

1 JOHN 2:12-17

SERIES ON 1 JOHN
MT ALBERT BAPTIST CHURCH

A SERMON BY STUART MCGREGOR

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I write to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven you for his name's sake.
I write to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning.
I write to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one.

I write to you, little children, because you know the Father.
I have written to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning.
I have written to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of
God remains in you, and you have overcome the evil one.

Don't love the world, neither the things that are in the world. If anyone loves
the world, the Father's love isn't in them. For all that is in the world, the lust
of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, isn't the Father's, but
is the world's. The world is passing away with its lusts, but they who do God's
will remain forever.

—1 John 2.12-17

This week I have felt at war. I'm not sure why, but I have come to this evening's service feeling like I have been dragged behind a truck for a good number of miles in the desert. Actually that's not true. But it doesn't matter.

But I think that far from this being an apology I want you to understand what it means for Stu McGregor to preach. It means that when I say the word 'we' I'm not being polite, I mean 'we'. It means that if I find that God wants to talk to people through my sermons, then it usually means that God wants to talk to Stu McGregor as well.

I am all too aware of my own failings and flaws, and I would hate for anyone to think that I am anything more than another human being who has been given at times awe inspiring and at other times unglamorous and still at other times fearful opportunities to preach the word of God. But vulnerability

is something that I bring with me to this place. I am not perfect, not that anyone has said that I am, but I think it's important to state that as a fact.

So last week I was thinking that as I exposed my own difficulties it may give others the opportunity to expose theirs. Because we bring to church not a heart that will gladly worship him at every moment of the day, but hearts that are distracted by the strangest things, by the smallest temptation, are bent on being so selfish. We bring fragility and failure to church and we present them before God. We come warts and all. And we can do this because Jesus forgives.

Because Jesus takes what tiny bits that are redeemable and lets that become more and more a part of who we are—if we let him.

But what actually stops us from being distracted? What are the undercurrents that drive us? What's the stuff that makes us feel important or special?

Is it our work? or it could be our sport? Could be it travel and gaining experience? Or could it be being a good religious person? Is it having things or making things? Where do we get motivated from, and at what point is that motivation a positive or negative force?

We find favour in peoples' eyes more than we would care to admit.

There are very few people who feel free from the eyes of the world when they walk out of the door. Who doesn't have a final glance in the mirror before you leave the house? Come on guys admit it . . . we all care about how other people perceive us.

I'm not sure what the driving force is behind this desire to look OK to other people.

"I need to feel good about myself. It gives me confidence when I know I look OK to other people."

When professionals wear a suit, "It's like if I don't wear a suit it will be a barrier to my colleagues and peers and they won't respect me." And it is true. Just go to Smith and Caugheys wearing jandals, ripped jeans and a Leather Jacket with some Gang patch on it. You may come across a newly employed staff member trying to impress the boss on their first day but the rest of the staff are strangely consumed by specks of dust on ties and benches.

How many times do we check that we don't have food stuck in our teeth? I hate it too, I get home from a great night out having dinner with friends and there's this piece poppy seed stuck between my front teeth. And it occurs to me that I ate that bun at lunch time, before I went to the

bank manager about my mortgage and to the job interview and my passport photo.

Girl looks at disbelievingly at boyfriend when he says “I’ve got a pimple right here on my forehead. I can’t go out tonight.” She says, “But we’re going to the movies.” “but I’ve got a pimple right here.” She rolls her eyes “But the movies are dark . . .” “I don’t care, I’m not going.” And he starts to sulk because he doesn’t want to be forced to look foolish in front of people who actually don’t care, and if they do it is for a brief moment until something else gets their attention.

And back to the cell-phones. When I was working as an IT administrator I sincerely believed I needed the latest cell-phone to support my image. It needed to be silver, have infrared capability so that I could connect it to my laptop which would mean I could surf the net anywhere in the country . . . and it needed to have downloadable ring-tones, WAP and e-mail capability.

Now as a youth pastor, I still need that eh! I mean how can I minister effectively to the youth unless I look hip and cool? I need to look cool so that they will relate to me right? You did employ me because I looked cool at the interviews didn’t you?

Isn’t it true that we source a huge amount of our identity in what people think of us? The way we speak, dress, walk, drive, work, shop, listen to music . . . how we worship, pray and minister—how much of our style is uniquely ours and how much is dictated to us through reactions to other people’s unspoken opinion?

At the end of the 1800s the great philosopher Fredrich Nietzsche talked about how power is the driving force for our actions. That all of our actions are dictated not by the welfare of others but by our desire to dominate. He suggests that we do nice things not to be nice, but to gain favour, to extract from someone good-will. He says that:

A living thing seeks above all to discharge its strength—life itself is will to power .

And when we look around us we can see that there is more than an element of truth in this. Our society functions on power dynamics.

Who is your boss? Who has authority over you? Nietzsche would have us believe that the driving force behind authority is the will to subdue, to gain control of someone, to become more powerful. And it certainly looks that way in many sectors of society. The ladder of success which is still a feature in

many of the professions in our society, is governed less by skill but more by the power and opinion of those in superior positions.

As humans it seems that our egos have an insatiable appetite for exposure. They want to be seen. We want our voice to be heard. We want our opinions to matter. We want people to understand that we have worth, not just in our doing but in our knowing as well.

It is almost like the concept that Charles Darwin introduced to the western way of thinking. Survival of the fittest.

Our desire to dominate will be at the expense of others. We will become greater than those around us by beating them at their own game. We will climb this ladder of society, become great in our field, we will climb the Mt Everest of our vocation and let our voice be heard! . . . do you thinking I'm exaggerating?

Women's magazines knock down the great who are the monarchy or celebrities, the news media prey on people's disasters for ratings, men's magazines allow individuals to have mental control over beautiful women even for a brief moment, sports matches are a mild and acceptable form of racism—boo the crusaders—go the blues because we are going to be greater than the south island! Jafas versus the rest of the country, tall poppy syndrome.

Mothers want to be the best mothers in the world so they read the right kinds of books and lord it over everyone else, government wants to be the most tolerant and forgiving in all areas of social policy because that will keep them in 'power'. Churches have the latest and greatest technology and have an image to maintain some semblance of power within society under the guise of being relevant. Bible translations compete for the youth market, mothers' market and the men's market—same translations but with different covers and introductions. Prayers that are prayed need to be convoluted with more jargon, effective pauses and the like to establish just how spiritual we are, or alternatively they have to be coarse and abrupt to prove how authentic we are. Youth programmes are bigger, better and cooler to be relevant . . . and the list goes on. We can look at every single aspect of our lives and see this massive battle for supremacy in the world.

It is the story of individualism. It is the value that western society holds most highly and most prized. **We have lost our understanding that existence is not a right, it is a privilege.**

It is the familiar story of the black-hole of Calcutta. Where it was reported that during an Indian rebellion against the British, 146 British

prisoners were thrown into a room 20feet square, that is a room 6m by 6m. They were left there overnight in the heat of the summer. The story goes that because the ventilation was so poor they started to struggle and squirm to get closer to the oxygen vents that were high up. They started to climb all over each other and trample each other underneath to gain more height. People were crushed to death in the 8 hour frenzy of human instinct at its worst.

In the morning, of the 146 that entered the room only 23 survived. The story may or may not be true, but we can all identify in part with that awful desire for personal survival.

Survival of the fittest. Society runs on this motif. It seems that we all need someone to trample. Someone to subdue, someone to exert power over.

Am I exaggerating?

Couple this with the reaction to it, that I will not be trampled, not me and to prove that I have worth I will communicate this using whatever means I have. You will see me, me rise to the top. I am human, hear me roar! It's a cry that echo's around a vast room filled with 6 billion people.

But our society is bent on this notion of "being your self", but no-one is allowed to define what it means to *be* or to answer what is *self*. To define existence will box people in! People will be captive!

But it's weird how we see that our expression of *self* is usually through something external, something like music or clothing or technology or interests. It's almost like we are feeling this enormous pressure to say something but to say what we would really want to say would be too hard or too painful or too embarrassing so we say something else, we dip into the vocabulary of our society and pull out some words.

Instead of saying, "I'm not really into competing against other people." We shout "Nike!" Instead of saying "I don't think I really need to be so connected with people" we shout "Ericsson!". Instead of saying "I'm not interested in poling my nose into other people's business" we shout "One Network News!" And the voices shout louder and louder.

We get caught up in this incredible power struggle between our voice and other voices. The more we shout, the more others shout. The more we fight, the more others fight. Who is winning? It seems that when we shout we are using someone else's words.

It's madness I tell you! Madness, and how will it stop? What will make it all stop?

Don't love the world, neither the things that are in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of Jesus isn't in them. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, isn't the God's, but is the world's. The world is passing away with its lusts, but they who do God's will remains forever.

And there it is. In a little book tucked away at the back of a big book, John is undermining the very nature of our society. He is saying to us to reject outright the expectation that we should succumb to the pride of life. I love that phrase. The pride of life. John is telling us to reject the pride of life!

Pride. It's a terrible thing. We all experience it. Sometimes it protects us doesn't it? Sometimes we can get away from our responsibility to be agents of love in situations because we have some kind of better understanding about what is really going on. Sometimes?

Remember the proverb? James 4.6 "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." In fact let's read James 4.1-10.

Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures.

Adulterers! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. Or do you suppose that it is for nothing that the scripture says, "God yearns jealously for the spirit that he has made to dwell in us"? But he gives all the more grace; therefore it says, "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble."

Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Lament and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy into dejection. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.

Yikes. Why is this being said? Because the humble heart is the one that can love people. It is the one that gives the benefit of the doubt, that sees the image of God in others, that lets other people be worthwhile. Even the bum on the street. Even the intellectually impaired. Yes, but they're the

obvious examples aren't they. We need to be more honest than that. We need to explore the immediate surroundings of our prejudice.

We're back at the heart of the letter of 1 John. Love God and love people. I want to suggest that sometimes we can see the more extreme examples as the targets of our misplaced affections. Sometimes we can think of the most obvious examples that are outside of our present circle of living, the poor in Africa or Asia for instance.

We can make day trips to the streets and minister to the homeless like some organisations do—and of course this is absolutely beneficial—but the question is, can these day trips be a way of escaping the real difficult situation of loving people in our normal existence?

Isn't one of the hardest things that John is saying here that we are to love those who lord power over us? The boss, or even worse, the workmate who thinks they are sooo good at their job. The acquaintance who just can't help but say how wonderful they are, how successful they are becoming. That guy on the other sports team, or worse on our own team, who just can't help but be so good and let everyone know? That person who gossips about you and puts you down all the time? Isn't that a hard person to love?

A humble heart is one that can love. But it's not the most successful business heart. A humble heart gives others a leg up to the air vent. A humble heart see worth in others.

Don't love the world, neither the things that are in the world. If anyone loves the world, the Father's love isn't in them. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, isn't the Father's, but is the world's. The world is passing away with its lusts, but they who do God's will remain forever.

It is just like we have a choice here. Be fulfilled in the world, whatever fulfilled means in that context, or be fulfilled in service to God for eternity. Love God and love people. It's the vertical and horizontal of the cross. Reject the pride of life and embrace Jesus.

Last week we filled out little promises that would be little acts of love for people we don't really like. There are about 40 envelopes, that is 40 different acts of love that have been pledged to happen this week.

Who wants an extension?

Who wants to write another one?

Is there anyone else who wants to tell of their experience? Not having done it is just as much an experience of having done it!

