

I John 2:7-11, Driving Dark

Elgin Covenant, 3rd Easter, April 10, 2016

Jonathan Wilson

Introduction

On the last day of March as I drove my family into Indiana, for the first time in my life I pulled over to the shoulder to wait out the worst of a storm. I knew it was time when visibility was reduced to about two feet, and I lost sight of the white stripe dividing the lanes on Interstate 65 and I drifted over and straddled two lanes. That was only for an instant, but that was enough.

The issue is not that I was lost. I am a man, I never get lost. I knew from Mapquest that I was on the road to Muncie. But in the moment, I did not know where I was going, in relation to the road itself, because the rain had blinded me. I might have side-swiped a car, hit a retaining fence, or worse, and done harm to myself, my family, and others with me on that same road.

Christians are travelers on the road to God, and all of us are pointing the same way, heading the same direction. Yet we are dangerous to each other when we proceed incautiously, heedlessly, impatiently, selfishly. That is true when conditions are at their best. And conditions are rarely at their best. Our path takes us through storms and darkness, so that even though we know where we are going we have a hard time seeing what is ahead, what is alongside, and what is behind. That is when we must become more careful than ever for the sake of those in the car with us, and for those on the road with us. First John calls this principle, loving our brothers.

Let us pray: Lord God, guide the words of my mouth and the reflections of our hearts to be an offering of worship to your glory and our encouragement. In Jesus' name, amen.

1. The Command

John describes a command that is both old and new. We know from nature that

something very old can also be considered something new. A raw unmined diamond is just as old as the diamonds that have been sold at Tiffany's for a century. When the diamond is taken from the ground, cut and polished and displayed in the window, it is properly considered something new.

The old command is to love your neighbor as yourself, especially, in Leviticus 19, those who belong to the People of God. John calls these the "brothers." In today's usage we prefer "fellow believers." That command belonged to the old covenant given through Moses for Israel as a self-governed nation. That old command is brought forward into the new covenant, which has created a new kind of community for the people of God, the church.

The difference between the Old and New for God's People is in the way we function. The Old Covenant functioned through the nation-state of Israel whose laws were enforced through fines, deportation, or execution, and whose identity was celebrated through public holidays. God had wanted Israel to show the world a nation founded on righteousness. However, using backwards logic, the Israelites supposed they could do anything they wanted so long as they paid their fines. God raised up prophets as early as Samuel to warn the people that God did not want fines, but hearts and lives of obedience.

Throughout First John we learn the function of the new covenant as it expresses a new spiritual reality. No longer do the people of God form a nation-state of laws and capital punishment, we form alternative communities to testify to the character of God within the nations where we live. We are able, now, to obey the commands of God through spiritual resources that had not been available to those under the Old Covenant. Believers now have as resources for faith the very light of God, the true light, shining forth through Jesus Christ, illuminated by the Word of Christ and empowered by God's own Spirit living within each

believer. Thus God's light, Spirit, and Word are not only external to us as they were under the Old Covenant, they now also become an intimate part of us when we receive Christ in faith.

This spiritual reality, our power to live the ethics of God, gets preached a lot. I talk less about the new cosmic reality, that Jesus Christ has won the victory of light over darkness. The powers of darkness no longer have the upper hand over those in the new covenant sealed in Christ's blood. The light of God, the light of a new creation, has broken forth, and the darkness is passing away. The believer now stands before the world as a torch lighting the darkness.

In verse 10 John writes, **Whoever loves his brother lives in the light, and there is nothing in him to make him stumble.** In reading the original Greek one could say, 'there is nothing in IT,' that is, the light, to make him stumble. This was the choice of the Revised Standard Version and I prefer it. As we walk in the light we see clearly and so avoid anything that makes us stumble. That is a better way to think of our life in God than to say that I am now perfect, so that there is nothing in ME to make me stumble. I have all kinds of issues, it is only as I remain true to the light of God showing my way that I stay on the road God sets for me.

2. The Direction

First John goes on to warn us, however, that even believers can hide the light of God in themselves and from themselves, and walk in darkness. In the LIGHT there is no cause for stumbling, but bumping into obstacles, missing an unseen step and falling, or steering wrong, is very easy to do in the dark when we cannot see. We call such things accidents; we absolve ourselves morally of things that happen when we cannot see the hazards. Yet there is moral and spiritual sin when we choose to travel in darkness rather than light. Suppose on our trip to Indiana I had missed a bend in the road and ended up nose down in a ditch. Would the State Police, or State Farm for that matter, have let me off on the excuse that I could not see because it

was raining so hard? Yes I had deadlines and goals, but it was my choice to drive, or not, in those conditions.

This reminds me of the time in Arizona that a sandstorm blew over Interstate 10. It seemed more oppressive than I expected, having driven through sandstorms before. And then I realized, I was wearing my sunglasses. I had added a layer of darkness to the darkness coming at us externally. When I took off my own shades my confidence greatly increased.

First John calls it darkness, calls it spiritual and moral sin, to choose to be hostile or hold a fellow believer in contempt. One might still rightfully claim that one is a believer and on the road toward God, but it is as though one is driving with a blindfold. You might stay on the road for a few hundred feet in flat country, but you will not get far before you make a wreck of yourself, those in the car with you, and quite likely, others on the road as well. It is poor consolation to the victims when you then claim, in the midst of the wreckage you have caused, that at least you are still on the road to God.

There are many kinds of blindfolds which have believers treating other believers in unloving ways. First, some Christians appoint themselves as judges over others, and hold others up to standards they have worked out for themselves based on the Ten Commandments, their mother, and Miss Manners. They find fault with the color of your shoes, the translation of your Bible, and your testimony of salvation. These critics are like those on the highway who choose their own speed limit and expect everyone else on the road to drive exactly as fast, or as slow, as they do, no matter what speed limit is posted. As they pass you on the road, or as you pass them, they will lodge in their minds a firm and negative opinion of how you drive, no matter your accident free safety-record and rewards from your insurance company.

But lest you think yourself off the hook, you become just as guilty as they when you fail to love and forgive your self-appointed critic. Some of the worst wrecks that happen on the road to God occur when people are blinded by their own impatience toward a critic in their life or in their church, and before you know it there is a pile-up and collateral injuries, and worst of all, there is finger-pointing instead of repentance and responsibility. You are responsible to be a godly witness in the light of God, which is like being a safe driver on the road; you are responsible to be patient and cautious towards others, for collisions can only be considered as having been bad or worse, there is no such thing as a good wreck, whether of cars or of souls.

Another way to be unloving is to indulge an addiction or flirt with vice; this is selfishness, inconsiderate of the safety and needs of others. Another way is that pride and ambition can get in the way of love, and cause wrecks to happen. And many believers have darkened their lives with the blind-folds of sour old grudges; these leak poison through one's own envious eyes and into the mind and spirit. Such bitterness will often have its origin in unhealed wounds from previous wrecks.

In all of these wrecks of the soul, caused when people choose to go forth blindly in vice, pride, impatience, or bitterness, we often encounter that favorite self-justification in our culture today: "Who are YOU to judge ME."

I find it strange that folks will allow Dr. Phil to judge them up and down, and make them look like idiots on national television, but a preacher holding up the Bible? *Well who do you think YOU are, telling me how to live my life?* Okay. Reality check. If the trap of vice is blinding you, making you so selfish you have lost the ability to show any consideration for your fellow believers, then the biggest favor those fellow believers can do for you is get in your face about it. If you are pursuing blind ambition, you need discipling, you need mentors to hold you

accountable and remind you of the things that are truly important to God, the things that make for peace. And if you are blinded and poisoned by bitterness, the cure for your Spirit is the call to repent. The world calls that JUDGING, and the world is wrong about that just as much as it is wrong about so so so many other things. Your accountability to fellow believers is not we judging YOU. It is discipleship. If you need to deal, then your church had better be the place where truth is confronting you. Let us return to our highway image. Every time you are wrecking your car, you are causing a pile-up where that person in the church loses a fender, and it costs a headlight from this family, and by the way, my airbag deploys. That we are the collateral damage in your so-called “accident” gives us the right to get in your face.

Your faith is your own. It is personal. But it is not private, nor more than your car is private. You are sharing the road with others. That is reality for the People of God.

Conclusion

Do not mistake what you are hearing today as judgment. It is a solemn appeal to you to repent of any blindfolds that cause you to love others less: blindfolds of vice, of pride, of spite. Look again upon your fellow travelers in a new light, the light of God’s love; they are sharing the road with you. It is not an easy road, but it is beautiful, and filled with light.

There is nothing in the light to cause you to stumble. Take the road to God in God’s light. Love your fellow believers. As we do, our light and our love will spread into a world darkness that needs love and light. Amen.