

LIFE MATTERS 7: A STUDY IN THE BOOK OF 1 JOHN
1 JOHN 4:13-18
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In light of the recent political climate, some people have been looking backwards at some authors who were looking forward. In the early to mid-twentieth century, it became popular to write about what the future might look like. Before World War II, the writers were more optimistic, like H.G. Wells writing about utopias wherein mankind through technology, education and commerce created something special. But with World War II and it's aftermath, people saw what an unhinged leader and an unhinged country could do and that's where we get books like George Orwell's *1984* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*.

In recent weeks and in recent years, people keep coming back to *1984* as a sadly prescient novel with the big brother language, the mass surveillance and the propaganda.

I think the more thoughtful observers have noted we are actually much closer to *Brave New World*. George Orwell's future looked like an oppressive regime, a totalitarian state. In a quote, Orwell said, "If you want to see the future, picture a boot stomping on a face forever." While that does sound evil and awful, I think *Brave New World* is actually a clearer picture of our present and potentially our future.

Neil Postman had a keen insight into this some 30 years ago when he compared the two works. He said this in the foreword to his book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, "What Orwell feared were those who would ban books. What Huxley feared was that there would be no reason to ban a book, for there would be no one who wanted to read one. Orwell feared those who would deprive us of information. Huxley feared those who would give us so much that we would be reduced to passivity and egoism. Orwell feared that the truth would be concealed from us. Huxley feared the truth would be drowned in a sea of irrelevance. As Huxley remarked in *Brave New World Revisited*, the civil libertarians and rationalists who are ever on the alert to oppose tyranny '*failed to take into account man's almost infinite appetite for distractions.*'"

In short, we will not be conquered by a scarcity of information but a tidal wave of it. We will not be conquered by a lack of choices but a seemingly endless supply of them. We won't be derailed by propaganda but rather by an uninterrupted supply of new and more.

We are drowning in data and distractions. So much so that it is hard to remember what to focus on. The barrage of a 24/7 news cycle and opinions about the news and then opinions about the opinions and then rebuttals to opinions about opinions. So much so that you sometimes have to slow down and audibly say, "Now what were we talking about again?"

If it's true in our country, then it is true in our faith. We are inundated with blogs, books, sermons and podcasts. We've never had more spiritual data and distractions and we've never been less effective. Christianity is on the downward slide in America, and I don't think it's because of something as obvious as Orwell's boot stomping metaphor. It would be easy to attribute our slide out of relevance to something like Hollywood's influence or Washington DC's legislation, but I think it is something far more insidious. I think Christians are swimming in spiritual data and distractions and more than a few people are popping their heads up and saying, "What were we talking about again?"

Sometimes it's worth being reminded about what's really important. What's really essential to being a Christ-follower when you strip away the latest fads, when you block out the feuding theologies, when you move past the most recent church arguments. Honestly, I think a lot of people struggle with this. What are we really supposed to be doing? As Christians, what do we really need to know or study? What should I be doing with my time and resources? You can go to five different Christian churches and hear ten different messages about what Christians should really be focused upon because the same pastor will say something different from week to week.

If you have ever felt frustrated by it all, you are not alone. That is the reason why we do this *Life Matters* series every year. Every year we spend seven weeks on this same topic. What do you do with this life you've been given? What does God expect of me? How do I live to the fullest? We ask that question every year and then wrestle with the answers we think

scripture provides. Today is the last week of this series, and it is about Life for Others. What it's really about is living a life that matters. It's speaking to you in the hustle and bustle of Silicon Valley and making it absolutely simple. John has some answers for us this week rooted in the teachings of Jesus.

1 John 4: 7-12

Here goes hippie John. In this letter, he says God is light. God is Spirit and God is love. He refuses to go deep into theological arguments or to build huge covenantal structures like Paul. In fact, the more I read John, the more I realize where he fits. He is essentially the modern day version of *Christianity for Dummies*. Not that he is dumb or that we might be dumb for liking it. I mean that it is probably the most well liked and accessible of the gospels as well as one of the most preached and quoted epistles. The books for dummies series have published almost 2,000 books with 300 million sold. The genius of the books is that they start on the assumption you know zero about the topic.

So does John. He doesn't assume the readers have historical Judaism in mind or any other references. He keeps it simple and accessible. God is love. While this wouldn't pass muster for many seminaries today, it was good enough for John. Keep in mind, John is speaking to an audience that to a lesser extent was on a similar track to ours. They were drowning in data and distractions. They were gnostic/dualistic and the goal of the gnostic is more knowledge. That is where growth happens. That is where salvation is found. Gnosis means knowledge.

I think he is being intentionally simple, not just to make God accessible and relevant, but to push back on their insatiable appetite for new and more and different data and distractions. So he just tells them that God is love.

As I am sure you know, people who can make things simple rarely are. John is telling them that God is love to bolster his next argument. Remember his recurring goal in this short letter is three-fold to reiterate that Jesus came in the flesh so the flesh matters. You hear

that when he talks about Jesus who they have seen, heard and touched. If the flesh matters, then obeying the commandments matters. The commandment to keep is to love one another. He has just told them you can identify God with love, and he uses that simple metaphor to help with what he says next.

1 John 4: 13-21

There is a lot in this passage, but it's actually still really simple. God is love. That love is obvious through the gift of his son. If the love of God is real and God lives in us, then love should be evident in us. The major manifestation of how people will see it is when we show love to people around us.

John brings about the great theological point. If you say you love God who is unseen but can't love a person who is seen right in front of you, how can God be a part of your life? If the major marker of God is love, and God purports to live in those who follow him and there is no love in your life, then you may have a problem.

I've dubbed this reality the vicarious economy of God. It's a theme for our relationship with God. We talked about this when we did the Gospel of John series. We often think of our relationship with God in vertical terms, rightfully so. God above, us below. Which is correct. But that is not the extent of it. We need to think of the Christian life in terms of the cross, vertical and horizontal. The horizontal is our relationship to others, other Christians and the world around us. These two are inextricably linked. You cannot have just the vertical. The idea of a solitary Christian is a very western concept from the last several decades. Our faith and the faith of those who have gone before us have always been communal. The advent of language around a personal relationship with Jesus Christ has arisen to the detriment of God's original calling. A people. God brings forth a nation. Several tribes. Jesus has 12. It's always communal. The vicarious economy of love states that our relationship with God is inextricably linked with our relationship with others, neither can exist in a vacuum.

The vicarious economy of love is not just the interconnectedness but that we express and experience God through people. That's why Jesus can say things like he does in Matthew 25, "When you do things for the least of these you do them for me." You are loving and seeing God in those moments.

Any parent in the room can identify with this idea. When I see you high-fiving my kid, giving them a hug, blessing them with a gift, I feel it. If the vicarious economy of love were a college course, it would be a lab not a seminar. It would be a time of practice not a lecture.

He is saying all of this against the backdrop of our original conundrum, the tidal wave of data and distractions. You can focus on learning more about God. You can focus on new distractions in the Christian sphere, but if you are not in the lab, practicing loving people, then it's all for nothing. Learning isn't bad. Distractions in the form of conferences and podcasts aren't bad, but if it doesn't translate to active love for those around you, then it lacks meaning.

I read recently that the market for evangelical goods, books, music, t-shirts is 7 billion dollars in the United States. That doesn't include the expense of time people use studying to great extents and listening to countless sermons or podcasts. A guy named Skye Jethani called this the Evangelical Industrial Complex. He makes a case that mega churches, Christian conferences and Christian books are interrelated and interdependent. Like celebrities who go on late night shows to market for their movies, these Christian authors pinball around between conferences and books in an interrelated mess that keeps the Evangelical Industrial Complex churning.

Now, hear me out. I like Christian books. I like Christian conferences, but if unchecked, they can be just a tidal wave of spiritual data and distractions. Things we consider and discuss in book clubs but never act upon.

It would be counterproductive for John and for me to denigrate Christian messaging be it sermons, epistles or books. However, they can be dangerous for two reasons, 1) the sheer

amount of them subconsciously trains us to become dependent consumers of them, and because something new is always coming out, we can be perpetual trainees and never practitioners. 2) The sheer amount of opinions and opinions about opinions and the rebuttals to opinions about opinions can numb us to our first true calling, loving God and loving others.

I have to tell you I was really encouraged by a couple things last week. The Aby family and Donna Coleman are going to Uganda on a mission trip to support an orphanage this year. Several women got together this week to help create supplies for this trip. During Monday Mom's Bible Study and throughout the week, these women worked together to bless the children in this orphanage. It was so simple and yet so pragmatic and life giving.

Second was our church's involvement in a "Night to Shine." Several of our people helped to organize and work this event. It's simply a formal prom type dance for teenagers with special needs. Volunteers do their hair, help with their makeup, shine their shoes and chaperone them for that special night. It happens all over the country and locally it was at the Home Church on Winchester. Phoebe Barber helped style hair, Debbie Lillo and Kaity Weisenberger helped organize and Lerry Wilson led the event. These kids enter via red carpet with people cheering them on. These kids got to dance, eat and celebrate. They were reminded that they were children of the King.

<https://www.timtebowfoundation.org/index.php/night-to-shine/#video>

Here is the great secret from John in this passage, verse 17; he says this is how love is perfected in us. In this vicarious economy of love, God is love, so when we love, we are experiencing and expressing God. The secret is in the doing. Not that we earn God's love, but somehow expressing the love of God leads us to the greatest experience of the love of God. That is the interrelated vicarious economy of love. That is the iconic lyric from *Les Miserable* to love another person is to see the face of God.

Loving others sounds burdensome, but it isn't. That's where you will see God. You will see the face of God in Ugandan orphanages. You will see the face of God in teenagers with disabilities who are dancing the night away. More than any sermon, more than any song, you will experience the love of God most when you are expressing the love of God.

The great truth about our life goals at SFC, Life in God, Life with Others, Life for Others is that they are interconnected. Symbiotic even. You can't just do church and not have some form of Christian community. You can't just serve but refuse spiritual growth. You can't just be in community and never worship. They are all connected and this simple recipe leads to life.

When it comes to Life For Others your service doesn't have to be heroic or huge. If you don't have a place to serve, I can help you find one. The place where you are called to serve is where your gifts and passions collide. That may be inside the church or outside the church. It's the things you are passionate about and something you can do something about.

Howard Thurman said it well, "Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive."

The entire *Brave New World* is built upon a tidal wave of data and distractions, and the end goal is comfort. Through genetic modification, cultural management and pharmacology, the end goal of *Brave New World* is comfort. Which sounds like the lie we are often sold in America. Insulate, protect, isolate. Keep yourself free from pain and danger as much as possible. Ironically, in trying to preserve your life in this way, you lose it. Cloistered away. Never stepping out in faith for fear that you'll fall. Never trusting yourself to another for fear that you may get hurt. Never serving others for fear they will waste it, really avoiding the mess and then sadly missing out on life.

There is a foil character in *Brave New World*. He is referred to as the Savage. He isn't indoctrinated or medicated by the brave new world, so he sticks out like a sore thumb when he is discovered by the city inhabitants. He questions their motivations and the way they live their lives. In one exchange, he pushes back against the sedated, comfortable lives they lead.

Savage: But I like the inconveniences

Controller: We don't. We prefer to do things comfortably.

Savage: But I don't want comfort. I want God. I want poetry. I want real
Danger. I want freedom. I want goodness. I want sin.

As we wrap up this *Life Matters* series, I want to remind you that you can't have it both ways. If we want abundant *zoe* life, we have to dive into the mess. Goodness and sin, freedom and danger. We have to embrace some of the inconvenience. We can't isolate, we can't join the rest of the herd. We have to stick out in a crowd. We have to consider and ask difficult questions. We have to be a bit like the Savage. Jesus talked about the ultimate *Brave New World*, his was viable and powerful. He called it the Kingdom of God. It's a place built upon *zoe*. People loving God and loving others. He invites us to join him there.