

# 1 John 2:7-29: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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In John chapter 13 verse 34, a new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. In John chapter 15 verse 12, this is my commandment, that you love one another, as I have loved you.

This is both an old and a new commandment. It is the same commandment that was given to Israel at Sinai. The law was always summed up in the commandment to love God and one's neighbor as oneself.

Jesus teaches this in places such as Matthew chapter 22 verses 35 to 40. And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?

And he said to him, You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment, and a second is like it. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets.

[ 4 : 2 1 ] The multitude of the commandments were always refractions of this single great principle of love for God and neighbor. However, something changes with the coming of Christ. In Christ, the fulfillment of the law in love is made manifest.

In Christ, we discover what love really means. God's love is seen, heard, touched, and people bear witness to it. And what is more, the Christ-shaped reality of love is worked out in our lives by the Spirit of Christ that he has given to us.

This new commandment is the fulfillment of the law. It is also the writing of the law upon the heart that was promised long ago as the fulfillment of the new covenant. This new covenant is not merely an external commandment.

It is something that is true in Christ and true in us. It is a commandment that is being fulfilled in the love of Christ that is at work in our lives by his Spirit. All of this is a manifestation of the passing away of the darkness of the old age and the rising of the true light of Christ in the world.

Where do we stand relative to this rising light? The test, once again, is that of love. Do we love our brothers? Hatred and hostility are the way of darkness. The darkness is a realm of blindness where people constantly bite and devour each other.

[ 5 : 3 5 ] However, the light is a realm of illumination and love. Those who dwell in it will be marked out by their love. As Jesus says in John chapter 13 verse 35, By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.

In verses 12 to 14 of this chapter, John addresses three different groups within the church in succession, twice in a row in the same order. Little children the first time, next time it's children.

Fathers and young men. This is a perplexing passage in many ways. Why does John interrupt the flow to address these groups and to explain his reasons for writing? Why these groups in particular?

Who are the groups in question? Are these different ways of speaking about the same people or distinct categories of persons? Why does he repeat himself within it? How do we account for the structure and the order?

Why, for instance, is there a threefold reason for writing to the young men at the conclusion of the second cycle? The children, the word used of them changes in the second cycle, are associated with forgiveness and knowledge of the father.

[ 6 : 42 ] The father's with knowledge of the one who is from the beginning. And the young men with strength and overcoming. As those begotten by God, the children have had their sins forgiven. And as those in the family of God, they enjoy access to the father through Jesus.

By speaking of children, John is probably speaking of all Christians, but especially of young converts. The fathers are likely the more mature believers, and the elders and overseers of the congregation.

He writes to them on account of their knowledge of him who is from the beginning, presumably a reference to Christ, perhaps looking back to chapter 1 verse 1. He may be suggesting that they enjoy a deeper and longer standing knowledge and experience, but the expression itself doesn't seem to make this clear.

By repeating it in both cycles, he underlines it, tightens the connection between the two cycles more generally, and invites us to reflect upon the difference between it and the other two categories.

The young men are likely the younger, but not the new believers. The church is a family with different levels of maturity and experience. A rounded church needs the sense of dependence and free welcome enjoyed by children in the faith, the vigour and the fervour of the young men, and the maturity and the wisdom of the fathers.

[ 7 : 54 ] Where one or two of these are lacking, churches will tend to be stunted in various ways. Churches ought to be intergenerational bodies, informed by each of these generational constituencies in the faith.

Opposed to the love that characterises those dwelling in the light is the love of the world and the things in the world. There is an antithesis between the people of God and the world, which is discussed at various points in John's Gospel.

In John chapter 15 verses 18 to 19, for instance, If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you are of the world, the world will love you as its own.

But because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. John chapter 17 verses 14 to 16, By the term world here, John is referring not so much to material objects, but to a system of life in all of its constitutive aspects.

Peter Lighthouse expresses this very well in the following passage. Probably drawing on the temptation of Eve in Genesis chapter 3, John details the law of the world under three headings.

[ 9 : 13 ] First, the world revolves around the desire of the flesh, which might include sexual and sensual desire, but also might include the desires that lead to the works of the flesh. Second, the world operates by spectacle and show, arousing the desire of the eyes.

Finally, the world operates according to the pride of life. Life here, as in chapter 3 verse 17, probably refers to wealth, and includes the status that often accompanies wealth.

Loving the world means idolising mammon, and striving for celebrity and fame. The relationship between the world and desire is complex. Verse 16 indicates that desires and boastfulness make up the contents of the world.

The desire of flesh, eyes, and boastfulness of life constitute the all that is in the world. The end of verse 16, however, suggests that the world is the source of desires and boasts.

The desire of flesh, desire of eyes, and boastfulness of life are from the world. Desires thus make up the world. Yet the world is also distinguished from the desires, such that the world produces, evokes, and provokes desires and boastfulness.

[ 10 : 19 ] Verse 17 distinguishes the world from its desires, as if the desires are accompaniments of the world. To put it more sociologically, sinful human culture, its institutions, practices, products, are all embodiments of evil desire or boastfulness.

John hints that we should evaluate the world, not only on the basis of what's done, or what things it contains, but on the basis of desire. And desire has a multiple relationship with culture.

Desires are the contents of culture. Culture is made up of embodied dreams, aspirations, lusts. On the other hand, the world is the source of desire, evoking certain kinds of desire.

As Lighheart recognizes then, for John, the world is a vainglorious complex of unruly desires and drives. It's a realm that provokes us to think, and to act, and to love, and to desire, and to imagine, in particular ways rather than others.

It excites our appetites. It calls us to consume. It tells us what we should want, and how we should want it. And it is very hard not to become deeply entangled and enmeshed within such a realm.

[ 11 : 26 ] However, this world is transitory, it's passing away, whereas those who do the will of God will endure. The Apostle Paul makes similar points about how we have to loosen our grip upon the world, upon its desires, its treasures, and its relationships, as those looking for the reign of Christ, in 1 Corinthians 7, verses 29-31.

This is what I mean, brothers. The appointed time has grown very short. From now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no goods, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it.

For the present form of this world is passing away, In the Olivet Discourse, Jesus had warned his disciples of false teachers and messiahs arising at the end of the age. The fact that many such persons had already arisen was proof that it was the last hour, and that the coming of Christ was imminent.

Within a few years, Christ would come in judgment on Jerusalem, and the whole old covenant order would collapse with its temple. The Antichrist, as he goes on to explain, is the one who denies that Jesus is the Messiah, the person who denies both father and son.

The false teachers with whom he is dealing seemingly went out from the apostolic group on teaching missions. However, they were not truly of the apostolic group, which was demonstrated by the fact that they all went in their own ways, departing from the apostolic teaching.

[ 12 : 53 ] This made their true character plain. People will generally reveal their character if you give them time and watch them closely, and these false teachers were no exception to that rule. Christians have been anointed by Christ, who is the anointed one.

John might allude here, perhaps, to the promise of the new covenant in places such as Jeremiah chapter 31 verse 34, and no longer shall each one teach his neighbour and each his brother, saying, Know the Lord, for they shall all know me from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord, for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.

In declaring that they have all knowledge, and later on that they have no need that anyone should teach them, we should see some reference to the work of the Spirit in the congregation. In John chapter 16 verses 13 to 15, When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come.

He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. Therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

The anointing that has been received is the gift of the Spirit then. In the Spirit the Church has been given all knowledge. It has been given the fullness of this knowledge in principle in the once for all gift of the Spirit at Pentecost.

[ 14 : 14 ] It is given this knowledge in the opening of our spiritual perception to recognise God's truth. By his Spirit within them, the sheep of Christ hear their Master's voice. They answer to his voice, but they do not answer to the voice of a stranger.

This knowledge is also given in the ministries of teaching within the body. The people of God have all that they need to recognise and grow in the truth of God, in what they have been given in the Spirit.

And they must abide and grow in the truth that they have been given. They must do this, so that when Christ comes, they can stand before him without any shame. We prepare for the full advent of the light by walking in the light at the moment, by living as people of the day, by being people that do not shrink back from the exposure and the judgement that comes in the light, but rather receiving the forgiveness of Christ, walking in the light, so that when he comes, we will rejoice at his advent.

Once again, people are known by their fruits. If God is righteous, and he is righteous, then we can be sure that everyone who practices righteousness has been born of God. The sons and the daughters of God will share the character of their father.

A question to consider, how might John's analysis of the world, his understanding of the world in terms of pride, lust and desire and other such things, help us to understand our own societies and their systems better?