

# 1 JOHN 2:1-11

SERIES ON 1 JOHN  
MT ALBERT BAPTIST CHURCH

A SERMON BY STUART MCGREGOR

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I don't think that I am going to enjoy preaching from 1 John. He stirs something inside me that makes me feel bad. His writing brings to the forefront of my mind my lack of pragmatic spirituality. I am going to make an attempt at explaining what I mean by that because the phrase is somewhat vague.

Pragmatic Spirituality.

We find ourselves having to go over stuff that we have been talking about at the beginning of the year in the series on Marketplace Christianity. There is some hard stuff going on here.

Last week I talked about how our society today wants us to make our faith a personal issue. Something that is not to be expressed in public, or to any one. Well actually it's more to do with evangelistic Christianity that needs to be suppressed. People become uncomfortable when we start to talk about our faith.

One woman I know every time she sees me she says that "if it works for you that's ok. It just doesn't work for me." I just wish she didn't have to say it every single time. What does that say about her?

It annoys me because I have to hear what she has to say in that statement. She has expressed her world view and is expecting me to embrace it, but she has set it up as a barrier not as a meaningful engagement with my spirituality—it doesn't seem right. But this is the double standard of being politically correct.

So I've been thinking it might be easier to call myself a member of an eclectic Messianic/Incarnational branch of Judaism. At least people might let me be that with dignity. At the very least it will disassociate myself from the missionary/colonialist, fundamentalist, ultra-moralist, social-saviour hypocritical heritage that has been so kindly thrown onto me whenever I have called myself a Christian.

And it is unfortunate that we find ourselves so labelled, so graffitied by our unashamedly secular-when-it-suits-me society. We become these loony type people who are part of some cult and we are treated with the same respect at times as the suicide cults that believe that they are going to be taken away by aliens.

Perhaps we shy away from encountering people with our faith . . . even to the extent that we are compromising our own ethical standards. When John is talking about how we should live he is posing a challenge to us. There is no compromise here.

I shudder whenever I see the Open Air Campaigners T-shirts that say “no compromise” because I can’t help but feel that it is just a slogan that cheapens truth and glosses over the struggle of living a Christian lifestyle.

But Slogans, we all love them! Probably one of the most memorable is the Nike slogan “Just do it.” That’s right, just grab that basketball and dunk it through that hoop, just buy Nike golf accessories and identify yourself immediately with Tiger Woods. When we put on a piece of Nike clothing we feel we are entering into the world of sport. We are having a brief excursion with the greatest athletes of all time. It really is a piece of brilliant marketing because at the end of the day we have thousands of people who wear Nike without doing anything sporty at all—but for a moment they feel like they are.

Slogans and labels. It’s not just clothing labels, it’s any label that makes us feel like we’re engaging with something external, something we think is significant. We all do this. Some people go op-shopping to get away from labels, but they can be very quick to point out that what they bought was from an op-shop. So it’s the same trap instead of Nike it is op-shop.

People identify themselves through what type of beer they drink. I might drink Heineken because it’s sophisticated and international. It’s the beer that graphic designers drink. I wish I could do the Heineken Wow. Others might drink Tui because it helps them identify with carefree student days where they could be irresponsible without any repercussions. Yeah right.

I look through a large portion of everything I own and what do I see? Stuff that is meant to enhance my existence in this world. I own an Apple computer, and I do feel like I think different, and a little superior perhaps. I’ve seen the advertising, I’ve read the hype and I’ve bought into it hook line and sinker. Fortunately I’ve also worked in IT with Windows and Linux. I’ll be honest with you . . . they’re all as reliable as each other. They all have their

little strengths and weaknesses. I use Apple because I'm sold on style, and I discriminate against Windows users. I'm windowsist.

At the end of the day, my computer is used for word processing and checking e-mail. I don't need the rest of it. Wow, I can edit movies on my laptop, I'd better get me one of those thar latest digital cameras to complement my digital lifestyle.

Who wants to take photos with their cellphones? I better be careful here, I'm a sucker for gadgets. I do! I want to take photos and have my calendar and check e-mail and surf the net and play games on my cellphone! I do! I don't know why! But I do, yeah it makes me feel like I'm a part of progressive technology. It makes me feel as though I'm significantly in tune with the things that are going on around me. It's crazy to voice it but I find that I buckle to this pressure all the time.

When we moved back to where we're living now we decided to no longer have TV and put "no junk mail or newspapers" on the letterbox. The only advertising I am subject to is that which is on the internet, billboards and the occasional time I listen to the radio. I remember the fateful day clearly. The rain came and the sun shone and the notice faded away from our letter box and then I came home to find a flyer sitting there enticing me to open it. And instead of just throwing it away I read it cover to cover—twice. And I realised something really important after that. I really do want to take photos and have my calendar and check e-mail and surf the net and play games on my cellphone! It's upgrade time. And my mind goes into overdrive to scheme and connive to find a way to make this happen. I'd log on to the internet banking, check out our incomings and outgoings, nibble away at the savings and come up with a proposal for my wife. And this is the advantage of being a married part-time employed youth pastor—"what about our groceries Stu?" She doesn't even have to say it, I just know that this is what she's thinking.

And then I realise how foolish I've been, how shallow and just how much I invest into what is unimportant. I am a person who wants to find and define my identity by external things. And here is the crunch. If we are made in God's image, then why do I source my identity in labels and accessories? Where is the source of my identity? Where is the source of who I am? Who would know best? Nike? Sony? Jesus?

What I am driving at here is not whether or not consumerism is ok, but it is about where we find our identity. I find it interesting that Glassons and other chain stores are meant to be helping us express our individuality. Hmmmmm . . . go figure. Have a look at these stores from the outside and

see how similar all the fashions are. Individuality? I'm not so sure. Fashion is driven by what other people think is cool and cost effective to make.

When we say that we are a follower of Jesus, what does that actually mean in real terms? John is providing us with a reality check in this letter. What does it mean to be a follower of Jesus? What does it mean when we say that we know Jesus?

And here we start to fall into a spiritualised reflection of our surrounding social expectations.

Do we too buying into slogans? This is not as strange as you may think. "No Compromise" is a slogan that at its root has no difficulties. But my question is this, how many people wear the slogan thinking they are buying into the phenomenon? No compromise. Is there anyone here who actually lives like that?

The no compromise that John is talking about here is with regard to the one law that sums it all up. Love God and love your neighbour. One without the other is not the real deal.

And now for the tricky bit. One of the tensions that we have to hold onto in theology is the tension where Jesus is both completely human and completely God. Not mostly one with a bit of the other, but totally all in one. It is not a tension that can be proved or disproved it is a tension of our faith and it makes sense through the way it works itself out in our lives more than it can ever make sense with paper and ink.

We can't help ourselves when it comes to paradox and tension. We feel we need to resolve it and so I think that we may oscillate between the two extremes of the tensions but never hold the tension in tact.

There are two approaches to understanding who Jesus is. In the last few months we have been looking at the Gospel stories about Jesus. We have seen a very human and very approachable chap who had an uncannily wise way of dealing with everyone. He could also perform miracles. And here is a key to the difference between the high and low views of Jesus.

What we will call the 'high' view of Jesus would see him as more divine than human. He is more inclined to be viewed with such terms as the redeemer of humanity, the sacrificial lamb and the one who sits on the throne of heaven. His miracles were performed to prove his divine power.

A low view of Jesus is where he is seen more as human than as divine. This is the Jesus that the disciples knew before the resurrection. He is the good man that wants to redeem people here and now. He will hang out with the tax collectors and heal the sick. He will stand up for the oppressed and

for truth. His miracles were performed to demonstrate the magnitude of his compassion for people.

This is an extremely rough sketch of the two views. But it's hopefully enough for us to start to realise our own dominating perspective or view of Jesus.

For some it is important to worship Jesus through words and for some it is important to do it through deed. Worship without deeds has a view of Jesus that is too high, deeds without worship has a view of Jesus that is too low. Deeds and worship together hold the tension well.

John was talking to his readers about these two perspectives of Jesus. He was saying that if you claim to know Jesus you will obey his commands. And what is the best and easiest way to understand the commands? The one which summarises them all, "love god, love people." The high and the low view of Jesus are held in tension with this simple command.

Those of us who live righteously but have no love have got a view of Jesus that is too low.

Those of us who sing and dance and worship and love Jesus so much but have no love for other people, have a view of Jesus that is too high.

I would like to suggest that in today's society, in Auckland New Zealand, our tendency is to be too high in our thinking of Jesus. Simply because the things around us are defining us. The things we do, the things we wear, what we think people think of us are the dominant definers of our lives.

Even in Christian circles we find that particular brands of music, or ways of doing church, or different ethical stances that aren't based on scripture are all ways that we are allowing other people to define us.

Our culture is more defining than we think. We are probably more a product of our environment than we think. And I dare say we feed that same cycle ourselves.

And this is easier in a worldview that catapults Jesus into the distance of glorious and separated heaven. Where Jesus is trusted to conquer in the future, at the end of the world, when he sits upon the throne. And where we don't need Jesus to interact with us in the here and now because our hope rests solely in the future. This is the kind of high view of Jesus that we can cope with because it lets us exist in harmony with the society around us. Jesus is a supernatural reality and that is the extent of it.

But I want to suggest that it is too philosophical and ultimately it doesn't change a thing in the lives of our families, our workmates, our schoolmates and our nation. A Jesus that we leave as connected to us by a

spiritual telephone cord called worship or prayer is not the Jesus that will impact New Zealand. A Jesus that is encountered only on Sundays or in the privacy of our own homes is not the Jesus that will impact our world.

Secular society wins, because we won't do anything with that Jesus. The Jesus who is found only in our worship songs and our quiet times and our prayers is precisely the personal and private affair our culture wants him to be. We can say we love Jesus all we want but it is not love if we don't love people. This is where the rubber meets the road.

And this is what John is warning us against. A genuine knowledge of Jesus is transformative not by the merit of other people's judgements, but by the estimation of Jesus. If we say we know Jesus then we will love other people. Why? Because Jesus loves other people! John says that we are to live like Jesus did. Not that we go around feeding five thousand people from 5 meat pies and two cans of V, but it does mean we go around with the intention of demonstrating the power of Jesus—in love!

Think of the most ideal world you can think of. I've got a friend who has just shifted down to Rotorua recently and we were discussing the difference between Auckland and smaller towns. She said that one of the things was the checkout operators would actually talk to you. And she would often find herself in a hurry and want the checkout operator to just shut up and get on with her job. But she said, "I stopped and thought about it for a moment. I thought to myself that actually this is the type of world I really want to be a part of." She wanted to be a part of a world that gave people love and respect no matter what the personal agenda is.

Surely love is a huge component of Utopia. If everyone loved everyone, then wouldn't that mean instead of stealing, there would be giving? Instead of murder there would be conflict resolution? Instead of a high divorce rate, there would be greater family functionality? How many problems of society could be overcome by love?

Love God and love people. It's the high and the low held in tension together. It's also right there in front of us with the symbol of Christianity. The vertical and horizontal of the cross. This is the pragmatic spirituality. A faith that motivates us into doing. A faith that motivates us into loving.

We are told through marketing that we need to love ourselves. Define our lifestyle by our accessories. We are told that what we own is who we are. Look after number one. Even in relationships, "I've just got to do what's right for me." Love is being shelved because the self is being raised.

But John says that we should find our identity not in others. We should find our identity in our obedience to Jesus.

Love God and love people. Be like Jesus for this is who he was. Even to the bitter end on the cross, he loved God and loved people.

Jesus sees right through our lip service. If we sing or pray or preach to impress others we may fool other people and we may fool ourselves. But not Jesus.

## R E S P O N S E

Think of one act of love you could do for another person. Write it on a piece of paper, stick it in the envelope and put it at the foot of the cross. We are going to give these back to you next week. And we may see how we got on.