

January 15, 2006

Just Who Do You Think You're Fooling?

1 John 2:3-17

Second Message in the Series "Get Real"

Based on 1 John

According to an exhaustive study by Christian pollster George Barna, we Christians are not the least bit different from non-Christians.

Barna used 131 different measures of attitudes, behaviors, values and beliefs. His sober conclusion: "In the aspects of lifestyle where Christians can have the greatest impact on the lives of non-Christians, **there are no visible differences between the two segments.**"

A few months ago, I was talking with Pastor Laura about this and she recalled seeing a play where two friends, a believer and a non-believer, were talking about their lives. They did everything together except one thing: one of them went to church. The believer asked the non-believer to go to church with him. But his friend declined, saying, "Why would I want to do that? We do all the same things—it's just that you have to feel guilty about them and I don't!"

It wasn't always so. There was a time when that there was a real difference in lifestyle between those who are believers and those who aren't. And it's not because the world has gotten more Christ-like. It's because the church has gotten much more world-like. It's like what Charles Colson said: **Christianity in America may be 3000 miles wide, but it's only about an inch deep.**

What is needed is a revolution among the real followers of Jesus, so that we are again

different. Not different because we don't smoke or dance or drink, but because we lay down our lives in sacrificial love for the needs of the lost, the poor, the immigrant, and the outcast. Where we return to a simplicity of heart that runs after God and serves one another. And where we no longer are seduced by the flashing lights of a fleeting world.

My wife likes Diet Caffeine-Free Coke. Personally, I like to think of caffeine as my friend. But I think maybe we want a Diet Caffeine-Free Jesus. We get a little taste without *any* of the effect. And if that's your Jesus, a Jesus that doesn't change you, that leaves you living the same as a hell-bound world; maybe that Jesus isn't Jesus at all. Maybe your faith is just so much smoke.

John *presses* us here in 1 John 2:3-17 about getting real and ending the games and having a life that is really different than that of a non-believer. Now, in John's time, there was a "super-spiritual" group that had separated out from the genuine church. Part of their problem was that they had a kind of snooty attitude toward the people they thought of as "ordinary" Christians. They didn't have to follow the same rules. They were "beyond" things like confessing your sins and needing forgiveness. They saw themselves as almost divine beings, not as ordinary people saved by the grace of God.

Now, in some corners, this still exists today, but it really is off in the corners of the culture. For example, you see some of this in the crazy ideas found in a book like Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*. (For your information: Later this year, I'm going to do a special seminar on the Da Vinci code, as the movie based on the book is about to come out.) Let me tell you, there's more spiritual truth in an episode of *Lost* than in *The Da Vinci Code*.

But instead of chasing down the oddballs on this, let's just focus on the part that comes right home to us: **living that genuine, transparent life**. And let me tell you: if we have any hope of reaching this generation that's rising up now, it won't be due to clever programming or a great worship ministry, or neat programs for the kids, **it will be because we again learned what it means to love God, love people, and not to love the world.**

One thing that John hammers away at is the fact that **you can't separate loving God from loving people**. That's the first big idea here, in verse 2-11.

Look there in 1 John 2:3-6:

*3We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands. 4The man who says, "I know him," but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him. 5But if anyone obeys his word, God's **love** is truly made complete in him. This is how we know we are in him: 6Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did.*

Here's what a real Christian looks like: he looks like Jesus—he or she "walks" like Jesus did. That is, they conduct their lives in a way that reminds you of how Jesus conducted His life when He was with us.

And what was the one essential characteristic of the way Jesus lived? Love. Love is giving away yourself to the needs of others. Love of God is expressed in obedience to God's will.

So if that's the case, love can't do without the Law. By law, I don't mean the whole Law of Moses and all that, but the moral code at the center of the law—the 10 commandments.

When we live by them, we live in love of God and love of other people.

Now look at verses 7-11:

7Dear 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. 8Yet I am writing you a new command; its truth is seen in him and you, because the darkness is passing and the true light is already shining.

John says this is a not a new commandment, but instead it's an old commandment. Then he turns around and says that it is new. What gives?

First, understand that the "commandment" here is to love like Jesus loved. It's not new because it was in the Old Testament and Jesus restated it during His ministry. But it is new in the new life it gets from the example of Jesus. The cross, as usual, changes everything.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus says this (13:34-35):

34"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. 35By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

What's new is not the command to love. You can find that way back in Leviticus. What's new is the standard: "*As I have loved you, so you must love one another.*" What's also new is the effect: "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

Jesus wants us to be people whose lifestyle is so distinctly different that the world sits up and takes notice: who say, "Who are those guys?"

And what do they have? I want some!”

Back to 1 John 2:9-11

9Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates his brother is still in the darkness. 10Whoever loves his brother lives in the light, and there is nothing in him to make him stumble. 11But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks around in the darkness; he does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded him.

Now, again, John is speaking specifically about the super-spiritual bunch that walked away from the rest of the believers with an attitude of superiority. We can apply his words, though to the stance we as Jesus-followers take to the way we love—or don’t love people in this world.

What’s your first reaction to some poor street person wearing rags and pushing an old shopping cart? Is it the way Jesus would react? Come on, be honest. If you can’t be honest to yourself, remember, you’re really not fooling anybody, least of all God. How about when someone cuts you off when you’re driving? “Crazy Asian driver!” (Yes, Asian friends, that’s how white people talk. As if you didn’t know already.)

Let me tell you an old story. An Abbott, the head of a monastery, let it slip that he admired those outside the monastery who followed Christ more than those inside. One of the monks was troubled by this and asked why. “It’s easy to be spiritual *here*,” he said. “Out *there* are real people.” Ah, *people*, that’s always the problem.

Real life Christianity is all about real people. People who smell and do stupid things and who curse and persecute and make bad

decisions with their lives. Now consider: Jesus didn't drop down to earth in a plastic bubble, antiseptically clean from earthly pollution. The Son of God followed the will of His Father and engaged in outrageous acts of love with the same smelly, stupid, sinful people **that we are** and that we rub shoulders with everyday.

This kind of **love needs to be integrated into the lives of all of God's people**—which I think is the reason for the next section here in 1 John, 2:12-14. It lends itself to a responsive reading:

*12I write to you, dear children,
because your sins have been forgiven on
account of his name.*

*13I write to you, fathers,
because you have known him who is
from the beginning.*

*I write to you, young men,
because you have overcome the evil one.*

*I write to you, dear children,
because you have known the Father.*

*14I write to you, fathers,
because you have known him who is
from the beginning.*

*I write to you, young men,
because you are strong,
and the word of God lives in you,
and you have overcome the evil one.*

This is a very poetic section and probably John drew from a hymn or an instruction manual used by the early church. There is simplicity of heart here, a purity of heart.

He divides the church up into three groups: "children", "young men" and "fathers." By that he probably means brand new Christians (children), growing Christians (young men) and spiritually mature Christians (fathers). But there's a lot of overlap here. It's not like the

"fathers" don't need to hear what the John says to the "children", or vice-versa.

Verses 12-14 are all about the **simple application and engagement of love**. Yes, the word "love" doesn't actually appear here, but the idea is under the surface. Forgiveness comes from God's love; to know the Father is to know His love; even the victory that we're promised over the evil one is a victory that stems from the love of God poured out through the cross.

No matter where we are in our walk with Jesus—the child stage, the youth stage or maturity—God is at work to take you from there on to the next level. **And to fully love Him, we have to turn other things down.**

What do I mean? Well, just have a look at what John says next:

15Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. 16For everything in the world--the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does--comes not from the Father but from the world. 17The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever.

All love involves choice. On your wedding day, you say, "I choose you." And when you do that you un-choose every other potential spouse in the world.

When you say, "I choose Jesus; I love Him," as well you un-choose the bright shiny things of this world.

Which brings us back to the fact that modern American Christians are hardly any different

from non-believers. It's a shame. It's a scandal. We do love the world.

Now let's clarify what John is, and isn't saying here. In this passage, John uses the term "world" to mean things in this world that take our hearts away from God. It's not that we can't love a beautiful view or a round of golf.

To make take clear, look again at vs. 16:

For everything in the world--the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does--comes not from the Father but from the world.

"Cravings of sinful man" probably refers to the desire for more and more stuff, good old-fashioned materialism. "The lust of the eyes" means more "I want what I see." That may mean sex or food or the job my buddy just got. And the "boasting about what you have or do" speaks for itself.

The heart is a funny thing. We all have small hearts in that we only have room to love either God's way or the world's way. We can either love God or we can love the world. We can't do both.

When people of this world see us so obviously loving all this stuff and then we speak about Jesus being our Lord—no wonder they laugh. We're not fooling anyone. That's fantasyland.

What would bridge that gap? Well, in many ways, that's what we're finding as we go through this letter from John. But let me give you a starting place.

I believe that the road to authenticity is paved with costly deeds of outrageous love. Like when a well-off family brings a pregnant teenager into their home until the baby's born

and helps her get a job after. Or when a study group adopts a public school for prayer and support. Or when you see that street person, with all their smell and half out of their mind, and stop and buy them lunch.

The way to holiness, said one wise man, passes through the world of action. It becomes real as it's expressed through love. Love means getting in the game, getting messy, and paying a price. This is what we are called to. And only this will show the world that this faith we have is worth having at all.

END
PRAYER