

Are you a fan of the television programme, The Apprentice? I'm not going to ask for a show of hands, so it can remain your guilty secret.

For those of you not familiar with the programme, it's a reality tv show, very similar to Britain's Got Talent, Strictly or I'm a Celebrity, but this time it's based around business. And like these other programmes, contestants are judged every week and whittled down to an eventual winner.

Now, I'll admit we're not massive fans of these in our house, but we have seen the process from the other side of the camera. I've got 3 friends who, over the years, have been involved in these programmes as contestants. Two went on the X-Factor and the other on Masterchef.

It's interesting to see what happened to them because they are genuinely brilliant at either singing or cooking. But you never saw that on these shows. Instead, the focus was on criticism, emphasising what made the judges unhappy and ignoring, almost completely, the skills and expertise that brought them to that position.

In other words, the talent that took them through the auditions, beating literally thousands of people to get on the show in the first place, was ignored.

Now these are relatively new programmes, only becoming popular, I think in the last 10-15 years but they're interesting because, in many ways, they mirror our society.

In the UK, for example, we seem to be more comfortable criticising, rather than praising. Some tabloid newspapers seem to build people up, only to delight in their downfall a short time later.

We see the same thing in politics. Even when politicians and journalists know that a policy is successful, no one can bring themselves to congratulate or praise.

In many ways, I think we've developed a culture where feeling positive and adopting a loving attitude isn't acceptable. It's easier to be negative and critical.

And this is important when we think about our reading today.

Our lessons on discipleship from 1st John have, to this point, been laying the foundations.

But in this section, John changes his tone slightly and starts to discuss the practicalities. In other words, how we should live on a daily basis as a disciple of Christ.

Before getting into the text itself, I want to focus on the writer for a moment. As Alan has mentioned before, although the authorship of the letters hasn't

been confirmed, scholars widely believe it's the same author as the Gospel of John, because the writing style is distinct.

Indeed, if you look at the Gospel of John, it's very different to the other Gospels. It almost appears to be written as a reporter might recount Jesus' life, rather than the personal messages that we see in Matthew, Mark and Luke. The writing style is closely observational, with long accounts of Jesus' teaching.

In other words, you could imagine John studying the situation in detail, carefully observing and documenting these important words.

And that's why the author of 1st John is important. He likely wrote these letters towards the end of his life and here, in these writings, John is giving us the benefit of his years of careful observation, documentation and understanding of what it is to be a disciple of Christ.

In other words, this writing is a very considered account of the message he's been called to give, gathered using decades of experience.

And that's why his use of words is important. They aren't used dismissively. He's too careful for that. For example, you'll note that John used the word "know" very frequently in the opening verses. We know. To know him. I know him.

So why is he doing that? What is he emphasizing? Well, when John uses the term "know", it doesn't just mean an understanding or familiarity. It's not even a confession or mystical experience. When he uses this word in other places, it's all of these things, and more. Knowing to John means living the truth of that knowledge.

In other words, when he uses the word, "know", he's telling us this is what a disciple's life should become with the knowledge of Christ.

And the first aspect of discipleship he considers is discussed in verse 6, which says: "Whoever claims to live in him must live as Jesus did".

In other words, we have to follow Christ's example to others.

On the surface, that might seem straight forward. All of Jesus' earthly ministry was undertaken in love. We see it when he fed the hungry, healed the sick, preached the kingdom, offered intercessory prayer.

So you could be forgiven for thinking that to be like Jesus, all we have to do is live a good Christian life: Help our church and local community. Turn up to worship, give generously, volunteer for a rota and so on. While these are hugely important, by themselves, they're not enough because Jesus' love went far beyond practical engagement with those around him.

Jesus loved everyone, and expected us to do the same. Even our enemies.

In Luke 6, Jesus says:
“love your enemies, do good to them,
and lend to them without expecting
to get anything back”

And that aspect of Christ’s life is, I think, the most difficult part of discipleship:
showing love to the unlovable.

I’m sure we all struggle with this:
That person who cut you off when driving, then shouted at you.
How can you love that person?

The friend who gossips about you behind your back.
How can you love in the face of that betrayal?

That family member who’s so ungrateful, despite all your support.

Loving people who hurt you is not easy because showing love to your
enemies is founded in forgiveness.

And yet Jesus did it.

On the Cross, when he was suffering the most awful death, Jesus asked
that his tormentors were forgiven, even as they cast lots for his clothing. He
forgave Peter, even though he denied him 3 times. He tells us to forgive, not
seven times but seventy-seven times.

But how could Jesus do this? I think it’s because through his love, he saw the
potential for good in everyone. He recognized that with forgiveness, everyone
has the potential to change and be better people.

But as I mentioned at the start, we live in a culture of criticism and negativity.
We don’t see that potential for good in others and offering praise just feels a
bit wrong.

I think that’s a real barrier to loving as Jesus loved but it’s also a barrier to
Christ’s kingdom. Society is never going to change if we only see the worst in
others.

And it’s a mindset that can affect you in other ways too. When you think so
negatively about others, soon you see yourself in a similar way. When you
look in the mirror, you don’t see one of God’s children, living in His grace and
love. You see a broken sinner staring back at you.

We know we’ve been forgiven by Christ’s death on the cross but do we know
because we’ve been told and read it in the Bible, or do we know, as John
asks, because you live the life of someone who’s been truly forgiven?

And this is important because we have been asked to love and forgive our enemies but can we really do that if we can't love and forgive ourselves?

If we are truly Christ's disciples and if we want to see his kingdom, our lives can't be dominated by sins from our past. Sins that we would never repeat and, through Christ's death on the Cross, have been completely forgiven.

That guilt, and lack of acceptance of his forgiveness, are truly the biggest barriers to loving others because as John said in this passage, that negativity leads you into the darkness. A blinding darkness where you will lose your way.

And yet, we know there is light that shines through this darkness. That light is God, and in him, there is no darkness at all.

And so, I want to leave you with this thought:

If the memory of those sins weigh heavy upon you today and the guilt you carry is a barrier to loving others, open your heart to God and accept His forgiveness. You can't hide these feelings from Him. He knows your guilt already and despite all of that, he still wants to lift this burden from your shoulders.

All you have to do is be honest with him, bring that guilt to him, and ask for his grace because your prayer will be answered. He is waiting, right now to fill your heart with joy and when you have experienced that blessing, and understand that forgiveness through Christ, you will be able to fully forgive others and love your enemies.

You will be able to show love to those bad drivers, those gossips or those ungrateful family members.

You will be able to live in the light and will never stumble because you will have truly experienced God's grace.