



Jonesboro Heights Baptist Church
Sanford, North Carolina

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“The Rule of the Evaluator”
1 John 4:7-12

It was the spring semester of 1981. I remember it well.

I was a freshman at Campbell University, taking Dr. Jerry Wallace's Religion and Philosophy 224, “Basic Christian Ethics” course. It was one of the toughest courses I had at Campbell.

Dr. Wallace is the president of Campbell now. At that time, he was chairman of the Department of Religion and Philosophy. He was known back then not only for his stimulating lectures and his keen intellect, but for the difficulty of his tests. He gave two kinds.

There were the exams, the major tests—four of them in all, including the final exam. Dr. Wallace customarily referred to his major tests as *Yom Yahweh*, the “Day of the Lord,” when everything would be laid bare and each one would be judged on the basis of what he or she had done.

Those tests were enough to put the fear of the Lord in you! But when it was all said and done, I actually did fairly well on those.

What gave me the bigger problem was the other kind of tests. He affectionately called them “Evaluators.”

He would walk into the room, put down his books and say, “The rule of the Evaluator is now in effect.” That meant, “Clear everything off your desk, take out a clean sheet of paper, and number from one to five.”

Five questions, on the reading for the day. He read them out, we answered them—or at least we *tried* to answer them.

Almost every day, it was the same thing. Dr. Wallace would walk in, and we would hear those dreaded words that struck fear in our hearts: “The rule of the Evaluator is now in effect.”

You see, he wasn't content just to know if we could do the work at four specific intervals in the course. He wanted to know how we were doing all along.

“The rule of the Evaluator is now in effect.”

And he counted them in calculating our final grade!

Judging how we're doing . . .

One of the things that the historic Christian faith has always taught is that there will be a “final exam” one day. When God brings this present world as we know it to an end, there will be a reckoning, a judgment, “The Day of the Lord,” *Yom Yahweh*. Small and great, rich and poor, good and bad, righteous and evil will all stand before him. We who trust in Christ will be judged on the basis of our faith in him as we depend on his work and righteousness and merit, not our

own. Those who do not trust in Jesus will be judged according to their own works, and will receive the just sentence of separation from God for eternity.

But how do we know *now* how we're doing and where we stand?

When I read this little epistle of 1 John carefully, I see several important themes arising. One of those themes—a key one—has to do with signs or indicators of who among his readers were really believers and who were not. There seems to have been a problem of sorting out just who in the churches he was writing to were really following Jesus Christ.¹

In the first two chapters, John says that it is those who really walk in the light, confessing their own sins, trusting in Jesus' atoning sacrifice for our forgiveness, and obeying God's commandments, who are really believers. As he understands it, the essence of God's commandments is to love our brothers and sisters in Christ, our fellow Christians. If we hate our fellow Christians, we're still walking in darkness; if we love them, we're walking in the light, obeying God, doing His will.

In chapter 3, John marvels at the awesome love that God has lavished on us—that we should be called “children of God.” He reminds us that as God's children, we should be becoming like him. As a result, we no longer practice lawlessness and sin as our way of life; instead we practice righteousness, living as Jesus did on earth. The essence of this righteous way of life is love for one another—not a warm, fuzzy feeling, but significant action. John says,

“Do you want to know what love is? Look at Jesus! By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers and sisters. Our love shouldn't just be pretty words and pious expressions, word or talk; we must love in deed, in action and in truth!” (3:16, 18, paraphrased).

So up to this point in his letter, John has been hinting at it ever so strongly. Every time he talks about righteousness or obedience, he brings love for fellow Christians into it. And nowhere does he make this connection more powerfully than in our text, 4:7-12. He addresses those who will hear what he has written as those who have been loved by God (literally, “beloved,” from the same root as the Greek word New Testament writers used to describe the kind of love that God loves with and that his children should love with). And he puts it in no uncertain terms:

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love (4:7-8).²

And just to make sure we understand the kind of loving he's talking about, he adds,

In this God's love was revealed among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he

¹ These commentaries were helpful in my interpretation of this text: F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970, Repr. 1995); Edward A. McDowell, “1-2-3 John,” in *The Broadman Bible Commentary, Vol. 12* (Nashville: Broadman, 1972); Charles H. Talbert, *Reading John* (New York: Crossroad, 1992); and Marianne Meye Thompson, *1-3 John in The IVP New Testament Commentary Series* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992).

² Unless otherwise indicated, translations of the Scripture passages are my own.

We sang it when I was in Franklin Hooks' youth choir at the Tabor City Baptist Church, and we sing it here at Jonesboro Heights Baptist Church from time to time. As a young pastor of a church recovering from deep division, I taught this song by Peter Scholtes to my congregation.

We are one in the Spirit,
we are one in the Lord.
We are one in the Spirit,
we are one in the Lord,
And we pray that all unity
may one day be restored.
And they'll know we are Christians
by our love, by our love,
And they'll know we are Christians
by our love.³

Dear friends, brothers and sisters, beloved of God, "the rule of the Evaluator is now in effect."

†MEG

³ Peter Scholtes, "They'll Know We Are Christians by Our Love," © 1966 by F.E.L. Publications.