

This is our third week in our series ‘Love Illuminated’ based on John’s first letter where we are looking at the whole issue of love, particularly God loving us and us loving God. In week one the first four verses reminded us that God has provided eternal life for human beings and we don’t need to wait until we die in order to experience it. He talks about psuche life: the life we experience every day, all the things that happen to us, and also the zoe aeon life, eternal life. We can experience eternal life right now through faith in Christ. He also makes it clear that Jesus is not only the messenger of that life, but he himself is life. So we enter into eternal life through a loving relationship with Jesus.

Last week we looked at what it means to have a loving relationship with Jesus. John says happens when we walk in the light and goes on to explain that to walk in the light means to walk in obedience and in honesty to God. If you walk in honesty with God about your sins and your struggles, but not in obedience. Then you end up living a self-absorbed, self-centred life, and it’s hard to experience intimacy in any relationship, particularly with God. On the other hand, if you walk in obedience, but not honesty with God, you become self-righteous and judgemental.

John develops this further in chapter two which is where we take up today. He talks about the whole issue of how easy it is for a group of Christ followers, people who have made the decision to follow Jesus, as best they can – that’s who he is writing to - how easy it is, even for a group of Christ followers, for their love to become perverted and redirected in other areas.

Our reading today is one that can be misunderstood very easily and so we’re going to be careful as we work through it. John starts off by telling us how love gets perverted. The love we have for God gets perverted when we start to love the world. Verse 15 says, “¹⁵ *Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in them.*”

On the surface that may seem a little confusing because this is the same person who wrote the gospel of John, the fourth book in our New Testament, and in it he talks a lot about how much God loves the world, and how important it is to love the world. In John 3:16 *For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.*

John says that God loved the world, but if we love God, we should love things that God loves and hate the things that God hates. Then logically, if we love God and he loves the world, then we should love the world. But now he’s saying that we shouldn’t love the world or anything in it. So which is it?

The reality is that it is both and the reason that it’s both is that John is using the word world in two different ways in those two texts. It is important to note the difference, of course. It’s like the Calvin and Hobbes cartoon (about a little boy with his toy tiger) where Calvin is dreaming that he is in a fighter jet. A voice crackles over his radio saying, “Enemy aircraft at 2 o’clock”,

to which Calvin replies, “Ok, what will we do until then?” As a child he didn’t understand that 2 o’clock could be used as a direction as well as the time. It is really important that we understand what John is talking about when he uses the word ‘world’. If we don’t get it right, then we can end up loving what God hates and hating what God loves.

One of the ways in which John uses the term world is to describe this physical universe and everything in it - everything that God has created the plants and animals, the stars in the sky, human beings and the oceans. We are told in Genesis 1 and 2 that God created everything and when he had finished, he looked at it and he said it was good. In fact, when he looked at human beings he said they were very good. So the idea is that we should somehow not love this world that God has made is nonsense. This is the world that we are called to love -this world that was created good was marred by sin, but it’s the world that God loves so much that he sent his son to die so that this world and everything and everyone in it that would recognise what he has done for them would be redeemed and restored and made new. So that the goodness we see in the garden at the beginning will ultimately be restored in the new heaven and the new earth.

But John uses the word world in a different way in 1st John. He uses it to describe the state of mind in which we act and think as if this world that God has created is all there is. That all there is is this psuche life that we talked about in the 1st week. The life that we experience every day – our relationships and all we go through; everything we see and touch and do – it’s a state of mind in which you have come believe that this physical world is all there is. John says that when we start to believe that, inevitably our love for it will turn into lust for it. Vs 16 *For everything in the world – the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life – comes not from the Father but from the world.*

When John uses the term lust, what is he using it in this context to describe? He uses the Greek word *epithumia* which breaks down to two parts: *epi* - over the top intensity, and *thumia* simply means desire. And so what you have is a very intense desire for something. So John is saying it’s not the love for this world, this good world that God created, that’s the problem. It’s the lust, the over desire for the things of this world that’s the problem. It’s the over desire for something that in and of itself may be good.

Whenever we think about lust, or over-desire, there is a tendency to think that’s connected to something that’s inherently bad or evil. What John is pointing out is that it is possible to have this over desire for things that are in and of themselves good. In fact, there are things that God created, that are of God and that he gave us to enjoy but we have an over desire for them. For example, it’s not that food is bad, food is good and is to be enjoyed, and to be savoured.

I don't know about you but I love to watch cooking programmes and I love to eat in nice restaurants. If you have a lucky enough to eat in a Michelin starred restaurant you'll find that each plate is a work of art and the flavours are intense - you don't necessarily get much on your plate, but what they produce is fantastic. It's a creative celebration of food and if you have food, and have the money to pay for it, then that's okay. God gave us food, so that we can enjoy it. But when you over desire it, that's when the problem starts. Eating disorders are about food moving beyond something we eat as part of the enjoyment of life to something that is used to cope with life, or to control life in some way. Either eating a lot or by deliberately not eating very much at all as an effort to control your life. Of course, it's the same thing with money, wealth or possessions. There's nothing wrong with using your money to help you enjoy your life, or enjoying your possessions. Money can bring great benefit to yourself, or others, when used wisely. It's when you over desire it that the problems come. It when the biblical idea of generosity, radical, unreasonable generosity, generosity that starts with the principle that 10% of everything we have belongs to God first, and goes on from there –it's where that becomes something where our money helps us to feel secure. It's no longer just to enjoy but it makes us feel secure. Having money then becomes a way of coping with life and controlling life.

John says if you live as if this world is all there is love will eventually, inevitably become perverted, and you begin to over desire what God has created. And when we begin to over desire things that God has given us for our good, that's when worry starts to define our lives. Because if there is nothing more than the psuche world, then the fear of losing something, of not having something in this world starts to control your life. So the things that Jesus talks about in Matthew 6, what you will eat, what you will drink, what you will wear, all the things that Jesus says we shouldn't worry about, they all start to become all-consuming.

If you believe this world is all that is, you can't help but worry because if you lose this, you become convinced you lose everything. And if you over desire the world you won't just be disappointed when life doesn't go the way you hoped would go - you won't just be disappointed and sad when it doesn't work out financially or with relationships or in your job - we all get disappointed and sad when things don't work out the way we hope. But if you have over desired the things of the world and your life doesn't work out the way you expected it can lead not just to disappointment but despair. So how do we avoid this?

Vs 17 *The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives for ever.*

How do we do the will of God? I suppose sometimes we can imagine that doing the will of God is related to particular decisions e.g. where should I live? Who should I marry? What job should I have? And those are important issues and God is interested in them, and he will guide us as we make those decisions. John is not talking about that and he's not talk about list of dos

and don'ts. He's talking about a relationship Vs20-21 *But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and all of you know the truth. I do not write to you because you do not know the truth, but because you do know it and because no lie comes from the truth.*

John says that we remain in the Father, and we remain in the Son by knowing the truth. Now this idea of 'knowing' for John is really important because it's a word he uses over and over again. For John there is a difference between knowing and believing. Believing is in your head. It's a cognitive process but knowing is a matter of the heart, it's more than an emotion, but deeper than a cognitive embracing of a reality. John understands the difference between believing and knowing. It's interesting that in the gospel of John, which was written for an audience of people who did not yet believe in Jesus, he gives a rational argument for belief. Between these two the word uses most in the gospel of John is believe. But now when he's writing to people who already believe he doesn't use the word believe very much. Now, time after time, he uses the word know. A lot of commentators think that the reason for that is the different audiences that he is writing to, and this is to do with a process that should take place in our lives where we move from believing something to knowing it. We move from something that we simply understand with our minds to something much more profound and deeper. For example when Linda and I got married 27 years ago I believed that she loved me, and I also knew that a little, but now, after all we've been through together I know without doubt that she loves me, and I love her and I couldn't imagine life without her. You see, with the experience of relationship comes a deepening of the knowing of the reality behind it, in this case the reality of love. I'm not saying that the believing is not important because you can't know something until you believe it, but knowing is better than believing.

Believing is something you can be argued out of. If someone presents a good case with a strong argument, they may be able to persuade you to change your mind. But knowing is different. Knowing is more than that. It is hard to describe what that knowing is but it is more than simply a cognitive process, it's something deeper and more profound. So John is wanting this group of people he is writing to not just to be a community of believers, he wants them to be a community of 'knowers'. He doesn't just want them to believe the right things about Jesus and about God, he wants them to pursue a relationship with God with such passion that not only do they believe that God loves them, they know that God loves them.

That they know that God sent Jesus, the Messiah, the anointed one, to die for them to offer them zoe aeon, life eternal. This life that has no beginning and no end. I sliced and indestructible, that not even death itself can destroy or overcome. This life that is stable and is not subject to the whims of the psuche world. It is life eternal.

So what about those who do not embrace that, those who do not know the truth that Jesus is the Christ, the anointed one of God. What does John have to say about them? Vs 18-19 *Dear*

children, this is the last hour; and as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come. This is how we know it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us.

And then in V22 Who is the liar? It is whoever denies that Jesus is the Christ. Such a person is the antichrist – denying the Father and the Son.

Now you may be thinking, oh no, he's got a go on about the antichrist now. And I suppose it would be easy, just stop now and sing and go home because antichrist is such an emotionally charged word. And the reason it's so emotionally is mostly because people have used the word to create an elaborate the your logic about how there's this single individual who is going to come at the end of time, right before Christ comes back and is going to create havoc.

Throughout history all kinds of people have come to prominence because of their evil deeds and people have looked at them and called them the antichrist –Roman emperors, Hitler, Stalin etc. You'll be delighted that were not going to go into any details about the end of time, and what the Bible says will happen. But here's the thing, John doesn't talk about the antichrist as a single figure.

You might well say, "That's only John, what does everyone else say?" The answer is nothing. John is the only person who uses that phrase, it's important to understand what John means.

John uses the word antichrist simply to describe someone who rejects the good news about Jesus Christ. He uses it to describe someone who only embraces the psuche life with all its ups and downs and insecurities and ultimately its hopelessness, rather than the eternal life, the zoe aeon, the indestructible life that is found in the indestructible one, Jesus Christ, the Messiah. And in that sense all of us have at one time demonstrated the spirit of Antichrist. All of us at times have chosen to focus on the bad news of the psuche life, rather than the good news of the zoe aeon, the eternal life that is found in Christ. And that's certainly true of all of us before we accepted Christ as our Lord and saviour. But even when we are Christ followers it is possible to become so focused on this world that when things don't go the way that you had hoped, or that you had planned, that not only are you disappointed or sad but you end up in despair. Even when we are in the depths of despair it's not that we stop believing, but it's as if we have forgotten that we know that God loves us.

That's what John is talking about, not that we stop believing, but we stop knowing, experiencing and bathing ourselves in the reality of it. So let me ask a question. Do you believe that God loves you or do you know that God loves you? Is it just in your head as a concept, an idea? You believe that God loves you. Or, do you know in the depths of your being that God loves you? If we only know it in our head then it's much easier for love to be

perverted and to lust after the things of this world. But if we know that God loves us then we'll be able to hold on when things get tough, because we know that God is holding on to us and will never let us go.

So maybe you're saying, "Ok, I want to know. Who wants to be the person who only believes? But how do I know that I know that Jesus loves me?" Well, knowing comes with time and with being in a relationship with someone over a period of time, where not only do you believe things about them, but because of your experiences with them, you know them at a level way beyond belief. We come to know the love of God because we have been on the receiving end of his persistent, pursuing love for us over and over and over again. And we fail, and we struggle and we fall down and he loves us anyway and we come to know that he loves us. When we experience his love it deepens our relationship; when we trust him and find that he doesn't let us down, it deepens our relationship; when we're scared to do something but we believe he's called us to do it, and we do it anyway, it deepens our relationship; when we spend time talking to him, reading his word, listening to him we deepen our relationship. Each time our relationship deepens, each time we take another step towards him it makes it easier to face the next thing, because we remember that we know the King of Kings and with him we can face whatever the world throws at us. That's how to know God.