

Spot the Christian!

1 John 2:1-14

There was *big news* on the ABC website on Friday morning. Did you see it?

A black kookaburra was spotted in WA.

Very rare to see a black kookaburra, but there it is.

A black kookaburra has an excess of dark pigment in its skin,
and *can* be seen from *time to time*, but it is a *very rare* bird.

Are you interested in this? Is this the kind of news article you'll stop and read?

It is for me, because I'm a bird watcher! It's one of my hobbies!

Now, I feel a little embarrassed about this

because it's a pretty dorky thing to be into,

and I couldn't have picked a more stereotypical hobby for a minister!

I wish I could offer you something a bit more exciting!

I wish you could say "My pastor races motorcycles", or

"My minister plays lead guitar in a heavy metal band",

but no, all I'm offering you is ... bird watching.

Apparently, one of my predecessors here

used to brew his own beer under the porch of the old rectory,

he did this in secret until there was an explosion or something...

There'll be none of that while I'm around, let me tell you!

The good thing about bird watching is that it's relatively [inexpensive] to indulge in.

First you need some field glasses to spot the bird,

But also an authoritative source to *identify* the bird.

Here's my go-to volume: ...

This book is the standard that I use to make sense of what I see,

and the more I make reference to it,

the better equipped I am to identify what I'm looking at.

This week we are continuing in our series in 1 John,

and John is writing this letter

because he wants his readers to become experts in identification,

not experts in identifying the wildlife of the ancient Mediterranean,

but experts in identifying true Christian teachings from false ones.

The twist this week is that his focus is not so much on identifying right teachings,
but on detecting the right kind of actions within God's people.

As worshippers of God, do we exhibit the right kind of behaviour?

Are your leaders exhibiting the right kind of plumage?

Well, John has some markers that he wants us to consider.

But first of all he has a reminder of the two great truths that we heard last week

1 John 2:1 My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin.

Here is the first great truth: our behaviour matters, it really does!

God is a holy God—God is light as we heard last week—

and he calls us to be a holy people, to stop walking in darkness.

And the second great truth is that, as well as being holy, God is also merciful:

But if anybody does sin, John continues, we have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. ² He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.

John's instruction to not sin in v1 would be cruel if it wasn't matched with v2.

God knows that on this side of heaven human sin is inevitable,

and so Jesus was sent as an advocate,

as a helper who can aid us sinners as we stand before a holy God.

And how does he help us?

Verse 2 says that Jesus is the atoning sacrifice for our sins.

In some of our other English translations,

instead of the words atoning sacrifice,

they have a more technical word,

they say that Jesus is the *propitiation* for our sins.

If you propitiate someone,

then you're doing something to turn aside their anger.

So you're at work and the boss takes you aside expressing their disappointment:

"That report was due two days ago. I've got this important meeting with our stakeholders tomorrow, don't tell me I'll be flying blind in that meeting! I trusted you with this assignment, and why were you late this morning?"

And so what do you say? What do you do?

You say and do something to propitiate them, don't you?

Something which turns aside their anger

"I'm sorry, yes, I've let you down, I will stay back tonight and it will be on your desk when you arrive in the morning."

And so by carrying that through you manage to turn aside the boss' anger.

So how can we manage to turn aside *God's* anger about the times we've failed *him*?

Well, we have a helper who does that *propitiation* for us,

Christ Jesus, whose death is the act that turns aside God's anger.

So these are the two great truths:

God deals with our sin, while we are to turn away from that sin.

And it's this second truth that John will use to identify Christ's true followers.

Now, when you're out with your field glasses and you're trying to spot your birds, successful spotting requires you to concentrate on certain features.

Usually you need to spot three or four features on the animal:
 The shape of the beak, the pattern on the plumage,
 the colours on the face and around the eyes are usually important.
 the pattern of flight is also a good one.
 The more markers you can spot
 the more success you will have with identification.

When it comes to spotting followers of Jesus,
 the markers are whether we are upholding the commands of God
 verse 3 We know that we have come to know him if we keep his commands.
 A Christian in the wild will be one who takes God's laws seriously,
 Will they use God's name appropriately?
 Will they honour their mother and father?
 Will they be truth-tellers?
 Will they not look jealously upon their neighbour's possessions?
 Will they maintain sexual purity?
 Will they keep meeting together with God's people?
 If someone truly knows God, then they'll take these commands seriously.

If you remember from last week, John's big concern
 was with the *false teachers* who were trying to lead his readers astray,
 and I think that's what's behind his advice in verse 4
 Whoever says, "I know him," but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not
 in that person. ⁵But if anyone obeys his word, love for God is truly made complete in them.

John was fully aware that influential people—people with great charisma—
 were positioning themselves as alternative leaders with an alternative gospel.
 And so John wants his friends to pause before signing up with these guys.
 "Just wait and see whether their lives are what they ought to be" John says.
 "If they truly know God, then God's commands will be taken seriously".
 And this remains good advice to this day.

In my first year working in a church we had two church members
 who became entranced by a Pentecostal revival that was happening in
 America. These guys were here in Australia watching these You Tube videos
 of church meetings which were accompanied by all sorts of signs and
 wonders and they said "Let's get over there" so they bought plane tickets to
 attend a series of church services. And when they came back they wanted to
 bring it into our church.

And so the staff team I was on took their request seriously and we did some
 study and some thinking and we decided that no, we wouldn't suddenly
 change our ministry approach because while we didn't want to deny the
 possibility of miracles, our own commitment was to the priority of word
 based ministry. And if charismatic gifts were going to be used then we didn't

want to import them, rather we wanted them to be generated from within the body so that they could be tested *by* the body as Paul instructs in 1 Cor.

But aside from all this, about a month after we made that decision, the leader of this revival was stood down because it was revealed that he was having an affair and was drinking too much. At that point the charismatic issues were neither here nor there. This was a man who claimed to know Jesus but was not living in obedience to his commands—unrepentantly so from what I can work out—and so he did not deserve an audience.

Have you heard the saying “Speed of the leader, speed of the team”?

The leader sets the expectations that are laid upon the followers, and so if a leader starts to deny the importance of God’s commands, then you can be sure that those following will also end up denying God’s laws. And so John wants us to take note:

when leaders claim to know God,
can we see them working hard to follow his laws?

And it’s not just a concern for the leaders among us.

John wants *everyone* to take stock in this way:

This is how *we* know we are in him: ⁶ *Whoever* claims to live in him must live as Jesus did.

In these verses John provides us with an important test for true Christianity

Our obedience can provide us with a sign that our Christianity is genuine.

But this kind of test must be handled with care.

Do you remember those science experiments
where you would thrust a substance into a Bunsen burner
to see what colour flame was produced?

The colour would reveal the metal that was in the substance.

A handy test, but don’t keep anything flammable nearby or you’re finished!

I feel this test of *Christian obedience* is a little similar,
in that, unless we use it carefully, then we can do ourselves great damage.

It’s very easy to read John’s words and to think “Well I mustn’t be a Christian!”

Because who here among us can successfully live as Jesus did?

But it’s important to realize that John has in mind those leaders who are saying

“God’s commands don’t matter”

he’s not thinking about those people who say

“God’s commands are hard, but I know they’re important!”

In fact if you are the type of person who does worry about your obedience then I suggest you have nothing to worry about

because obviously God’s law matters a great deal to you.

John is not looking for perfect obedience,

he'd already said that sin is a reality,
 and he's already pointed out in verse 2 that if we do sin
 then Jesus is ready to act as our advocate, turning aside God's anger.
 So the test is not so much to ask "Have I sinned today?" but,
 "Are God's commands from the Bible still a priority for me?"

Sadly some people will answer 'no' to this second question,
 They've decided in their hearts that: generosity doesn't matter,
 truthfulness doesn't matter ... sexual purity ... meeting together ...
 and so they cannot be assured of their salvation.
 But, if you still *want* to be obedient, then that's a great sign of faith.

Sometimes when you're identifying birds
 There's one feature that's telltale sign.
 Here is one of my favorites at the moment.
 The Eastern Rosella, an iconic bird but not as common as it once was.
 It's not easy to spot: it's flight path follows a wave pattern
 so it's hard to land your eyes on it.
 It has green tones on its wings like the Rainbow Lorikeet,
 but the one tell-tale feature I look for is the white patch on its cheek;
 that's the marker to look for, it's the marker which must be present.

And among all the forms of obedience that we are called to pay attention to,
 there is one characteristic that John thinks is vitally important: love.
 V10 Anyone who loves their brother and sister lives in the light,
 and there is nothing in them to make them stumble.
 It's a love that John will later describe as being exemplified by the cross,
 a love which is sacrificial, which puts the needs of others ahead of your own.
 It's a love that I *do* see here in our church at Waitara.
 I see people foregoing personal time to make meals for others,
 I've seen people opening their homes to those who are homeless,
 I've seen people provide transport to those who would otherwise be stuck.
 All simple things, but not all people are willing to do carry out these actions.

And John also warns about the opposite of love, v11 But anyone who hates a brother or
 sister is in the darkness and walks around in the darkness.
 Here are some examples of hatred
 that I've seen or heard reported in church settings over the last few years:
 Suing the church denomination,
 Trashing the reputation of a church leader while on social media (many e.g's),
 Yelling at someone over the phone,
 Throwing a broom at someone across the room (see it on You Tube!)

These accounts are absolutely horrible,
 and such things have absolutely no place among God's people.
 What's really shocking with the above examples

is that each one was perpetrated by a minister!
 And again, if such behaviour is in anyway excused or justified
 then the legitimacy of that leader's role should be questioned.
 Love is the marker throughout the church on each and every level.

And it's the marker throughout the church for each and every age group!
 One of the difficulties when spotting birds
 is that their plumage can change as they get older;
 you need to know your juveniles from your adults.
 However, John expects that within the church
 each age group will be displaying the same signs of faith.

Notice how in vs 12-14 he addresses both youngsters and those who are older.
 Youngsters are ones who have overcome the evil one,
 the older ones are those who know God, and, as we have seen,
 knowing God means keeping his commands.

Sometimes we give the young and the old a free pass on love, cant we?
 We don't want to pressure young people,
 we want to enable them to find their own way
 —and there is some wisdom there—
 But the Bible also says the young require guidance,
 and some of the sharpest forms of hatred that I've seen in churches
 have been in the youth fellowships as one group excludes another.
 We might say to ourselves, "That's how kids are",
 But John would beg to differ; he has much higher expectations!

And sometimes we speak of older people as having turned off the filter.
 We laugh as they say outrageous things, unloving things,
 and sometimes it's the product of weakening faculties,
 but sometimes its because, well, its possible to stop caring isn't it?
 There's a T-Shirt I've seen some older people wearing: "ageing disgracefully"
 But again, John has higher expectations, he wants us to age gracefully,
 including the grace of loving others as Christ loved us.
 And so the markers remain consistent throughout the ages

Last summer we had two birds of pray that roosted in the big gumtrees next door.
 It was a very exciting time, but I couldn't get a definitive identification!
 I think they were Black Kites, but I just couldn't see enough to be sure,
 and so I remain a little confused as to what they were.

Are people sure of what they see as they come close to you?
 Are your identifying markers clearly on display?
 Let's not leave people confused,
 Lets have people understand that we follow *God's* commands,
 particularly the command of love. I'll lead us in prayer.