the feet of the disciples. Not one of them got up to wash His feet. Still, 11 of the 12 stayed with Him that night and were in genuine sympathy with Him, in genuine sympathy with what He taught them, in genuine sympathy with His will. And as the believer considers his life, he or she knows that there is real sympathy for the Lord God and His will. We know it is right and we seek to obey it. We're sympathetic with it. We are in harmony with it. We want that and so we seek to obey it - though again, never perfectly.

Even when we don't though, even when we fall into sin, as we all do, daily, we're not in sympathy with sin. We may fall into it and fall, but we're not essential in sympathy with it. We know it's wrong and we long to do God's word and we're grieved when we don't. Well, wasn't that Paul's moral conundrum in Romans 7? "The willing is

present in me, but the doing of the good is not. I practice the very evil that I don't want, wretched man that I am." Feel the same way, don't you? I feel the same way daily, I think.

When am I going to learn? When am I going to stop falling into that trap? When am I going to keep from falling on my face continually? That's the Christian life and yet I think that too in part is what John is saying here about keeping the Lord's commandments. The willing is present in me, as Paul said. The sympathy is there. I want this. I want obedience, and the pursuit of it is there in the child of God. It's not there in these others who claimed perfection, these men against whom John is writing, the ones whose doctrines and ideas he's correcting. They were not sympathetic to God's will - just the opposite. Their practice didn't match their profession. John says in verse 4, "The one who says, 'I have come to know Him,' and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him." In other words, they're hypocrites. Their behavior betrays them.

They boasted of having knowledge, but the knowledge John speaks of here is a knowledge of a different kind from what they spoke of. It's not some arcane, mystical knowledge. What John speaks of here when he speaks of knowledge is personal knowledge. It's knowing God. It involves doctrine, but it's more than doctrine. It is personal and practical. Those who know God, those who have a relationship with Him, are affected by Him. They are changed in their character and conduct, by their contact with Him. God is Light. He is holy. And those who walk with Him reflect that light. They reflect that holiness. If we are connected with Him, we're going to be changed by Him.

So that's what they want. That's what God's people want. They love God and the proof of their love is holiness, righteousness, it's obedience. That's what John says next in verse 5, "The love of God," meaning love for God, "has truly been perfected in whoever keeps God's word." Perfected here doesn't mean made faultless or flawless, but has the idea of being complete. Love is not complete if it's not

obedient. That attitude or disposition of love bears fruit in right conduct, doesn't just have an attitude of "I wish this or that would be well for that person. These fellows over here have dirty feet; I wish they were clean." No, it doesn't just wish that for someone. It gets down and washes the dust off their feet. It's that kind of love. Love is responsive. Love acts. It bears fruit in right conduct. Love and obedience are interwoven. They can't be separated from each other, though people do try to do that.

Back in the 1960s, theologians were teaching what was called the New Morality. Some of you will remember that. One of them was an Episcopal priest named Joseph Fletcher, who wrote a bestselling book titled *Situation Ethics*, and it stated that love is the guiding principle of behavior, which on the face of it, that certainly sounds good and we would agree with it as far as that goes. But as far as it went with him, it's different.

Moral codes could be set aside in the interest of love. In extreme cases, immorality and mercy killing were permitted in the name of love. That's a very attractive rationale for sin: love. But the whole argument begs the question "What is love?" According to the Scriptures, it can't be separated from morality. It can't violate morality. It's not love if it does. It can't be separated from obeying God's law. The Lord Jesus made that very clear when He told His disciples in John 14:15, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." Obedience, morality, integrity is the expression of love, the fruit of love. It's the proof that we belong to Christ or that we are in Him, as John says. And to emphasize that, he adds that those who are in Him, those who are joined to Him, walk like Him. By this we know that we are in Him. The one who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked.

How did Christ walk? How did He behave? He walked or lived with integrity. He walked in complete obedience to the commandments. So He could say to His enemies, as He did in John 8, "Which one of you convicts me of sin?" Of course, not one of them

could convict Him of any sin. And John is instructing us to pursue that model, to imitate Christ. He is our law. He gives the pattern of life for us to follow, which means that we are to be faithful to His teaching and His example. Now that's a high standard. "Which one of you convicts Me of sin?" Well, none of that could convict Him of sin, because He had no sin. He was perfect, and that's our standard.

And while we can never reach that standard, we can never reach perfection this side of heaven - and again John is not suggesting that we can. He has repudiated any notion of sinlessness. Nevertheless, John is instructing us to pursue perfection through the imitation of Christ, which the Christian will do. It is in us to do that. It's in our nature to do that as a new creation. Our walk, in fact, is the proof that we are a new creation, that we are joined to Christ in a permanent, vital relationship, like branches in a vine that bear fruit.

Now, what was it that was characteristic of the Lord's walk, or life? What characterized it? Well, it was love - love for the Father and love for His people. He once explained to a scribe that the Law of Moses is summed up in two commands: To love the Lord our God with all our heart and soul, and to love our neighbor as ourself.

And that leads naturally to the second part of our passage, where John commands love, love for the brethren. If we are in Him, if we are in Christ, if we're united to Him through faith, in a living relationship with Him, we will love one another. This is the second of the two tests of life that John gives in our passage.

The third is given later in the chapter, in verses 18-27, the test of belief, or the test of right doctrine. But here the issue is love and it's sometimes called the social test, caring for others. Someone might say that he loves God, which is an easy thing to say. We don't see God, we don't touch God. We can say we love God. How do we disprove that? Well, the evidence though, the proof of it, is that we love His people, specifically His brethren.

So the progress of the passage is a person can know that he or she knows God has a relationship with Christ because he or she keeps

the commandments, but if he does that, he will love others. Love isn't - he mentioned till verse 10, but that's clearly the subject here. And it's a reference to the new commandment the Lord gave in John 13. And yet John introduces this in verse 7 by stating that he was not writing a new commandment, but an old one. So what does John means when he says that he was not writing a new commandment, especially since in verse 8 he says that he is writing a new commandment? It sounds a little confusing.

But what he means is he's not teaching anything that these readers didn't already know. He wasn't introducing anything novel or strange. The commandment to love is as old as the Law. It's older than the Law, actually, but we certainly see it codified in the Mosaic Law, in Leviticus 19:18. Moses wrote, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." That's the second summary of the Law that Jesus gave.

But then John writes in verse 8, "On the other hand, I am writing a new commandment to you." Just what Jesus said, that it was a new commandment. And what makes it new is Jesus Himself. The old commandment under the Law was love your neighbor as yourself. The new commandment is love one another even as I loved you." Christ is the new example and the new measure of love. And that raises the standards significantly. The standard of self is a good one. It's a high standard. I don't want anyone to offend or injure me or my family, so I should not offend or injure anyone else.

But the Lord's example is even higher, and really, it's far more demanding. It not only is protective, but aggressive. It actually helps others. Just consider the Lord's life, how He gave so freely of Himself to those around Him. He reached out to everyone. He listened to them. He talked to them. He sat down with them. He dined with them - everyone - men and women, young and old, from little children to the Pharisees, to the prostitute. In fact, He became known as a friend of sinners.

The old Law could be comfortably confined. It could be restricted. An orthodox Jew who knew that he was to love his

neighbor and was very scrupulous about keeping the Law could do that, because he could see his neighbor as his fellow Jew, a fellow Hebrew, while Gentiles and sinners were dogs and they were outside the pail. They didn't figure into that. He could restrict it very easily to people like him.

The Lord did not limit love in that way. He was for all kinds of people, every kind of person - male, female, Jew, Gentile, slave, free, regardless of race and social standing - the world. In Ephesians 3, Paul writes of the love of Christ in terms of its breadth and length and height and depth, and of comprehending it, that love which surpasses all knowledge. It's infinite. In fact, it's beyond our ability to comprehend. We can't fathom that kind of love, but we can know something of it and understand it most fully as we see it in the Lord Himself - in His incarnation, in His life, in His sacrifice. He came from the heights down to the depths. He left heaven, where He dwelt for eternity in unapproachable light, to enter this fallen world of darkness and filth and sin to be one of us, and die. And die not a comfortable death, not after a life that's full of many years, but a painful and shameful death, as the old catechism says. Die as an offering on the cross.

Now that's really the depths, the humiliation of our Lord. He suffered a painful, shameful death in our place. And that's the height and the depth of love. Its length and its width are witnessed in its object, the sinner, and every kind of sinner over the whole face of the earth and in evening generation. The Lord's love is deep and wide. Really, it is ultimately and impenetrable mystery. That's our standard, which means we are to be forgiving and giving, as Christ was. We're to be living out His life before the world. That's what the church is to do.

John says that is what the church is doing. John goes on to say that this is presently happening. The darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining. But where is it shining? How is the true light shining in the world today? Well, it's shining from the Lord's

people. It's shining from you. It's shining from believers in Him who are living in obedience and following His example.

Paul spoke of this in Ephesians 5:8, where he sounds very much like John. He calls us children of light. He wrote, "We were formerly darkness, but now are light. So," he says, "walk as children of light." And the more we do that, the more we walk, we live, as Christ walked, as He lived, the more the believer does that, the more he or she grows in love and the more that love penetrates into his or her heart and transforms us. The more we practice this, the more we're transformed by it, the more we become like Christ and the more the light shines in us and out from us.

Now that is a work of grace. It's a work of God's sovereign grace. In fact, walking as a child of Light, walking like Christ, is completely unnatural in terms of the world around us. And that in part is John's point. This is not what the natural unregenerate, unbelieving man or woman does. He or she doesn't forgive those who offend Him or humble himself, or help those around him, not typically. You can find examples where that happens, but that's not typical. Characteristically, it's every man for himself. That's the rule by which the world lives.

And that is especially true of the natural man's relationship with God's people. He doesn't love them. He's fundamentally different from them, and so fundamentally opposed to what God's people are and what they represent. What they represent is the cross and the grace of God, which is an offense to the natural man. And John says in verse 9 that is very revealing about him. He may say he walks in the Light, as these false teachers did, but if he hates his brother, John says, he's in the darkness until now.

John makes the same case back in verse 4. A man may boast that he know God, but if he doesn't do what God commands, he's a liar and the truth is not in him. Likewise, a man who hates his brother demonstrates that he is not a real brother. He's fundamentally different. The one who hates is not of the Light. He is in the darkness,

John says. Now, what does John mean by this? What does he mean by this word "hate"? Because that's a hard word. That's a harsh word. And when we think of it we think of aggressive hatred. We think of murderous hatred. Is that what John's speaking of? Well, it would certainly include that. In fact, later in 3:15, John refers to murdering a brother.

But hatred in Scripture is not always violent. It can be the absence of love, and here it's that. It's simply the absence of interest in or concern for another. It's an indifference and a rejection of a person. But again, what John shows is words are not enough. Profession without practice is empty. Love is the mark of the Christian. When it is absent there's no evidence of spiritual life. When there's indifference toward the people of God, that's not an evidence of spiritual life.

But when a person loves his brother, takes an interest in his brother or sister, he's a real brother. He's the one who is in the Light, John says in verse 10. And he adds, "There is no cause of stumbling in him." He won't stumble, because he's in the Light. He sees. His path is lit by the word of God. And specifically, by God's word as it cultivates in his heart the love of the brethren, and that's what the word of God will do for us as we read it, as we study it, as we reflect upon it, as we feed spiritually upon it. It transforms us. It changes us and it gives us that love that John speaks of here. And that love, he says, keeps him from stumbling along the way so that he or she helps others, isn't indifferent toward them, doesn't ignore their need, but he helps, he has a concern, and doesn't hinder them in any way. Love keeps people from wandering off into darkness.

But where there is no love for God's people, when a person hates his brother, according to verse 11, that man is in the darkness. He doesn't know where he's going, John says. He's blinded. Lack of love blinds a person's spiritual vision. Hatred destroys a person's perception of things. And when there's no love people do harm to others. It's when self rules the heart, when the ego rules that heart,

that people act selfishly, indifferently, carelessly and callously, cruelly.

There's infidelity. In the name of love, which is the opposite of love and results in terrible things. It results in divorce, it results in a broken home, a devastated wife or a devastated husband, and children who are scarred by that. The list goes on of the woes that can be catalogued from the darkness that blinds the minds of the unbeliever. Since Adam sinned, darkness descended and man lives blindly, lives selfishly, ruled by self with the catastrophic results that come from that, results that are catastrophic for others, for those around us. That's not characteristic of a child of God. We walk in the Light. We're guided by love, as the Bible defines love as the model of our Lord defines love, which is selfless and sacrificial.

I wonder if later in life any of those 11 disciples who stayed in the upper room with our Lord ever thought back on that evening and realized, "We never did wash Jesus' feet," and maybe felt a bit of regret over that. It's understandable that they didn't wash His feet. They were shocked by what the Lord had done, by this action of Him. They took a while to comprehend what He was doing and that whole night they were learning and He was instructing them. They were having their whole vision of things rearranged, really. So it's understandable in some sense.

And then when we look at our own lives and we know that's our own experience as well, we look back on experiences and incidents that happen and we regret what we failed to do, that we failed to do the right thing at the right time. But if they did have regrets about that, they could have always fixed that failure by washing each other's feet, by serving one another. That was the point that Jesus was making. That was the lesson that He was giving. Be selfless. Humbly help others. Help your people. Help your brothers and sisters in Christ. That is love. It's the highest virtue. It fulfills the whole Law - loving God and loving one another. That's the mark of the Christian.

The end of John's gospel, Jesus asked Peter, "Do you love me more than these?" And there's great difference of opinion, as you read the commentaries, over what the "these" are that Jesus is referring to. I think He's probably - at least this satisfies my understanding of the passage - referring to the great catch of fish that the disciples had just make. There's quite a bit made of that in the text and the number's given and there they are on the shore, and I think Jesus may well likely have been pointing to those fish and saying, "Do you love me more than these fish, more than food? Do you love me more than your job as a fisherman?" It may have been that He was pointing to the disciples though, because they were there and that too is a suggestion.

But really, whatever the "these" are, and I think it may be that John was being deliberately vague in that so that we apply it widely. "Do you love me more than these disciples, more than your friends? Do you love me more than the things of the world?" And Peter said, "Yes, Lord." And Jesus said, "Tend my lambs." Three times He asked Peter if he loved Him. Three times He told Peter to care for His sheep. That's how we love the Lord. We take care of His lambs. We take care of His people.

The social test, the test of love, is really the greatest of all the tests. It gets to the real soul of a person. Sadly, even those who are born again fail that test. We all do - not completely, but we fall short of Christ. We certainly fall short of loving each other. We show indifference. All of that's true of all of us.

But listen, if the Son of God would leave paradise to pour our His blood for us, should you and I not be willing to pour out some water for a brother and wash his or her feet, to serve him or her? Of course we should. That's the mark of a Christian. That's the proof that we are Christ's disciples. We don't become disciples by washing feet or serving others. We become a child of God by the grace of God, through faith alone, in Christ alone. It is God's work that we simply receive by faith alone, by believing in Christ.

So if you've not done that, if you've not believed in Him, who is the Son of God, who died for sinners, we invite you to come to Him. Trust in Him. He receives all who do and He makes them a new creation, gives them a new life, a new ability. May God help you to do that. We trust in Him and rest in Him and rejoice in the love that He has for us and that we should have for others. Let's pray.

[Prayer] Father, we thank You for the gift of Your Son, for sending Him into the world. We thank You for the great love He showed us in going to the cross and paying our ransom. Lord, fill us with gratitude and may that gratitude reflect itself in our love for one another. We pray in Christ name. Amen.