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Grace Fellowship Church, Port Jervis, New York

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Light versus Darkness

Selected Scriptures

Prayer: *Father, we thank you for the opportunity that we have still. We thank you for the gift of the political freedom that we have. We thank you for the gift of freedom from sin that we have in the gift of your Son. And Lord, I just again, each time at this time we just thank you for your Holy Spirit, thank you for your word, and I pray that you would give us the presence of your spirit. We can't make heads or tails of anything without the presence and power of your spirit. And so we pray Lord, as we open up your book that you would accompany us and make it of permanent value, and we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Well we are again back at 1 John, and we've spent a considerable amount of time here just grappling with what John says is evidence that we're actually born again believers in Christ and not somebody that's guilty of either kidding ourselves or having been kidding by others. And this is how John puts it in 1 John 2:4-6, he says: *Whoever says "I know him" but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him, but whoever keeps his word, in*

him truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may know that we are in him: whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked.

So John sets out not one but two different standards by which we can know that we truly do know Christ: number one, we keep his word, and number two, we walk like he walked. Now the less that we actually know about Jesus, the easier it is for us to do that. I mean if we think of Jesus as just a good man, a good leader, a good teacher spouting off good platitudes, well then Jesus will be relatively easy to follow. But the more you learn who Jesus is, the more you understand that he was very God in the flesh, that he had come to earth to live not just in accordance with the law, that is the Ten Commandments, but to perfectly execute to the very last jot and tittle every single aspect of the law just so that he could bring his perfection to the cross as payment for our sins, if you know that, well then you know that his walk was not just a difficult one, it's an impossible one for anyone other than God to accomplish.

And as far as his talk went, well that too went beyond impossible when Jesus gave this command to his disciples. This is what he said in *John 13*. He said: *A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to*

love one another. Have you and I ever loved a human being the way Jesus Christ loves us? I mean have you ever loved somebody flawlessly? I don't think so. See, part of the tension that John is dealing with is this call is to live in a Christ-like way; and the more you know Christ, the more you know how impossible that is on a human level. But God doesn't ask us to live on a human level, he asks us to live in accordance with the Spirit of Christ that he has now placed within us which enables us to do, as he puts it, "all things in Christ."

And so the apostle John now takes his fellow believers back many, many years to when Jesus was walking among them because you understand, this letter is written, when this letter is written John is an old man. So John takes his readers back, back even further into the Old Testament to where the very same command to love was uttered by God, once towards our neighbors in Leviticus. We find in *Leviticus 19:18*: *You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself.* That should sound familiar. And then there's another one towards our God and this is *Deuteronomy 6:5*: *You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.* Well Jesus' life and ministry accomplished both of those ends perfectly.

John now reminds us that those commands, they've really never changed. This is what he says in verses 7 and 8, he says:

Beloved, I am writing you no new commandment, but an old commandment that you had from the beginning. The old commandment is the word that you have heard. At the same time, it is a new commandment that I am writing to you, which is true in him and in you, because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining. So the commandment, it's both old and new because God has expressed it all the way a back to the Old Testament books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy, and yet it's new as well because God himself has come to earth to not only to give full expression to what it means to love like Christ loves but also to indwell and empower us to do that. *"It is a new commandment that I am writing to you, which is true in him and in you."* And this new commandment that we are to love one another as Christ has loved us, it's now possible in us as it was in him. I mean the very same power that gave Christ the ability to supernaturally love can now be found within us as believers in Christ. In other words we are now empowered to love as Christ loved. I mean every time you hear that phrase "in Christ," understand what it means. It means if you're truly born again, then God has given a unique and supernatural power to you. Because within you now is the Spirit of Christ as the Holy Spirit giving you a supernatural power to obey his command to love in ways that are clearly miraculous. Again

John says: *At the same time, it is a new commandment that I am writing to you, which is true in him and in you, because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining.*

Now the darkness is literally what the world is like without the presence of Christ, and the true light that's already shining, that's Jesus. And John then makes a statement that probably most of us would shake our heads at considering the moral state that we're in today. John says: *"The darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining."* Well that statement itself makes needs some considerable unpacking.

Let me just explain how I see the battle between light and darkness in the context of our culture and in the context of our lives here today. You see, first you have to go back in time to gain an historical perspective of who Jesus was in terms of the light and what it is he came to earth to accomplish again in terms of light versus darkness. John tells us in his gospel that Jesus was the light. In *John 1:4* he says: *In him was life, and the life was the light of men.* We find Jesus himself telling us in *John 8:12*: *"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."* So Jesus is light. As God he is pure light who, according to *1 Timothy*, dwells in unapproachable light, who stepped out of that light into what is

known as "the darkness." *John 1:4* says: *In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.*

Well you know it's helpful to understand a little bit about the physical aspects of light and dark in order to grasp what it is that they're getting at here with this idea of spiritual darkness. I mean, there's something absolutely unique about darkness in a physical as well as a moral sense. You know you can think of all kinds of physical opposites, like wet and dry or hot and cold, but when it comes to light and darkness, we find that there's something unique. You see, in every other physical sense, you can project one or you can project the other but not so with light and darkness. I mean, you can take a dry area and project water onto it like a fire truck does at a fire. You can project dryness into an area that's wet like anyone who's ever used a hairdryer knows. It's the same with hot and cold, I mean, you can project heat as in welding, you can project cold as in cryogenics, you can project light but you can never project darkness. Because what's unique about darkness is that it does not in and of itself exist, it's simply the absence of light. I mean, you can project light with a flashlight but think of the idea of projecting darkness, I mean, there's no such thing as a flash dart that projects darkness. You can only produce darkness by removing light. And light itself has

a history. I mean God said at the very beginning when this world was first produced, it didn't have any light. In *Genesis 1:1-3* it says: *In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light.*

Now that light, that light was the physical manifestation of the presence of God. And once again we find that darkness is simply the absence of that presence. So the ultimate horror is hell itself which is the essence of darkness. Folks, today you know, they imagine hell as a place, oh, it stinks of sulphur and is on fire, it's got all these demons with pointy tails and they're poking people with pitchforks. I don't think it's like that at all. There's a reason why God calls hell a place of outer darkness. Hell is by definition the complete absence of light. It's the complete and utter satisfaction of one's desire to remove every shred of light and to dwell in absolute and complete darkness. Who wants to do that? Why would anybody want that? Well Jesus says precisely why, and it comes down to this ongoing war that's taking place right here and right now between two very different sides. This is what Jesus said in *John 3:19*. He said: *And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and*

people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed.

Now understand Jesus is the absolute expert on light and darkness, being the essence of light himself, and it's Jesus who tells us the horrors of a place that has no light whatsoever. Think about what Jesus said about hell itself in *Matthew 10:28*. He said: *"And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell."* Well that ongoing destruction of both soul and body in hell is the natural ongoing state of those who refuse the light. They inherit the darkness. And make no mistake about it, there's an ever present ongoing war in heaven and on earth right here and right now between light and darkness and those two kingdoms, the kingdom of darkness and light will never coexist together peaceably. God says the light will cast out the darkness. But he also says that those who love the darkness will also be cast out. I mean that's what Jesus told the faithful centurion about the fate of the faithless in *Matthew 8:12*. This is Jesus' own words. It says: *"The sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."*

Jesus also once told a story about a man arriving at a wedding

feast clad in his own righteousness rather than the righteousness that only Christ can supply and this is what Jesus said about that. He said: *"Then the king said to the attendants, 'Bind him hand and foot and cast him into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'"* And then Jesus told yet another story about a man who had been given talents and sought to bury them rather than advance using them to advance the kingdom, and there *Matthew 25* says: *"'For to everyone who has will more be given, and he will have an abundance. But from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. And cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'"* It's popular today to paint hell as something that comes due to God's respect for man's bad choices but there's also, you've got to understand this, there's a judicial aspect to hell, one in which God casts the lover of that darkness out into that darkness.

Joe Rigney, he's a professor of theology at Bethlehem College and Seminary and he offers this observation about C.S. Lewis' thoughts on hell. This is what he says: "Sinners are cast or thrown into hell, into the lake of fire. That's the language of the Bible. At the same time, when Paul describes the wrath of God being poured out (Romans 1), it looks like an increasing process of dehumanization—God giving us over to our desires and finding that

we become less and less human. Things come apart. This is where Lewis is brilliant in his depictions. Hell is an everlasting ruin, a decay, crumbling, retreating into yourself, a loss of all rationality and joy, a plunging into misery. But, it's a self-plunging. It's a gnawing and an ache, but it's oriented inward, downward into the abyss. It is, in one sense, the opposite of heaven. Heaven is this ever-increasing, further up, further into joy, into God, into life. Hell is the opposite of that. It's an everlasting movement away from God."

It's a movement characterized by an ongoing increasing embrace of darkness. And hell is described as a place with the complete and total absence of light. And also note that every one of those descriptions is accompanied by weeping and gnashing of teeth. It's important to understand that gnashing of teeth is not an action of regret, it's not a deep longing that things, oh, could they be otherwise. Instead it represents a bitter enmity that this person has, not as a static part of who he or she is but as an ever-growing dynamic. Every moment you spend in hell is a moment in which your hatred of God who cast you there continues to grow and your disgust that heaven in spite of your hatred of hell remains. I mean, the destruction of soul and body in hell is an ongoing, never-ending eternal task. And folks are in hell because they hate the idea of heaven, and it's an ongoing dynamic eternally

growing in hatred which is why hell is forever.

Just consider for a moment the problem of darkness. Just ask yourself, how could the complete absence of light ever produce any desire for that light? I mean you might say it's only when you're in a dessert that you start wondering how badly you crave water. You don't miss your water till the well runs dry. But for somebody who loves the darkness, hell is everything they craved in the first place. I mean, Jesus said it best, he said: *The light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light.* Folks in the desert crave the water they can't find but folks in hell are swimming in the darkness that they love in the first place. They're not starving for it, they're swimming in it. So where would the desire for the light that they're fleeing from come from if I'm in hell? The absence of light precludes anybody being attracted to that light and an ongoing embrace of ever-growing darkness. And by the way, Satan isn't somehow or other the boss of hell. People love to think that he's the one that's in charge down there. He's simply a fellow prisoner of the darkness released right now on bail as it were to do God's bidding until such time as this war comes to a close. And make no mistake about it, there is an ongoing ever present war between the forces of light and the forces of darkness trying to eliminate that light. And the war ebs and flows again according to God's will and

purpose.

This is what God said in *Isaiah 45:7*. He's declaring that he is ultimately in charge. He says: *"I form light and create darkness; I make well-being and create calamity; I am the LORD, who does all these things."* You see, for God's own purposes darkness was essentially reigning when Christ came into humanity. I mean John's gospel describes it this way. He says: *"In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."* Well, this text was written by John some sixty years after Christ had come to shine into that darkness and offer up his life as a sacrifice for us and then having risen from the grave, had gone on to heaven. John in all likelihood is writing from the Island of Patmos where he's in exile and he's explaining how Jesus' ministry has grown from simply shining the light in the darkness and not being overcome by it to this bold statement that John is making this morning. This is what he's saying. Again he says: *Beloved, I am writing you no new commandment, but an old commandment that you had from the beginning. The old commandment is the word that you have heard. At the same time, it is a new commandment that I am writing to you, which is true in him -- and here's the key -- and in you, because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining.* Again, just to remind you, the new commandment is to love others as

Christ as loved us. I mean it's certainly true in him but again we're talking about Christ who is perfect love personified and John doesn't stop with Christ. He says *"I am writing to you a new commandment which is true in him and in you."* Just think about it. Is John actually saying what I think he's saying? Is he saying that in Christ we have the very same miraculous power to love that Christ had? That it is now in us because we have the Spirit of Christ living inside? That's what John insists. Listen to how he put it in *1 John 4:12*. He says: *No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us. By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.* I mean if you truly understand what God is saying here and you begin to grasp the enormity of what God has entrusted us with and what loving others is all about, that is it's not Jesus alone but we believers who are part of the process of making the darkness pass away. Peter put it this way in *1 Peter 2:9*. He says: *But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.* And again John says: *At the same time, it is a new commandment that I am writing to you, which is true in him and in you, because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining.*

Now as wonderful as that sounds, a lot of us can just kind of look around us and say how can John say this darkness is passing away, it sure looks like it's advancing to me. Well, thank goodness God doesn't look at the light as we might look at it. You see, from the day that Jesus arrived on earth, the light has been doing exactly what God said it would do, and that is advance. God in Matthew's gospel laid out a timetable that charted the advance of the light from the very beginning of Jesus' ministry. Listen to this. Speaking of Jesus, this is what Matthew says in *Matthew 4:12*. He says: *Now when he heard that John had been arrested, he -- that's Jesus -- withdrew into Galilee. And leaving Nazareth he went and lived in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: "The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles -- the people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light, and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death, on them a light has dawned." From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."* So from that very moment Jesus began gathering his disciples, building his kingdom and advancing the light. Again understand, darkness has no power in and of itself. The only power darkness has, the only power it can grow is by removing the light.

So from the day that Jesus began his public ministry, he began attacking the darkness by empowering his disciples to become literally light, light itself. That's exactly what Paul says. That's what Paul says takes place when one enters the kingdom. Listen to how Paul puts this in *Ephesians 5:8*. He says: *For at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light.* Just think about that in terms of this war that's going on. I mean as Jesus was light so now we in Christ, we have become light as well. We become new sources of light that can pass that light on to others. Just consider, if you say one person represents one candle power, then every additional person who comes into the kingdom would add yet another candle power and from Jesus' beginning some 2,000 years ago we're now somewhere between two and three billion candle power in that battle of light versus darkness. And remember, the kingdom of darkness has no power in and of itself. Its only hope of advancing is not in its ability to project its darkness but its inability to stuff the light. Every time someone from the kingdom of darkness comes into the light, well then the ability diminishes by one. So can we say as John says: *The kingdom is advancing and the true light is shining?* Absolutely, yes. It advances every time someone comes to the light. Listen to how Jesus put this in *Matthew 5:14*. He says: *"You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but*

on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven."

Now as John does so frequently having established the positive aspects of who we are as light in the world, he then goes on to describe the impossibility of genuine light bearers acting like so many so-called Christians seem to be very comfortable to act. This is what he says about that. He says: *Whoever says he is in the light and hates his brother is still in darkness. Whoever loves his brother abides in the light, and in him there is no cause for stumbling. But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes.* What John is giving us here is good news-bad news scenario, actually it's more of a good news-terrifying news scenario. The good news that John is telling us categorically is that as believers in Christ, we've been given this absolutely supernatural power. It's one that belonged wholesale to Jesus that now has been given retail to every single one of his sheep. It's the ability to love our brothers. And the bad news, the terrifying news is that given this supernatural ability, we have also now have a way of knowing if we're one of his sheep or not. And the test is extraordinarily simple: Do you hate your brother? Can you think of someone whose very name being

mentioned causes your gut to tighten and your teeth to clench? If you were to do a completely open and honest personal inventory, can you honestly identify people who you would have to say you have hatred for? Maybe it's somebody who abandoned you in your time of deepest need? Maybe it's someone who betrayed you or tempted to have fun at your expense, who took advantage of you. Well if so, you know you are in good company, because Jesus knows precisely what it was like to love somebody who actively betrayed him. He offered Judas the place of honor at the last supper, giving him that grace just hours before he betrayed him. He also knows exactly what it feels like to be abandoned by those that you've counted on the most. He loved his disciples, all of whom abandoned him, some of whom actively denied him with curses, cursing that they didn't even know him. As for mistreatment, Jesus cried out to his father for forgiveness for those as they're pounding the nails into his flesh. And then there's the mockers who dared him to come down from the cross to prove that he was God. You see, Jesus had no shortage of people he would have been entitled to hate.

So who do you hate? Perhaps it's someone who mistreated you at one time or another, maybe it's a whole class of people who you've never even met. Christians are supposed to be known for their love but frequently they get singled out for their hatred. Sad to say, seventy percent of those slaughtering and being slaughtered in the

Rwanda genocide of Hutus and Tutsis were at least nominally Christians. Christians killing other Christians. You say, how could that possibly be? Well John suggests that it cannot, and that people that engage in such hatred, only -- they do that only when they're kidding themselves that they're one of his sheep. And what John is doing for us here is he's giving us yet another criterion, another indicative, if you will, to decide whether or not you really are one of Christ's sheep. See, those who are his sheep have been given a power and an insight through the presence of the Holy Spirit that others simply do not have. They have the ability to put their need to forgive into God's perspective.

Jesus told a story that made that crystally clear. This is the story he told in *Matthew 18*. It says: *Then Peter came up and said to him, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times. Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents -- that's billions of dollars. And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything' --*

something he could never, ever do -- And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, 'Pay what you owe.' So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. Then his master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?' And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart."

So the person who refuses to forgive is someone who is simply unable to put into proper perspective the forgiveness that he had received. He doesn't grasp what he's been forgiven of. It turns out that he's been forgiven a debt numbering in the billions and he's about the business of demanding payment on a debt in the hundreds. He has no understanding or concern that the cost of his debt was literally the blood of God himself. And because he cares

not, he finds his debt remains. And the only way that debt can remain is if you are not one of his sheep. If you are one of his sheep, if you've been given this supernatural ability to perceive what you've been forgiven of and because of that perception you are expected to give what you have received, and that is to love those whom the world feels you are entitled to hate. The good news is that you've been given supernatural power just like Christ has to forgive all, and that means the burden of carrying that hate on your own has been supernaturally removed. You don't have to receive a certain kind of response to produce that forgiveness, you don't have to reserve space in your head for that person. You're now capable in Christ of offering one hundred percent one-way forgiveness that requires nothing to be extended on the part of those who've offended you. Understand what that means. That you are one of a few people who don't have to be enslaved by bitterness towards someone who's offended you. You know you can safely leave the situation in God's hand for his ultimate justice knowing that that justice will be rendered. *Romans 12:19* says: *Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord."* See in Christ you're someone who has the power, the literal supernatural power to turn away from that bitterness that can and often does eat you alive.

Well the terrifying news in all of this is that if you find that there are people in your life that you simply cannot resist hating, perhaps it's because you don't have this power. And of course the logic inevitably leads to the very real possibility that you don't have this power because you're not one of his. Let me just repeat it. He says: *Whoever says he is in the light and hates his brother is still in darkness. Whoever loves his brother abides in the light, and in him there is no cause for stumbling. But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes.* Please don't misunderstand. The power that being in Christ gives, it's not an ability to turn some kind of magical forgiveness on that comes at no price, that comes at no cost to me individually. It cost a great deal to be able to extend forgiveness especially to someone who might not even want it. What I'm trying to say here is that Christ alone can give you the power to do that. And the terrifying part about a lack of forgiveness, it's not the idea of somebody struggling even mightily with the need to forgive, I mean that's what believers do. We struggle at it. I mean it's okay to have people in your life that you feel absolutely overwhelmed at the thought of forgiving because you still have the power of Christ to forgive, and you can bring that fear and that loathing to Christ and he will give you the power to forgive. It's only those who are able to withhold forgiveness, who

are able to remain bitter, who are able to extend hatred without feeling the Holy Spirit pressure to live up to this indwelling desire to forgive that should have cause to think maybe the Holy Spirit doesn't live here. And that may be terrifying news at first but it may be the best news you've ever heard because it's also an invitation. And when you're indifferent to the idea of forgiveness, consider the possibility that darkness has blinded your eyes not just to the need to extend forgiveness but to the idea that the lack of forgiveness is silently shouting that you're not one of his sheep.

And if God's spirit is speaking to you right now, that's good news. Think about it. It's just what happened to Paul when he was on his road to Damascus. He was absolutely dead set and absolutely certain that he was on the right path and entitled to hate Christians enough to seek killing them. God spoke specifically to Paul, and what said to him that day still has meaning to those who are still blinded by their inability to forgive. This is what Jesus said. He told Paul that he would: *'Open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.'* See, those who have received forgiveness are those who have been sanctified by faith. And those who refuse to forgive give every evidence that they've

not yet been forgiven themselves. And so I plead with you to heed this good news, because you still have the option of claiming Christ as your Savior and welcoming that power into your life. Let's pray.

Father, I pray for the presence of your Holy Spirit and I pray if there is someone here this morning either on You Tube or here in this building that has been struggling with the need to forgive, that has been struggling with bitterness, that has people in their lives who they feel entitled to hate, Lord, I just pray that they would understand the supernatural power that accompanies being born again in Christ, that we now are the light, we've been given the light, we've been given the presence of the Holy Spirit who enables us to forgive. And I pray for each and every person who is facing those kind of choices, Lord, that they would give their fear and their loathing and their inability to you and they would say, "Lord, I'm willing to forgive. Help me to forgive." And I pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.