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Today we conclude John's first letter to the community of Christians living in western Turkey at the close of the first century.

The theme of '**love**', a word found fifty times in his short letter, is his recurring and overriding theme; he keeps hammering away at this theme.

As I read and re-read this letter, I cannot but help think of the serious impact, being with Jesus would have had on the mind of this young *son of thunder*, John. On one occasion, the Pharisees plotted to entangle Jesus with His own words<sup>1</sup>. In dismay they watched Him demolish a question posed to Him about the marital status of men and women in heaven, asked with such convoluted and perverted logic<sup>2</sup>. The Pharisees, who thought no end of themselves, then asked Jesus the question, "*Teacher (they wouldn't think of Jesus as anything other than teacher, a step below themselves) which is the greatest commandment in the law?*" Now, the Law of Moses had 613 laws, and the Pharisees who wanted everyone to obey all 613 laws all the time, now wanted Jesus to pick one as the greatest?! How intentionally warped is this?

I imagine Jesus smiling at them a knowing smile as He proceeded to summarise the 10 commandments into **ONE** - *You shall love the Lord your God with all your **heart**, all your **soul** and with all your **mind**. This is the great first commandment. There is a second, but it is not really a second because it is as important as the first and stands alongside and equal to the first - you shall love your neighbour as yourself.*<sup>3</sup>

John witnessed this exchange<sup>4</sup>, and I sense Jesus' teaching on loving God with all your heart, soul and mind, and neighbour as ourselves, made a significant impact on him.

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 22:15

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 22:23-33

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 22:34-40

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 23:1 (the disciples were present with the crowds)

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I also sense John's glee in his letter, *oneupmanship* over the Pharisees for understanding Jesus' teaching so clearly, when they didn't!

About the Pharisees Jesus said, *They sit on Moses' seat and pontificate over you; **do** what they teach, but don't do what they do! They preach but do not practice!*<sup>5</sup> Last week we heard John repeat this, ... *let us not love in word or talk, but in deed and in Truth.*<sup>6</sup>

John's entire letter mirrors Jesus' teaching. Jesus compared the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of this world (satan), so John picks up on these contrasts. On the one hand, he encourages us to love God, which is to be seen in our relationship with our neighbour, and reflected in our love for our neighbour.

On the other, John warns us against the danger of falling for untruth and opinion, masquerading as truth and fact.

John now uses a word with which we are not very comfortable: spirit(s). We are unclear about our relationship with this word "spirit". We don't mind indulging in "spirit" activity when it comes to halloween, but when there is talk about real spirits in the world, we back off.

The Christian faith is the only one I am aware of, which alerts and cautions us to the obstructive and perverse relationship satan has with God. God and satan are not opposing **forces**; the person of satan is consciously acting in opposition to the person of God. We saw that at the start of creation in God's perfect garden, we see it in every generation thereafter (e.g. in the life of Job), and we saw it at the start of Jesus' ministry when satan tried to oppose Jesus, distracting Him from doing God's will, from accomplishing God's mission on earth.

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<sup>5</sup> Matthew 23:2-3

<sup>6</sup> 1 John 3:18

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This is the tension we Christians must live with: working alongside the Holy Spirit who is tasked with accomplishing the will and plan of God on earth, and the spirit of satan (*also referred to as the spirit of this world*) who is committed to opposing the work of God **in** us, and destroying the work of God **through** us. John is keen that this tension does not cause us to err on the side of the wisdom of the world.

*Do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits whether they are from God.*

There is only one test, says John. People who confess, declare and affirm, Jesus is the Christ, who came to us in human flesh, from God who sent Him, have the Spirit of God and are motivated by The Holy Spirit . We can safely hear their counsel, and spare ourselves from going the wrong way, believing what is wrong, and doing what is not acceptable.

The Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit who is in you, says John, is greater than, has more authority than the spirit of the world. How? The spirit of the world will end in death, but the Spirit of God will take you into eternal life.

As we begin to wrap up John's first letter, lets recap John's counsel. John offers us seven words of wisdom:

1. Do not love the world<sup>7</sup>; make every effort not be enticed by the values the world considers worthwhile, values defining pleasure, values defining status, and values defining power.
2. Get to know the person of God<sup>8</sup>, spend time learning about Him and His son Jesus our Christ, so that when He appears at God's appointed time, we will recognise Him and delight in His presence.
3. Practice righteousness<sup>9</sup>; practice living by God's laws, so that you will be known as a child of God.

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<sup>7</sup> 1 John 2:15-16

<sup>8</sup> 1 John 2:28

<sup>9</sup> 1 John 3:7-10

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4. Don't just talk the talk, but walk the walk; don't love with words or by talking about it, but love with deeds and in Truth<sup>10</sup>.
5. Do not believe every person who claims to have a special word from God. Test the source of their wisdom. There are deceiving spirits, principalities and powers, the rulers of this world in heavenly places, powers and principalities of darkness that are demonic, deceiving spirits, which work through false teachers. Some of them, as Paul tells us<sup>11</sup>, will forbid to marry, some will command to abstain from foods, other will require people not to do this, not to do that ...

I recently read about this incident which the author said was absolutely true: a preacher on the radio in Texas, invited his listeners, I quote: 'Stay tuned to the end of this message, because if you stay tuned I'll tell you how to obtain' - wait for this - 'an autographed picture of Jesus Christ'.

We may know this as an obvious con, but the number of people who were sucked into this con tells us the extent to which people do not know the real Jesus! It doesn't matter what a *preacher* claims, John tells us, test/discern all the spirits!

6. John's sixth word of wisdom is, *love one another, for love is of God. Demonstrate to those around you by the way you live and act, the love of God who sent His Son to die for us.*<sup>12</sup>
7. John's final word of Godly wisdom, appears to be an abrupt end to his first letter. John might have had something more to say, but either the ending is lost, or circumstances might have compelled him to end his letter with the words, *Little children, keep, protect, shield, safeguard yourselves from idols.* John is not referring to physical idols made of stone and wood;

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<sup>10</sup> ! John 3:18

<sup>11</sup> 1 Timothy 4:3

<sup>12</sup> 1 John 4:7-12

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he cautions against **idolatry**. Protect yourselves from making an idol of anything, believing that the **object** itself has life, has power over us and deserves our full attention in worship. By inference John is saying, *if we have a substandard view and understanding of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, it is idolatry!* If we do not believe that Jesus is the only Son of the Father, coexistent with the Father, who came from God to release us from the clutches of death, and free us to live in eternity with God, and His resurrection is proof of God's mission accomplished, if we believe anything other than this and live our lives accordingly, then we are worshipping some other person, not the real Jesus. *This, says John, is idolatry.* Worshipping any other being who is an extension of our imagination, a substandard Jesus who is stripped of divinity, and/or deprived of His humanity, is not the real person and therefore an idol. *Protect yourselves from idols!*, cautions John.

Next Sunday is Palm Sunday when Jesus entered Jerusalem for the last time, in a triumphant procession. Was it not Harold Wilson who said, *A week is a long time in politics*, describing a reversal of political fortune? Well, Holy Week as we call it, was a *long time politics*, what with all the plotting and scheming to put an end to Jesus' life.

Lets' approach Easter with the confidence, God has delivered on His word, to break the dead-end of death (excuse the pun!). Its up to us to decide whether we believe him, and if we do, then worshipping Him, loving God with all our heart, soul and mind, should be followed by loving our neighbour as ourselves. When people see us living in love and harmony with our neighbours, they will know *we live and walk in God's light, and His light prevents us from stumbling, tripping or falling!*<sup>13</sup>

**AMEN.**

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<sup>13</sup> 1John 1:10