

Last week we started a series about love, Love Illuminated, and we saw that we use the word love to describe so many different things but we don't actually mean that we love our children in the same way we love pasta.

It is because the word love is so overused that when we start talking about God loving us [pic of God is love], or us loving God, we find that people have such divergent views about what it actually means. That is really why we're taking time to go through first John. John makes clear what it means to love God. In the first four verses of the letter which we looked at last week John tells us that there is a life - psuche life: which is all our experiences and the things we go through every day. There is also a zoe aeon life – eternal life which we can experience right now but which most people are unaware of . John reminds us that Jesus is the messenger of this eternal life but he also is eternal life. When a person comes to believe in and accept Christ as their saviour they receive eternal life and are expected to experience it working out each day. When a person enters a loving relationship with Jesus something of eternity begins to affect their life and attitudes.

We talk of having a loving relationship with Jesus and it's quite a common phrase in churches but because of the overuse of the word love it is possible that people might have very different views on what that actually means. What John does in our reading today is clear up what it means to be in a loving relationship with Jesus.

The first things John says is – if we want to be in a loving relationship with God where we know we love him and he loves us then we have to walk in the light. The idea of light is huge for John. He uses the idea of light in all of his writing. In verse 5 he says, “God is light; in him there is no darkness.”

John 1:4-5 *In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.*

1:9 *The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world.*

3:19 *Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.*

8:12 *I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.*

12:46 *I have come into the world as a light, so that no one who believes in me should stay in darkness.*

To understand John we need to understand what he means by light. When we think of light and darkness we often think of opposing forces – even movies tend to portray it as a sort of good v evil issue. Occasionally you get a movie like the Dark Knight where it gets a bit confused because we're not sure whether the hero is really good or not.

The thing is though that light and darkness are not opposites – they are not competing forces. Where light is introduced to a dark place the darkness disappears – there is no competition; it's not a battle. When light shows up darkness doesn't exist. Darkness is not the opposite of light – it is the absence of light. Darkness is always at the mercy of light and it doesn't matter how little light there is, it is no longer dark.

You don't get rid of darkness by removing darkness – the only way to get rid of darkness is by introducing light. Conversely, you don't get rid of light by bringing in darkness. You can't bring in so much darkness that it gets rid of the light. If you want to get rid of the light you need to get rid of the source of the light. Why is that important? Well, it's important because it demonstrates what you have to do if you're tired of darkness in particular areas of your life.

If you've grown weary and tired of some darkness in your life then you don't fight against the darkness. If you're in the darkness you need to light a lamp. If you're tired of the darkness of hatred, the darkness of confusion, the darkness of sadness, the darkness of anger or the darkness of addiction. If you're tired of being in that dark place then you can't get rid of the darkness just by trying to get rid of the hatred, or the confusion, or the sadness, or the anger, or the addiction. It's like trying to shovel the darkness out of the room, it can't be done.

The only way you get rid of the darkness of hatred is by introducing the light of love. The only way you get rid of the darkness of confusion is by introducing the light of truth. The only way to get rid of the darkness of sadness is by introducing the light of joy. The only way to get rid of the darkness of anger is by introducing the light of peace. The only way you get rid of the darkness of addiction is by introducing the light of freedom.

Darkness cannot coexist with light, when light comes in darkness has to leave. So when John says that God is light. He is saying something absolutely profound. He is saying that there is no darkness in God. John is saying, he is the light of truth. He is the light of joy, and the light of peace, and the light of freedom. The reason John spends so much time in the gospel of John talking about Jesus as the light is because he is convinced that God, through Jesus, has sent his light into this dark world, so that every inch of darkness would have to flee. That's why he talks so much about Jesus as the light.

But, that doesn't mean we don't have a decision to make because even though God is light, we have to decide whether we are going to walk in that light. That's what John says in the next two verses 6-7: *If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth. 7 But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.*

Walking in the light is a nice, poetic metaphor. But what does it actually mean? John tells us that it means two things: the first is that it means to walk in obedience and the second is that it means to walk in honesty. So, the first thing John says, is that if we are to be in a loving relationship with God, we must walk in obedience.

2:3-6 3 We know that we have come to know him if we keep his commands. 4 Whoever says, "I know him," but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in that person. 5 But if anyone obeys his word, God's love is truly made complete in them. This is how we know we are in him: 6 Whoever claims to live in him must live as Jesus did.

John is saying that walking in the light is not about feeling a certain way about God, it's not simply believing certain things about God, although there are certain things we need to

believe in order to be Christian, but it's about more than that: verse 3 keep his commands; verse 4 do what he commands; verse five obeys his word; verse six live as Jesus lived. It's about being obedient to God. For John to say that the only way to be in a loving relationship with God is to obey him is totally counter intuitive to the culture we live in. Most people in our culture probably think that love is about living how you want, and still being able to give and receive love despite how you live. Many people think that living with the idea of being obedient is simply setting yourself up to feel guilty and has nothing to do with love.

At its core, what is obedience? I think it's to allow our natural inclinations to be subservient to, or trumped by, something else. We understand the importance of this, for example in relation to our bodies. Most of us have a natural inclination to avoid exercise and eat whatever we want eat. That's why there are so many books and adverts for diets or magic pills to reduce your weight. But we know that these shortcuts don't work in the long term. We know that the only way to have the benefits of being healthy is by watching what we eat, and taking exercise. And we know that the more training we do, the more fit we become. We become faster, stronger, and able to exercise for longer.

We understand that in relation to physical freedom we need to say no to certain things at certain times. But when it comes to moral obedience, we often don't connect the dots. We live in a culture where anyone who suggests that you shouldn't follow your own moral inclinations is viewed as being out of touch. In fact, the popular idea is that you find what is right for you morally, and you do it. That leaves very little room for moral obedience or even the idea of moral obedience, because the idea is that there is no standard above you, which should trump your natural inclinations when it comes to morality. To talk about moral obedience is to suggest that there is a standard above yourself that should trump, or that we should be subservient to, when it comes to our moral standards. But we know that to apply that same standard in the physical realm doesn't work. So why do we imagine that it would work in relation to morality.

John is talking about the kind of obedience when we allow God to trump our natural morality. It's about being willing to say, "This feels right to me, but you've said it's wrong, so I'm going to let your will trump my moral inclinations."

It's about allowing God to speak into your life and to become subservient to his will. According to John, what is the purpose of this obedience? The purpose is relationship. Obedience is not an end in and of itself, but is a means to an end. Look at verse five again: *But if anyone obeys his word, God's love is truly made complete in them.*

That's how we know we are in him. John is saying obedience leads to intimacy with God. That we don't obey God in order to be accepted by God, but we obey God *because* we are accepted by God. If you feel that you are accepted by God because of your obedience then, at best, you become a self-righteous, judgemental, legalistic person because you become convinced that you measure up and other people don't. It becomes about your ability to obey. At its worst, you become guilt ridden because you're convinced that you never measure up.

People hang around the church for years trying to deal with this issue and maybe you are one of those people. Somehow you have connected acceptance with obedience and there is this sense of guilt that you always have, because you never seem to measure up. That's what happens when you connect obedience to acceptance. But if you obey because you know you've been accepted that leads to something very different, it leads to intimacy and transformation.

Why is that? Because the more you love the less control you have over your life. Most of us tend to put people into categories: objects or subjects. If we make them objects we treat them as someone who places no demands on us and they simply become a tool for us to use. They are only there to meet my needs, and serve my particular purpose. But if we make people subjects, we see their needs and understand the demands they place on us, and we feel the obligation that goes with lovingly responding. The more you love the more obligations you feel.

Some people try to turn God into an object to be used, so they resist the obligations of love and they resist obedience. But the reality is love and obedience go together. If you're not willing to embrace the obligations of love, you can't get closer. There's no personal relationship without the obligations of love. With God the obligations of love are not one way. Some of you might be thinking that although you understand on a horizontal level between yourself and another person their mutual obligations of love, and the obligations of love run both ways, but it seems like in my relationship with God the obligations of love only run one way - from me to him.

But that's not the case. If we want to be in relationship with God we embrace the obligations of love, but so does he. The whole reason for Jesus' birth and sacrifice on the cross is because of the obligation of love. That's what love cost God.

The second thing John tells us is that walking in the light is not just about obedience, it's also about honesty. Look at ch 1:8-2:2 *If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. 9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. 10 If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word is not in us. My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father – Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. 2 He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.*

Being in a loving relationship with God has to involve both obedience and honesty, otherwise we end up living a kind of self-centred, self-absorbed life that keeps us from pursuing any intimacy in a relationship with God. John is saying that if we try to walk with honesty without obedience we very quickly become self-centred, and good at trying to hide our sin. That also takes away our intimacy with God and it means that we never bring these areas of struggle to God because we are not honest about them. It also means that we are not honest with other people and our relationships, even within our church family are not as intimate as they could be – so we don't get the help and support and encouragement we need.

John is saying that to walk in the light means not only that we walk in obedience, but that we're also willing and able to walk in honesty. Jesus' death on the cross allows us to pursue obedience and yet be totally honest and open and vulnerable about our sin. We don't need to pretend, or strive for acceptance with God. I think that three things that stop us being vulnerable: the fear of being rejected; the fear of being embarrassed; and, the fear of feeling inferior. That's what keeps us from being honest with God and also with other people. But Jesus was willing to become vulnerable and be put to death for us. Because of his actions we can receive forgiveness and grace, not so that we live undisciplined lives and do what we want, but so that we don't have to be afraid anymore.