

The Test of Obedience and Love

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[0:00] This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you that God is light and in him! Let us pray.

Gracious Father, shine your light upon us as we sit under the preaching of your word. Humble and chasten us in our pride and foolishness. Comfort and assure us in our weakness and doubt. And help us to walk in your light and grow in obedience and love for you and for your church. For the sake of your dear Son, Jesus Christ, our advocate. Amen.

If you remember in our first sermon on this, as we launched this series, we said before that John's original errors were faced with a division in the church. Some have left the church claiming that they have a higher spirituality. Claiming fellowship with God while neglecting the apostolic word, which is the authoritative standard for Christians. Many of these deserters claim, you know, that they were spiritual giants, higher spirituality. They claim a higher knowledge of God even. And the faithful, the remaining, might be tempted to question whether they really know God.

After all, they are acquainted with their weaknesses and sins. While these super-Christians say sin doesn't matter. And that they no longer sin. It's easy to start asking questions of yourself.

[2:04] What am I doing wrong? Why do I still struggle with sin when this person claims that he doesn't sin anymore? Why is my Christian walk full of disappointment over my inability to obey this Jesus I love, while these so-called super-Christians seem so triumphant in their walk?

These super-Christians never seem to put a foot wrong. Ever. And here I am, stumbling all the time, always crying out for mercy. So John writes to the church. He writes to the church, past and present, to instill confidence in the faithful and to expose the liars. So I hope you've seen that's what John has been doing so far.

He's exposing the liars and comforting and giving assurance and confidence to the faithful. Last week, John began to give us evidence of what it looks like to walk in the light with God.

To have fellowship with Him. We saw that those who have true fellowship with God have an increasing consciousness of their sins.

Do you hear that? True fellowship in God means that you are increasingly aware of your sins. And you confess them. And that stands in contrast to the liars who claim fellowship with God, and yet they minimize sin.

[3:51] They deny their sinful nature. In fact, they ignore sin altogether. So John says, those people are liars. Now this week, John continues to expose the liars and to give assurance to the faithful by giving us the second and third marker of true fellowship.

He gives a test of obedience and a test of love as markers for those who are in the light and to expose those who are in darkness.

Now remember that Paul has said, God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all. So only those in light have a true claim to fellowship with God.

So John then begins to give us the test of obedience, which is the second marker of true fellowship, in verses 3 to 6. So John writes again, John writes again there that these pseudomi, these liars, these actors, that's the way it kind of describes them, masquerading as followers of Jesus, actually remain in darkness.

Why? They claim, they claim we have a higher knowledge that gives us deeper intimacy with God. They claim we have the higher gifts that shows us spiritual superiority.

[5:18] And to all these claims, John says, the sign, the true sign of knowing God, that is of true intimacy with Him, is obedience.

Obedience. If you love me, Jesus says, you will obey what I command. That's in John 14, 15.

And that's why the Apostle John then writes, this is how we know that we have come to know Him if we keep His commandments. Obedience is the mark that Jesus is Lord over our lives in practice and not just in theory, in actuality.

Obedience is walking the walk, not just talking the talk. But obedience is out of vogue in our day, isn't it?

As it seemed to be even in the church in Ephesus that John is writing to. You know, it's more common to hear people say today, I feel the Holy Spirit say this or that.

[6:30] Or I sense in my heart God saying this or that. God's word, while completely sidestepping God's clear command in the Bible.

Now the Holy Spirit does speak to us. And if we're in Christ, we will hear His voice. But we never hear His voice over against His revealed word in the Holy Scripture.

If you ever feel the Holy Spirit is telling you something and then you read the Bible and it's opposed to what God has revealed in His Holy Spirit inspired word, objective word, then brothers and sisters, that's not the Holy Spirit talking to you.

If anyone says, the Holy Spirit is telling me that you ought to do this, and you look in God's word, and it doesn't agree with God's word, it is not the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit does not disagree with Himself.

So, but we hear it a lot today, the feeling of the Holy Spirit, we look inward, rather than objectively at God's word as the standard by which we ought to live.

[7:40] Let me give you clear examples. One of the ways in which He just manifests Himself is saying, I'm going to go out with that girl who's not a Christian. I'm going to move in with that boy before we get married.

I feel God's blessing in my heart about it. I feel a peace in my heart about it. God's saying it's okay. Whereas, God's objective word in Holy Scripture runs counter to that feeling in your heart.

To what you claim God is saying to your heart. Because God says in 2 Corinthians 6.14, Don't be unequally yoked with an unbeliever. That is God's clear command.

God says in Hebrews 13, Keep the marriage bed pure and undefiled. And so, when that feeling comes, where do you go?

Do you go into God's word as a standard? Do you look inward? Or do you look inward? At your feeling? That's what John then says to us. This is how we know.

[8:52] That we have come to know Him. If we keep His commandments. Whoever says, John continues in verse 4. Whoever says, I know Him, but does not keep His commandments, is a liar.

And the truth is not in him. The apostle John writes that. Not me. Keep in mind that when he says, Whoever says, I know Him, but does not keep His commandments, the does not keep there means an ongoing, hear this, an ongoing disobedience.

It's the disobedience that says, sin doesn't matter. That minimizes sin. It's the disobedience that sweeps it under the rug. It's the disobedience that said, it's not even sin at all.

That celebrates it. It's the disobedience that says, I was made this way. And God loves me and wants me to be happy. Even when what is being embraced is a clear contradiction of God's revealed word.

Now, John is not saying, hear this, brothers and sisters, John is not saying that those who know God will lead perfect lives and never disobey God. That's not what he's saying.

[10:13] But he is saying, there will be those who don't excuse their own sin. We will admit and come to God those who call evil, they will call what God calls evil, evil and what God calls good, good rather than the opposite.

Those who know God will be ruled, those who will be ruled by God's word rather than by their own heart, which is predisposed to sin, which is desperately wicked.

Those are those who are in the light. Those who sorrow over their sin and seek, repent, and go to God repenting and seek, and confess their sins and accept God's comfortable, comfort in the forgiveness of their sins.

Those are those who are in the light. Nowhere here is John saying, you need to be perfect. You must not put a foot wrong. In fact, we saw at the end of last week that he knows that we will stumble.

That's why he gave us the comforting words and tells us about advocating in heaven, Jesus Christ. But such people are those who John says in verse 5, but whoever keeps his word, whoever keeps

his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected.

[11:40] By this we may know that we are in him. So, here again he says, only those who obey God's commands can claim to have an authentic relationship with him.

The sign of true fellowship is obedience. And God's love, he goes on, is perfected. God's love is perfected in such people.

That is, God's love is made complete in such a person. John is not talking about, here, about God's love for believers, because God's love for us is already perfected in the Son, Jesus Christ.

So, our inability or our ability to keep the law does not make him love us more or less. But what John is, what John is saying about here, about God's love, is our love for him is perfected.

You know, God doesn't grade you on a scale of, of your own obedience. That's, that, that should be a comfort to you, brothers and sisters. God doesn't say, well, yeah, okay, I'm going to give him an A there.

[12:51] Oh, I'm going to give him a C. Oh, no, that's an F. Oh, that's a B plus. Good effort. No. God grades you on the scale of Jesus' perfect obedience. And it's an A plus all the way.

So, I think John here is not talking about God's love to you. God's love to you is perfected in the Son. But he's talking about God, your love for God is being made complete.

How? Through your obedience. So, I think John is talking here of our love for God. Our love for Him grows. Our love for God grows when we walk in obedience to His Word.

You claim to love God? Do you obey Him? If you obey Him, your love for Him will grow. your heart for Him will grow. That's what John is saying.

We will be in ever more increasingly conformed to Jesus Christ. We will walk in the same manner in which He walked. Verse 6. As we abide.

[13:57] That is, as we remain in His Word. So, John reminds us. John reminds us in verse 7-8 that to walk in the way Christ walked is what we've been called to even from the start.

Loved ones, He says. Beloved, He says. He says this to the church then and now. This is what you've been called to since you were called from death to life.

This is what you've been called to from the moment you accepted Jesus as Savior and Lord. The love spoken of is not a new command really.

You know, both in the Old Testament Leviticus 19-18 and in the New Testament the law of God is summed up. How is the law of God summed up?

In love of God in love for God with all our heart with all our soul and with all our mind. And in love of neighbor as yourself.

[15:05] We say it every Sunday as we gather. This is the summary of the law and the prophets. They're summed up in these commands. It is an old commandment.

It's not new. It's there from the beginning. It's also there from the beginning. The moment you're saved you'll receive this commandment. You've heard it at the moment you receive the gospel. But verse 8 says something there that it says John says it's also a new commandment. So how can it be both? How can it be both an old and new commandment?

I think Jesus gives us the answer himself in John 13-34 where he himself says he called it a new commandment. He says I give you a new command. Love one another just as I have loved you. you are also to love one another. Jesus says that's a new commandment. And that's what John is recalling in verse 8. He's recalling Jesus' word.

[16:11] In Jesus Christ this old commandment has been renewed. Jesus Christ he alone fully obeyed the command to love God and to love neighbor.

And he shows us in himself how to do it in a self-sacrificial way. He perfectly models love of neighbor by laying down his life his very life for us.

And then through his sacrifice he made the path by which we may start to love God and we may start to love our neighbor rightly. Jesus Christ effected a new covenant through his atoning sacrifice on the cross.

He makes it possible for his law to be in our minds and to be written in our hearts. He is the light that John speaks of.

And God has made this light which is Christ himself to shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.

[17:20] That's why John can say to us dear ones this new commandment is true in him. This new commandment to love is true in him.

Him that is Jesus. He who is without sin. But here's the most staggering truth. Of course the new commandment is true in Jesus. He's without sin.

He's perfect. But he goes on. This new commandment is true in you as well. What a staggering truth. We, the church, live in the era where the true light is already shining.

Jesus Christ, the true light, has dawned at his coming in flesh to the world. The light to which the law and the prophets were merely a shadow of. The law and the prophets were always pointing. There were shadows pointing to that light. The light to which the law and the prophets point to has dawned. This Christ in whom the law of God is perfectly fulfilled.

[18:26] And as he shines on and the darkness fades away because he has defeated the darkness, we await the eradication, the complete eradication of the darkness.

We await the consummation of this kingdom of light. But he has already started it. He's already shining through you and I, through the church, through those who are followers of Jesus.

Christ's light shines. That's what John is saying here. Here's the staggering truth for us, brothers and sisters. It's not a matter of whether you feel like the light is shining or not.

It's an objective truth that John is pointing to. If you believe in God, you obey him, you follow him, you're growing and increasing in love for him, the light of Christ shines in you.

And then so, if that is true, it gives us the second test of love. There in verse 9 to 11. In the meantime, as his light shines in us, now we know that to say that it is a staggering truth because we know we're jaws of clay.

[19:38] We stumble and we fall. We still war in our flesh against sin. But yet, it's surpassing power is shown in us. So how do we who have this, how do we know we have this light in us?

We might ask. John gives us the proof in verse 9 to 11. And at the same time, as he gives us the proof, he shows how we can identify the counterfeit, the liars.

Verse 9. Whoever says he is in the light and hates his brother is still in darkness. Now, hate might seem like a severe word to use here.

It might be easy for us to say, well, I don't hate anyone. Maybe a strong dislike. But I wouldn't say I hate anyone. But David Jackman's commentator on this passage offers a helpful commentary for us on this.

This is what he says. He says, some Christians think that true mature spirituality is found in being emetically sealed off from other people.

[20:49] To be a spiritual recluse, if not a physical one. that's what spiritual maturity looks like for some. They think that in that way they can be safe from infection of those who may not believe as strongly as they do, who may not be as pure as they are.

But that's a false thinking. It seems to me it's quite easy though for us. For us to be such a Christian.

To think that other people are the problem. To be what another commentator calls a selfish religionist.

What is a selfish religion? Someone who goes on and he goes on to say that such people such people would think they need to be separated in order to be really holy.

They don't want to partake of other people. They don't want to interact with other people. Such people become morbid and stupid. Those are his words. He says such selfish religionists become morbid and all stupid because they close their hearts off to others.

[22:11] He says that it is by sympathy and brotherhood that the fire of personal Christianity is fanned into flame.

In other words, the hatred described in verse 9 need not be an active desire to arm somebody. It could just be a lack of positive love for others.

This may be the sign that you're walking in darkness. It's like a picture of a fire, coal fire. You take one coal out, one ember out of that bed of coal that's already alight and glowing.

You take one ember out. What happens to that ember? It lights up a bit. It still lights. It gives light. But eventually what happens?

It dies. It dies. It dies. It dies. That's the picture that's being painted here. The fact that you think you can be alone and medically sealed from your brothers and sisters is not actual mature spirituality.

[23:23] Because John is saying here that God has placed this together. We need one another. It is by the way in which we love one another that we display Christ's love among us.

That we display Christ's light in us. And what's the proof test that we're in the light and that we've not wandered into darkness? It's by loving your brother. It's by loving your sister. And what does such love look like? John says it resembles Christ's love for us. It is self-given, self-sacrificial love.

This is what real Christian love looks like. And you know what the greatest enemy of that self-given, self-sacrificial real love is?

The greatest enemy of that kind of love is self-love. Self-love. And I don't want you to panic because even as I say that, I'm honest with myself.

[24 : 29] And we ought to be all honest with ourselves because self-love comes so easily. No one has to talk you into loving yourself. In this fallen nature of ours, self-love is the given.

But it's sometimes the antithesis of the love that Christ is talking about. John is talking about here the love that is in Christ. But don't panic because the Bible gives us comforting words.

We are a new creature. We are new men. New humanity. God in Christ has given us a new heart. And if we abide in the light that is in Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, God the Holy Spirit will continue to enable us to love as Christ loves.

That is, don't panic. If you are in Christ, the Holy Spirit is working in you to enable you to love as Christ loves. Light and love goes together.

[25 : 40] You cannot separate them, as John puts it here. And so, as you love, as you continue to fellowship with brothers and sisters and remain together, you will feel the conviction of the Spirit, that is, the Holy Spirit.

You will be driven to repentance over the way in which maybe you have offended someone or you have sinned against somebody. And you will seek and give forgiveness to one another.

That's what our God's love is displayed among us. It's not that we wouldn't offend each other. It's not that we would not say things unto us to one another.

It is that even in the midst of it, we will feel the conviction of the Holy Spirit and we will reconcile with one another. But if you hate your brother, John says, if you're unwilling to do that, you are in darkness and you are not in fellowship with God.

You're not in fellowship with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. And in darkness, in darkness, it's quite easy to stumble, isn't it? I love the imagery that John has given us here.

[26 : 57] The Greek word for stumble here is skandalon, where we get the word scandal from. It means to cause harm to a person. It means even to cause them to fall into sin.

So it's easy then to stumble if you're in darkness. You can claim to have knowledge of God's deeper mysteries all day long. You can know your Bible from front to back.

You can be well versed in systematic and historical theology and still be walking in darkness because you do not love your brother or sister.

Let's try to get practical. Let's try to get practical here. John is saying that the light of God is the light of love that shines in among us, among those who abide in Christ.

And he's saying to us that the church is the place where God's light can be seen in the midst of the darkness of this world. Jesus himself says, this is how all men will know you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.

[28 : 12] Those are Jesus' word. They will know out there in the darkness that you have the light of Christ if you show and display love towards one another.

So what then does the world see when it reads us here at Holy Trinity? What does the world see when it reads you when you're out in the world, at your workplace, when you're with your unbelieving family and friends?

Do they see the light of Christ through our selfless love of neighbor? do they even observe that love amongst us towards one another?

You know, for all those who claim intimacy with God, John says to us, if you're not in the light, then any claim of intimacy is false. And notice what John has done in these verses.

He's shown to us that if we are to know, if we are to know the new command is in us, if the new command is in us, then we are indeed in the light and not in the darkness, we need one another.

[29 : 26] That is the sign by which we know if we have truly the new commandments. You cannot be in Christ and be a medically sealed, solo Christian.

And I know it may be a bit awkward, but I want you to look around at the person to your right and to your left. Do it, please. Look around two, three seconds and if you do it in two, three seconds it will

start being awkward if you turn back and face me.

Look around at the brother and sister to your right, to your left, to your back, to your front. Look at that person. God has given that person to you and God has given you to that person so that he may display his light and glory in you as you love that person and they love you back.

So you might ask, how am I going to love that person over there? Well, you first love by being here, by being among the brothers and sisters.

You cannot love from a distance. The love that is being talked about here has to be an embodied love. You need proximity. you need to participate in the life of the church, to participate in the life of your brother or sister, to be able to seek their well-being, to inquire about them when they're not here, to pray for one another.

[30 : 56] There needs to be proximity. But what of disagreements and discord? They will happen. Even among those who dwell in the light, the old man, the old creature, still trashes then and now.

But the new man, the new creature, is who we are. So when there's disagreement, what do we do? We display the love of Christ by seeking reconciliation.

Notice that I said seeking. Seeking is an active thing. You seek out reconciliation. You don't sit in the corner and say, well, I'm going to wait for him to realize the mistake. I'm waiting for her to realize what a jerk she's been.

And then she'll come forgive me and then I'll forgive them. No. If you've been sinned against, you go to your brother who will sin against you. You make known their sin in love.

And if you're the one that is offended, you hear and you ask for forgiveness. We freely show mercy to one another in the light.

[32 : 04] we don't harbor hatred and resentment. This is how we know we are in fellowship within the light. By doing as Jesus says, by obeying his commands, and by loving one another.

These are the two tests. And this is the true test of Christian faith. Obedience and love. If we're honest, if we're honest, and we want to be, we struggle with this all the time, don't we?

I know I do. Because we don't do either perfectly well. We sin against God all the time. It's hard for us sometimes to obey, not sometimes, often to obey his commands.

And we sin against our neighbor. It's hard for us to love our neighbor as much as we love ourselves. That's why the old apostle, apostle John, says here in verse 12.

What he says here in verse 12 must be heard by all of us. Listen to his words of reassurance. I am writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven for his name's sake.

[33 : 15] I'm writing to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning. I'm writing to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one. Here is the assurance for us.

John is saying here, when he says little children, he's talking to all of us, the whole church. He's been calling his hearers, little children, and says, among you little children, there are some who are mature.

He's talking about age really now here. He's not even talking about necessarily spiritual maturity. Some of you who are older, you've known him from the beginning. So even as you are coming to the twilight of your years and you're wondering, and there is doubt, remember, you've known him from the beginning.

He lives in you. He is in you. There's the assurance that you are in the light. You know him who is from the beginning and you are in fellowship with him and in him you have overcome the evil one. the darkness is fading away. You've overcome in Christ. Be encouraged, Holy Trinity. John says, I am writing to you to encourage you and to assure you.

[34 : 44] And then he says, again, I write to you children because you know the father. I write to you fathers because you know him who is from the beginning. I write to you young men because you are strong and the word of God abides in you and you now it might seem like John is repeating himself as very old people want to do but that's not what's going on here.

Notice the change in tense in the second half. In the first half is I am writing present tense. I'm writing. In the second half it really is better to read it as I wrote to you.

I wrote to you children. I wrote to you fathers. I wrote to you young men. It's past tense. The first half is to assure us and the second half is to warn us to keep strong to stand firm.

I wrote to you that you may keep from sin that you do not participate in the work of darkness that you do not abhor hate towards your brother in your heart towards your sister.

And you will notice if you read closely this letter from then on John's tenses are in the past tense because he begins to exhort and challenge his hearers.

[36 : 01] Know that your sins are forgiven in Christ. So sin no longer. You have known him who was from the beginning so old fast to the word of God through which you have overcome the evil one that is the devil.

You are strong the word of God abides in you. You are no longer in the devil's grip. You are free. Victory is yours. So don't give up or give ground to the fading darkness.

Rather live in the light. Spread the love and light of Christ as you abide in the light. in the name of the Father and the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.