

Living in the Last Hour
Cultivating Authentic Christian Community
1 John 2:18-29
Pastor Bryan Clark

I think you can pretty much count on the fact that anything in this world that has great value is going to be copied, imitated, faked...counterfeited. There's probably nothing in this world that has greater value than God's offer to receive the forgiveness of our sins in a relationship with Him now and forever. Therefore it would be fair to assume nothing in this world is more counterfeited than that offer. That's what we want to talk about this morning. If you have a Bible, turn with us to 1 John, Chapter 2.

We've been talking about community. We learned that the essence of community is entering into the life that has defined God forever—to dance with God. But to dance with God—to dance with Jesus—you must dance in the light because Jesus only dances in the light and light exposes our *stuff*. It exposes our *sin*; it exposes our *rats*, and we must deal with our stuff in order to stay in the light. We learned that when we experience God's forgiveness—when the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin—we notice there are others with us in the light who have been so cleansed and we invite them to join us as we dance with Jesus. That is the essence of authentic Christian community.

If we're going to dance with Jesus, then He requires that we *love* like Jesus, so we have to reorient our lives. Rather than the default setting—which is to be selfish every day—we reorient our lives to think of others as more important than ourselves—to give ourselves away. So the necessary ingredients for community are *light*, our *love* and, this morning we're going to talk about *truth*. We pick it up in Chapter 2, Verse 18:

Children, it is the last hour; and just as you heard that antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have appeared; from this we know that it is the last hour.

(*NASB, 1 John 2:18)

He refers to them as **children** and, as we talked about last week, there are two different Greek words for children. One is just talking about the fact that we're all family because we've all been born from the same spiritual parent—from Jesus Himself. That's the word used in chapter 2, verse 1 and that's the term that's used off and on throughout his letter.

But last week we were introduced to a different term that carries more the idea of a new believer—somebody that isn't yet spiritually mature and is at risk. This word for children is *that* word. I think the train of thought is: Last week we talked about those who are *spiritually mature*, those who are *growing* Christians, and those who are *new believers*. And really the encouragement to the mature and the growing Christians was to listen to what John has to say, because he's concerned about the false teachers and he's mostly concerned that the false teachers will lure the new believers away. They're the most vulnerable. After telling the believers in the church to do that, he now turns around and writes directly to those new believers—to those that are the most vulnerable to the ramblings of false teachers. And so this section is directed right at them.

He talks about the concern of **antichrist** or *antichrists*. There is a singular and there's a plural. Now what does he mean by that? This is a term that's unique to John; he's the only one in the Bible

that uses this term. And basically, if you take the two Greek words that make up this word, it means to stand *against* Christ or *instead of* Christ. I think the best way to think of it is it is someone who is *against Christ*, but the strategy to do that is to offer something *instead of Christ*—in other words something that is counterfeit, something that comes up alongside of that which is true and looks like it's true but it's actually a counterfeit. That's the best way to stand against Christ. That's the best way to confuse people and to lure them astray.

Now who is the antichrist (singular)? It depends a little bit what your End Times theology is or what your eschatology is but I think everyone would agree, at the end of the day, *the* antichrist is the evil one—it's Satan himself. That makes the most sense in this text because he just warned them of the evil one. He told them that they need to overcome the evil one. He just talked about the evil one as the architect of the world's system intended to destroy. He's the ultimate antichrist. Jesus said that he's a liar and a deceiver. When Paul writes to the Corinthians he says, "*He disguises himself. The evil one disguises himself as an angel of light.*" In other words he's a counterfeiter. He presents something that is *other than* what it is.

Now if you go back and look at that text in 2 Corinthians, when Paul refers to him as *disguising himself as an angel of light*, there's no question the context is referring to religion. Therefore, what he is saying is how he operates as an angel—disguising himself as an angel of light—is he takes a religious system and he puts it up alongside the true story, in order to confuse people and deceive them and lead them astray. So I think that's the ultimate antichrist and the ultimate battle is yet in the future and that's how it's worded in the text. But in the meantime he sends his foot-soldiers. Those are the antichrists (plural)—the false teachers that are intended to lead people astray and, interestingly enough, that was a problem two thousand years ago and it's a problem today. John says that's always going to be a problem in this last hour.

Now what does he mean by **...last hour**? This is another phrase that's unique to John. He's the only one that uses this phrase. Paul uses a similar phrase. He refers to the *last days*. People will often say, "You know, do you think we're in the last days?" My answer is always, "Absolutely!" because according to the New Testament, from the ascension of Christ until the return of Christ, these are the last days. Yes, we're in them. We've been in them almost two thousand years and we'll be in them until the return of Christ. That may be tomorrow. That may be a hundred years from now. That may be a thousand years from now. But this time in history is referred to as the last hour or the last days.

Now the best way to understand it is to realize that there has been this ongoing story of God all the way back to the beginning—from the Garden of Eden onward. In Genesis, Chapter 3, since sin entered into the picture, God made a promise that He would one day send a Redeemer—a Savior—that would make it possible for sinful people to make it back to Paradise forever. So the story of history has been God's unfolding story, giving images and pictures that ultimately lead to the coming of the Messiah. So virtually all history has been looking forward to that moment in time. But that time has passed—the Messiah has come. Jesus perfectly fulfilled God's promise and through his death, burial, and resurrection, provides salvation to those who, by faith, will receive it. From the ascension of Christ to His return, what's unique about this time in history is, this is the only time in human history where we're not looking forward to the fulfillment of the promise, but rather proclaiming the message that the promise has been fulfilled. So the last chapter of the story *is* this chapter, and the mandate is to proclaim the message that the Messiah has come. And then Jesus returns, has His last battle; there's the final judgment, and He ushers in the New Heaven and the New Earth. So that's what he means by *last hour*. This is the last chapter of the story before

Jesus returns and ushers in the New Heaven and Earth. So he says what will define this chapter is antichrist—false teachers. We need to know that. Verse 19:

They went out from us, but they were not *really* of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but *they went out*, so that it would be shown that they all are not of us.

As is very common, the false teachers came from within. The closer the counterfeit is to the original, the more deceptive it is; the more dangerous it is. And when the false teachers come from within, they are always more dangerous than those who come from without. He is saying they were with us but they weren't really one of us. In other words they were a part of our group but they never really believed. They never really bought into the message of Jesus. And so the more we came together in community, the more it became obvious, "*Hey, you don't fit here. You don't believe what we believe. You don't affirm the same truth that we affirm.*" Therefore, *they went out*.

Now that's interesting to think about. In essence, what John is saying is, what exposed the false teachers was community, that in community it became obvious, "*Hey, you don't fit here. You don't really come into the light. You don't really love like Jesus. You don't really believe the same things.*" And they were exposed and left.

We live in a world that devalues truth because we believe that truth divides and so we have to diminish truth. We have to kind of make it secondary so that we can all come together and get along. What John is saying is the polar opposite of that. Actually what brings us together—what actually defines us as a community—is truth. So you might say that truth is necessary for true community, but true community is necessary to guard the truth. Another way of saying that is, "Show me a church that doesn't value community and I'll show you a church that is vulnerable to false teachers." So he says to them that the false teachers have *gone out*. Verse 20:

But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and you all know. I have not written to you because you do not know the truth, but because you do know it, and because no lie is of the truth. (vs. 21-22)

He says **...you have an anointing**. Now the language isn't *you have been anointed* where it's emphasizing the process. It's emphasizing what they received—the substance of the anointing. Now this word *anointing* is one of those terms that preachers throw out a lot and it often gets very confusing. "*What are you talking about?*" There's absolutely no question in John's letter, in John's mind, he's referring to the Holy Spirit. If you go back and you read John's Gospel, he uses this term a lot and it's always in reference to the Holy Spirit. That's clearly his reference here. He is saying that the Holy One, which would be Jesus Himself, has sent His Spirit to anoint us, to live within us in order to lead us to truth.

Now remember when John opened his letter he said, "*I'm going to talk to you about stuff that I've heard from Jesus with my own ears. It's stuff I've heard, I've seen, I've touched, I've scrutinized.*" When you get to the middle part of John's Gospel, where he's talking about the discussion in the upper room, Jesus said to his disciples, "*I have to go away. But it's to your advantage that I go away because, when I go away, I'm going to send My Spirit and My Spirit will live within you and My Spirit will lead you to all truth.*" There's no question that's what John is referring to here. He

heard it directly from Jesus Himself that, “*You have the very Spirit of truth within you to lead you to truth, to give you what you need to know the truth.*” Verse 22:

Who is the liar but the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, the one who denies the Father and the Son. Whoever denies the Son does not have the Father; the one who confesses the Son has the Father also. As for you, let that abide in you which you heard from the beginning. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, you also will abide in the Son and in the Father. (vs. 22-24)

John is identifying **the liar**. The liar is **the one who denies Jesus as the Christ**. Now he’s talking specifically about the Gnostics. The Gnostics believed in the concept of a Christ, but they did not believe that Jesus was the Christ. They did not believe that it was possible that God would take on human flesh because they believed that human flesh was evil—that all matter is evil. Therefore they denied that Jesus is the Christ. And John says, “*When you get the doctrine of Jesus wrong, you have no access to the Father.*” That’s what he says. “*If you deny the Son, you deny the Father. If you confess the Son, you confess the Father.*”

Now it’s interesting that this text would come up right at this time when there is quite a bit of media attention related to Mitt Romney, related to Rick Perry, related to Pastor Jeffries out of Texas and what all is going on in the religious world. It’s driven by politics. It’s driven by political correctness. It’s driven by a media agenda. But churches are not political and churches are not politically correct. According to the truth of God, if you get the doctrine of Jesus wrong, you have no access to God. A Christian church, by its very name, is built on the concept of Christ and if you don’t get your doctrine of Christ correct, you’re not a Christian organization. It’s important to understand that.

One of the reasons why sometimes truth seems to divide and truth seems to prohibit community is because we sometimes don’t understand what are the right things that we need to stand on. A lot of churches are split over lots of things like worship styles, like church government, like eschatology. But there are certain foundational truths that are non-negotiable, that define who we are as a Christian church. Jesus Himself stood before John and said, “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Nobody gets to the Father unless they come through me.” John is repeating the same thing. “*If you deny the Son, you have no access to the Father.*”

When we talk about the doctrine of Jesus, it’s the fundamental doctrine that Jesus was God in the flesh—fully God, fully man, lived a perfect life, ultimately was crucified on a cross in payment for your sin and mine, was buried and rose again, and offers His salvation freely to those who receive it by faith. That is the fundamental doctrine of the person and work of Jesus.

Notice what he says in verse 24: **As for you, let that abide in you** (that’s one of John’s favorite words—to live in you, to take up residency in you) **which you heard from the beginning**. Now this is a really important statement for our discussion this morning. It’s a concept John has thrown out there over and over again—*from the beginning* of the time that they heard it from John...*from the beginning* of the time that John heard it from Jesus...*from the beginning* of time when the story of God started in the Garden of Eden. It’s important to understand that the story of God has been unfolding throughout history—the story that is the story of God’s redemption. Sometimes you hear people in the culture talk about Judaism starting with Abraham and these world religions that preceded that. But the story of God does not start with Abraham. It starts in the Garden of Eden with Adam and Eve sinning against God, and in Genesis 3:15—God promising through the seed of

a woman he would once again bring life back out of death. The story of history is the story of God's promise to redeem us from our sins. Alongside of that, all along the way have been counterfeits, put forth by the evil one who disguises himself as an angel of light to confuse people and to lead them astray. The closer the counterfeit is to the original, the more confusing it is and the more deceptive it is.

Now when we talk about the story of God, we're not talking about religious theory. We're not talking about a bunch of mystical stuff that happened in a cave that's written in a book. We're talking about real people, real history, real miracles, real events, real prophecies, real fulfilled prophecies—things that can be investigated, things that can be scrutinized, things that can be affirmed. Archaeology can come back and affirm the credibility of God's story over and over again. History comes back and affirms the credibility of God's story over and over again. We can document over seventy major prophecies made about the coming of the Messiah that were perfectly fulfilled in Jesus. We can calculate the odds that that just happened by chance. We can document from history the birth, the life, the death, and the resurrection of Jesus. We can document that there was a massive explosion of Christianity—of people that bought into the concept of a risen Messiah in the first century, exploding from the very place where those events took place. The New Testament was written well within the lifetime of the eyewitnesses to those events. Again, this is not religious theory. It's not just one of many theories out there. If you're here this morning and you're seeking for truth, this can be investigated; it can be scrutinized; it can be affirmed. This is the story of God.

Some time ago I heard an interview with Richard Dawkins and he was asked the question, "If someday you die and find out that there is a God, what would you say?" He basically quotes Bertrand Russell in saying, "I would say to God, 'Why did you make Yourself so hard to find?'" I don't understand that at all. What if God Himself became a man and walked on this earth and declared over and over and over again, "This is the way. This is the truth. This is the God story. This has always been the God story," and affirmed it with miracles and a resurrection. Why is that so hard to comprehend? Isn't that God doing everything possible to say, "This is my story," in order to separate it from the counterfeit. That's what he means. John says, "*What you've heard from the beginning is the story of God. God Himself spoke it to me in the upper room and I'm speaking it to you.*" Verse 25:

This is the promise which He Himself made to us: eternal life.

John is summing it up and saying, "This is the story of God. He is the Word of Life. He is the One that came to reveal the life that has defined God forever." It's a *duration* of life but it's a *quality* of life. It's the deepest, richest, most fulfilling life possible. Jesus became a man in order to declare, "This is God's story. This is eternal life." Verse 26:

These things I have written to you concerning those who are trying to deceive you. As for you, the anointing which you received from Him abides in you, and you have no need for anyone to teach you; but as His anointing teaches you about all things, and is true and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, you abide in Him. (vs. 26-27)

Again John loves this word...*abide*—to dwell and to take up residency in. He reminds them that they have this anointing. They have the very Spirit of Jesus Himself within them, again remembering that Jesus doesn't just tell the truth; He *is* the truth. Just like Jesus isn't just alive; He

is life. He is truth itself, and His Spirit is truth itself. His Spirit lives within us and He is the truth and He is there to guide us into truth.

Now what John is *not* saying is: Because of that, no one needs to teach you anything. John just got done talking to the mature believers, saying, “You need to teach the new believers.” He himself is teaching them in the letter. That’s not what he’s saying, but he is picking up on a term that the Gnostics were using. The Greek mythological religions—mystic religions—basically had this concept of an **anointing**. It was kind of this experience. It was very mystical and kind of enlightened you to that which is true. So the Gnostics picked up on that and offered this *enlightenment*. Again, the name *Gnostic* means *to know* or *to be in the know*. And what they offered was this enlightenment that would allow the people to really know the secret and to know the mysteries of God. So basically the appeal was this: “*Hey, we set up our own church just down the block and, if you join our church, we’ll show you how to have this mystical experience that will enlighten you to what’s really true about God.*” What John is saying is, “You don’t need that. You don’t need some other experience. You don’t lack anything. You have the very Spirit of truth within you to lead you to that which is true. We don’t need a prophet hundreds of years later. We don’t need books written hundreds of years later. We have everything we need with the revelation of God and the Spirit of truth within us to guide us to truth.”

Now it’s interesting that we actually have this GPS within us—the Spirit of truth—to lead us and affirm to us what is true. This explains why the more you look at the evidence—the more you look at God’s word—the more you look at that which is true, there’s something inside of you that says, “*That’s really true. That’s really true!*” And there’s this building sense of confidence and this sense that, “*I know this is true,*” when an unbeliever is looking at the exact same stuff and saying, “I just don’t think I believe this.” What makes the difference is that the evil one has blinded the eyes of the unbeliever. But to the believer He has given us His spirit of truth that speaks to our heart, our spirit, and says, “This is true,” and so we believe it more and more fervently. Verse 28:

Now, little children, abide in Him (live in Him, dwell in Him), so that when He appears, we may have confidence and not shrink away from Him in shame at His coming. If you know that He is righteous, you know that everyone who practices righteousness is born of Him. (vs. 28-29)

The big problem with the Gnostics, with these false teachers, is that they had constructed a theology to fit their morality. They’d figure out a theological way why it was okay and acceptable to live grossly immoral lives. This is often what separates religious people from the truth of the gospel. At some point it’s no longer an intellectual problem. It’s not a lack of facts on the table. Religion allows you to pursue God on your terms, with you still living your life your way. But the demand of the gospel is that you surrender to God as God and surrender your life to Him and choose to live life God’s way—and that’s often the great divide. It isn’t an intellectual problem. It becomes a problem of whether I’m going to surrender to God or whether I’m going to be my own god—and religion grants you that option.

What John is saying is that if we’re going to have credibility, if we’re going to say that we have found the truth, if we’re going to say that we dance with Jesus in the light, if we’re going to say that we love like Jesus, then our lives should reflect that truth. And if He is righteous, then our lives should be righteous. There should be something within our lives that says: These people found the truth. They have the joy. They have the hope. They have the purpose. They have the significance. They choose to live life God’s way as evidence that they have genuinely found that which is true.

What confuses people is when we say we believe this but we don't live like it. Then they're confused. They don't understand how those two things fit together. And that's what John is saying. The Gnostics clearly don't believe—their lifestyles give evidence of that. If we believe, then it should *seem* like we believe. There should be an evidence in the way that we live our lives. The effect of that is then: we abide in the truth so that when Jesus returns, we don't have to shrink back in shame but rather we confidently celebrate the return of Christ. If, rather than dancing in the light, we choose to pull back into the darkness and somehow justify our sin, or we're deceived, or we've made up our own doctrine in order to allow ourselves to live our lives our own ways, when Jesus returns, His light will expose the darkness and those in the darkness will be exposed for who they are.

Now exactly how that will work I don't know. I find this to be very similar to the discussion about rewards. God talks about them. We should take them seriously. I think they mostly have to do with motive, but I don't exactly understand how that's going to work. In the same way, I don't really understand how it's going to work when He comes back, but clearly there will be those who will pull back in shame because of how they have lived their lives, resulting from things they believed that weren't true versus those who abide in the truth and believe that God tells the truth and choose to dance in the light and choose to love like Jesus and choose to embrace the truth and live life God's way. In order to experience authentic Christian community there must be *light*; there must be *love* and there must be *truth*.

Our Father, we're thankful this morning that You love us, that You love us and You tell us the truth. Lord, You've given us Your Spirit, the very Spirit of truth, and He lives within us to guide us to that which is true. Lord, I pray that we would be sensitive to the voice of the Spirit, that we would be aware of the deceivers around us and, Lord, that we would take our stand on that which is true. Lord, I pray for those here this morning who perhaps have never really understood what is true. Lord, I understand how easy it is to be confused and distracted. The enemy is a clever enemy. But, Lord, I just pray that Your Spirit this morning would lift the blinders, that they would understand what is true and receive Your gift of life. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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Opening Discussion

1. In what ways do you see the antichrists at work in our culture today? Where are they coming from? Are they coming from within religious environments or secular environments?
2. Which would you consider more dangerous – false teachers who emerge from our culture or false teachers who arise in our churches? Why?
3. How important is knowing truth to living the successful Christian life? Do we live each day like we believe truth is essential? What did you do this week to grow in your pursuit of truth?
4. What is a counterfeit and what makes it hard to identify? What things are typically counterfeited and what things are not? Is the counterfeit as valuable as the original? Why or why not?

Bible Study

1. Review: Why is light and love necessary to experience authentic community?
2. Describe the operating system of the world according to 1 John 2:15-17. Why is this system a barrier to true community?
3. Read 1 John 2:18-29. What does John mean by the “last hour”? Compare Hebrews 1:1-2 and 2 Tim. 3:1-9. What can we expect in this last hour? In what ways are the “antichrists” really counterfeit “Christs”? Can you give some examples?
4. What does John say about these antichrists? Where will they come from? What identifies them as having never truly been converted? Compare with Matt. 13:24-30 and Matt. 7:15-23.
5. What does John mean by ‘you have an anointing’? What do we have? If the essence of true community is to dance with Jesus in the light and He is the truth (John 14:6) and His Spirit is in

us, then what is the relationship between truth and community according to John? What does this mean in practical terms?

6. Compare John's words in 2:20-27 with the Gospel of John 14:16-26. What role does the Holy Spirit play in our lives? What do we lack as Christians? Do we need another experience or prophet or "anointing"?
7. What has been the message of the Christ "from the beginning?" How can we know this? What gives us confidence that we have the truth? What's the difference between religious claims and the historical roots of Christianity?
8. John states that what will keep us from shrinking away in shame at Jesus' return and allow us to have confidence is to abide in Him (2:28, 29). What does this mean? Think of it this way; if you dance with Him who is the light and the truth, how should we then live? What is the relationship between how we are living and true authentic Christian community?

Application

1. What will it mean for you to "abide" in Jesus and His truth this week? What will be necessary for the Holy Spirit in you to lead you to truth? What role do others play in that pursuit?
2. How can we be on guard for the "antichrists" arising among us? How should you respond if you have concerns about someone leading people astray? What might be some simple yet compelling responses we might offer to those who say all religions are equally valid?
3. According to John if you are abiding with Christ (dancing with Him) your life should reflect that which means light, love and truth. How are you doing?