

Obedience and Love

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning, church. Let me invite you to turn with me to the book of 1 John. Our sermon text today is 1 John, chapter 2, verses 3 through 11.

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Whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked. Beloved, I am writing to 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.

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.

[1 : 34] But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in darkness and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes. All right, let's pray together.

Father, we just sang that our soul might be satisfied in you alone. Lord, that is a mighty prayer. And we ask now that as we come to your word, your Holy Spirit would give us clarity and understanding and grace as we come to understand what the Apostle John has written here, not just for his time, but for the church of all time.

And Lord, we pray that as a result, our obedience to you would grow, and our soul would indeed be satisfied in you alone. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. So what is the great evidence or sign that someone truly knows God?

That's what John is getting at in this section, and really that's what he's getting at in this whole book. How can we tell if we genuinely know God? Notice John has a few ways of talking about what it means to know God, and we see right away that we're not talking about merely intellectual knowledge about God.

No, John has in mind an intimate, saving relationship with God. In verse 5, he speaks of the love of God, which in this context means the love that believers have for God.

[3 : 09] And in verse 6, he talks about abiding in God, abiding like the roots of a tree, abiding in the rich soil of a garden. And in verse 9, he talks about being in the light, basking in the warmth of God's presence.

So John's talking about an intimate relationship with God, knowing God. Friends, this is the heart of Christianity, that humans, you and I, can have this sort of relationship with God, our Creator.

A relationship that at the start of the book, John describes as fellowship. And what is fellowship in the Bible? Fellowship is sharing something in common, that we can actually share something in common with God.

But the message of Christianity is not just that humans as creatures can have this sort of intimate relationship with God, their Creator, but even that humans as sinners can have this sort of intimate relationship with God.

Remember the passage that we looked at last week? John says, If anyone says they have no sin, they deceive themselves. We've all disobeyed God's perfect and good commands. And we all stand condemned before God's perfect justice.

[4 : 23] Yet the heart of Christianity is that sinners like you and me, who deserve condemnation, can be welcomed into intimate, loving fellowship with God. We can know God.

But how can that be? Well, you know, it's easy to think that surely the way into this kind of relationship with God is that we have to reform our lives and work hard to be moral and good, and then perhaps God will turn around and accept us.

But that's not how it's done. It couldn't be that way, because our good works could never be good enough. And besides, how could our good works cover over the wrongs that we've done? You know, imagine that I were to rob a bank. I'd probably be a really bad bank robber, but just imagine that I were to go and rob a bank, and there I go, I head running out of the doors, and as I escape the scene of the crime, I see an elderly person crossing the street, and they look like they're having a tough time.

So I pause, and I let them cross, you know, because I'm that kind of guy after robbing a bank. Well, a few blocks later, the police catch up with me, and they arrest me, and they bring me before the judge.

[5 : 37] And imagine my defense. Judge, I know I've committed this great crime robbing this bank, and you've caught me, but you see, I did some good deeds, actually. I even helped an elderly person cross the street right outside the bank that I robbed.

Surely that should cover over my crimes, right? And you'll let me go. Well, obviously, this is a silly illustration, right? But you get the point. Good deeds, no matter how good, don't erase the very real wrong that's been done.

And that's true for us before God. Thinking that we can simply reform our lives, and that that will get us into a relationship with God is like thinking that helping the elderly person cross the street will cancel out our crimes of robbery.

It won't. And the sad reality, as friends, is that we've robbed God of His glory. We've disobeyed Him. We've ignored Him.

We've lived our lives without any reference to Him, even though we depend on God for everything, every second. What could possibly cancel that debt?

[6 : 48] And the truth is, it can't come from our side. There's nothing we can offer as humans to get back into God's favor. But here is the stunning message of Christianity, that in love, God makes a way.

He sees us in our sin, buried under a debt we can't pay, and in mercy, He comes to pay it. And since death is the punishment for sin, Christ dies willingly in our place to deliver us from the penalty of sin and bring us back to God.

He's the propitiation for our sins, as John has just written a couple verses ago in verse 2. And if you understand that word, propitiation, you are staring right at the heart of the most glorious thing that has ever happened in human history, that Christ has died to turn away the just wrath of God against human sin and bring us back into God's favor.

And this is how Christianity is so different than all the old pagan religions of John's day and even every other religion down to our day. Because you see, Christ, the sacrifice, is God the Son, one with the Father.

So that means Christ is not some helpless victim, unwillingly sacrificed to appease a capricious God, like, you know, the Greeks sacrificing before they go storm Troy, you know, trying to appease the capricious gods.

[8 : 20] No, Christ is fully God. In Christ, God himself makes the payment. God himself provides the sacrifice. God himself bears the penalty and bears it away once and for all, for everyone who admits their sin and trusts in Christ.

And because of what Christ has done, it's as if the doors of heaven have been flung open wide for all to enter. Come to me, Christ says, and I will give you rest.

Sinners can now come into an intimate relationship with the holy God, their creator, on the basis of sheer grace and live in fellowship with him forever, starting right now.

But how do you know? How do you know that you really know God? Is there any sign that this grace of God in Jesus Christ is alive in a person's heart, really uniting them to Father and Son and fellowship?

Because you know it's possible, of course, to say you know God, but not really know him. It's possible to have these things up here in your head, but not really possess them in your heart.

[9 : 36] It's possible to know about God. It's possible to know about the good news of Jesus Christ, to know about the gospel. It's possible to know about God, but not really know God.

So what is it? What's the sign, or at least one good sign, that we really have come to know God in Christ? Well, for John, the answer is simple and profound.

And in fact, it might even seem a little mundane at first, a little too simple. But for John, here it is. Verse 3, By this we know that we have come to know him.

How? If we keep his commandments. If we keep his commandments. Not if we have mountaintop spiritual experiences, right?

Although there's nothing wrong with those when they come. Not if we experience miraculous gifts in our life, although God certainly does miraculous things. Not if we have a deep knowledge of systematic theology, although every Christian should seek a deep grasp of biblical truths.

[10:48] No, the criteria, the evidence, that someone really knows God through the gospel of grace is that they keep his commandments. Now, John unpacks this in three ways in the rest of this section.

Notice there are three times where the phrase, whoever says, appears in our text. Whoever says. You find that in verse 4, and in verse 6, and in verse 9.

And we'll take those as the markers of the outline of the passage. And basically what John says in summary is that keeping God's commands is the evidence of really knowing God.

Because one, it's the natural overflow of loving the Father, and two, of abiding in God the Son, and three, of walking in the light.

Keeping God's commands really is the evidence of knowing God. Because it's the natural overflow of loving God the Father, and abiding in God the Son, and of walking in the light. So let's look at the first of those together.

[11:50] Loving God the Father. Look again at verse 4 and 5. 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.

Now, John's pretty blunt, isn't he? He's maybe a little more blunt than some of us care to be. If you say you know God, but you don't keep his commandments, you're a liar, and the truth is not in you. Ouch.

Now, let's be sure we understand what John means here. Let's be precise. Just a few verses earlier at the end of chapter 1, John said, If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

In other words, everyone, even Christians, will continue to sin. We will break God's commands.

We'll never reach sinless perfection in this life. Though all our sins have been forgiven through the cross of Christ, sin still remains.

And this indwelling sin will at times get the upper hand, and we will fall. And when we do, we run back to the cross and find God's mercy to be fresh and new.

[12:58] Right after John says, If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us, he says, If we confess our sins, he's faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Now, John isn't saying that we lose our salvation when we sin as Christians. God's sovereign grace that made you a child of God cannot be overturned. But we certainly can lose our assurance and our sense of peace before God.

And many of us who have followed Christ for a long time know what that feels like when we fall into sin. And so we continue to confess our sins, and we continue to be amazed by God's abundant grace.

So when John writes, Whoever says I know him but does not keep his commandments is a liar, he's not talking about a Christian who fights against indwelling sin and at times loses the fight and who gets back up and keeps fighting.

No, he's talking about a person who says they know God, but they don't care about keeping his commandments. Or they pick or choose which commandments they want to abide by.

[14:08] Or maybe they even actively reject some of the clear commandments of Scripture. If someone says they know God but actively rejects what God's Word says about generosity and money, for example, or sex and marriage, or truthfulness and integrity, or forgiveness and reconciliation, if someone actively rejects or just doesn't care about God's clear commands, then John says their profession to know God is empty and hollow.

Now, of course, people who profess to know God but reject or ignore his commands can be very nice and very knowledgeable and very socially concerned and aware.

That's true. But friends, niceness and knowledge and social awareness are not sure and certain criteria of genuinely knowing the God of the Bible.

It's keeping his commands. But why? Why that one? Well, look at verse 5. Whoever keeps his word, in him truly, the love of God is perfected.

Now, it's not immediately clear when John says the love of God if he's talking about God's love for us or our love for God. That phrase, the love of God, grammatically could mean either.

[15:35] Either God's love for us or our love for God. And either could make sense. If John means God's love for us is perfect or completed when we obey his commands, then it would seem that John is reminding us of a beautiful truth about God's love and grace.

Which is this. That God accepts us as we are. But he doesn't leave us as we are. His love accepts us and immediately begins to transform and change us.

Change us more and more into people who delight to keep his commands even when it's costly or unpopular. The love of God, you see, is like a swift river. When you step into it, you don't stay in the same place.

It picks you up and it carries you downstream. It's a love that changes you and transports you and transforms you. It's a love that picks you up in its current and sweeps you along and it makes the hard-hearted and unforgiving, it makes them soft and compassionate.

It makes the heart that's desperate for approval safe and secure. And it makes the heart that clings to worldly goods for control and for power generous and open-handed.

[16:54] This is God the Father's love for us in Christ. Changes us. But in verse 5, John could also mean our love for God.

And that's probably what he means. A little later in this letter, John will write pretty much the same thing in chapter 5, verse 3. For this is the love of God, meaning our love for God, this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments.

And his commandments are not burdensome. In other words, what it means, this is what it means for us to love God. That our love for God naturally leads to keeping his commands.

Jesus said the same thing in John chapter 14 that Nick read for us earlier in the service. If anyone loves me, Jesus says, he will keep my word. Pretty straightforward. You see, friends, here's the secret of Christian obedience.

It's not done begrudgingly or out of sheer duty as if we just sort of white-knuckle it and begrudgingly obey.

[18:07] No, it's done because we love the one who tells us these things. True obedience doesn't flow from a heart that's afraid we'll lose God's favor and acceptance if we fail.

It flows from a heart that's so enraptured and in awe of the one who would love us so much that he sent his only son to die for our sins. We see how good and how trustworthy this God is in the gospel and we delight then to listen to his words and obey because they must be for our good.

How could they not be for our good? How could this God, the God who gave his only son, not want our absolute best? So in love, we keep his commands and they aren't burdensome.

If you've ever been in love, you know exactly what John's talking about, don't you? When you're madly in love with someone, they could tell you to drive to Milwaukee for their favorite sandwich and you'd start Googling the best route, right?

How do I get there? You like the sandwich from Milwaukee? Let's go. Let's do it. Why? Because that's just what love does.

[19:22] It delights to do the will of the beloved. In fact, if love doesn't result in that sort of action, then we'd question if it's really love, wouldn't we?

If your spouse asks you to do something, hey, do this thing for me. It's really important. And you say, you know, I'm busy right now playing some video games. I've got to find the next geoglyph to make sure Zelda's okay.

You know, you switch players, you know what I'm talking about. Well, anyone would begin to question your love after a time, right? Do you really love this person if you're not eager to listen and keep their word?

John's making the same point about our relationship with God. The reason why keeping his commands is a surefire evidence that we've really come to know God in the gospel of grace is because it's the natural result of genuinely loving God who loves us so much.

Love is perfected, John writes. That is, it's brought to completion in delighting to do his will.

[20 : 30] It doesn't just stay in the conceptual, emotional, feeling realm. It expresses itself in action. Now, before we go to John's next point, there's a practical application here.

If you're a Christian and you're struggling to obey in a certain area, one of the best things you can do is work to rekindle your love for God.

And really, the most certain way to do that is to return to the gospel itself, Christ crucified for you, to set your mind on those things until it gets down into your heart.

And begins to kindle your love for God again. Perhaps, for example, you're struggling with what God says about marriage and sexuality, perhaps. Maybe you can't understand why God would limit something like sex to marriage or why God would limit marriage to a man and a woman.

It all seems so confusing and so hard and you're just struggling. And friend, I get it. We all wrestle with those questions. And you know, there are really good theological answers to those questions and there are really good practical answers to those questions too.

[21 : 54] But the place to start is with God Himself. Do you see that this God is good and trustworthy? Do you see how He took on flesh to become your true lover, your true spouse, faithful to the end?

That He came and He loved you at the greatest cost to Himself so that He might take you to Himself and make you His eternal bride. And He even bled and died to make sure that you'd never be alone, never be rejected for all eternity.

And when your heart starts to kindle in love for this God who loved you so well, then you can begin to trust Him.

Trust Him that His limits, for example, around marriage and sexuality might be confusing, might be countercultural, but they're good. They're good because He is good.

And so the path of obedience is walked along the path of love. Kindle a heart of love for God through worship, through meditation on Scripture, through prayer and communion with God, through fellowship with other believers.

[23 : 18] The road of obedience will still be hard at times, it's true, but underneath you'll feel that swift current that river of God's love that carries you along even when it's hard.

Now, for the sake of time, we're going to move quickly through John's next two points, but, you know, the good news is that John weaves his themes throughout this book, so we'll be returning to these themes again and again and we'll be able to go much deeper, but let's see how John finishes up here in our passage.

In our next verse, we have John's second point, that keeping God's commands is evidence of truly knowing God because it's the natural overflow, not just of love for God the Father, but of abiding in God the Son.

Let's pick up at the end of verse 5. By this we know that we are in Him. Whoever says he abides in Him ought to walk in the same way in which He walked. Now, John is talking about Jesus here. Remember John 15 where Jesus talks about abiding in Him like a branch abides in the vine. Well, John says, if we say we abide in Jesus, then surely we ought to walk in the same way in which He walked.

[24 : 30] And how was that? How did Jesus walk? Well, if you read the four Gospels, especially the Gospel of John, you see that Jesus' life was animated by one central, overriding desire.

The thing that drove Him and guided Him, His aim and His mission was to fulfill His Father's will. There's lots of verses we could cite, but perhaps the most poignant is when Jesus is praying in the Garden of Gethsemane.

And there in the Garden, Jesus says in His hour of greatest trial and distress, Father, not my will, but Your will be done. And John's point in verse 6 of our text is very simple.

If you say you're a follower of Jesus, then you should have that same attitude as well. not my will, but Your will be done. A desire to delight and to fulfill the commands of the Father.

That's the evidence that Christ is dwelling in your heart through faith. That's the evidence that you're united to Christ by the Spirit. That more and more you walk in the same way Christ walked, keeping the Father's commands.

[25 : 43] Friends, this is a sad state of affairs that there are many churches with the name of Christ on their sign, but they seem to have little interest in keeping God's commands the way Christ did.

Is that not a great tragedy? But friends, may it not be so with us. As a church, may we not fall into the same trap of talking about Christ, but never actually living like Christ.

don't think that we aren't immune from the same danger. Let us not be so proud that we don't think that we too could slip and turn a deaf ear to God's Word.

We must humble ourselves before God, ask for His mercy, and ask for His help, and continue to pray, not our will, but Yours be done. And in that pursuit, friend, are we willing to be confronted or challenged even?

You know, one of the great gifts of being involved in a small group, for example, is that you'll begin to be known by a group of fellow Christians who can encourage you and support you and rejoice with you, but who can also lovingly hold a mirror up to you when your life doesn't match your profession.

[27 : 15] Oh, how we need brothers and sisters in Christ who are humble and gentle and courageous enough to hold up that mirror when the time is right and show us our shortcomings.

Do you have that sort of fellowship with other Christians? If not, you need it. Seek it out. Join a small group if you're not involved in one.

This is one of the means whereby you can continue to walk in the same way as Jesus walked. None of us can do it alone. We need each other to go on abiding in Him.

Now, John's third and last point takes us from loving God the Father and abiding in Christ the Son to walking in the light. If we walk in the light, we will keep God's commands.

But in these last verses, picking up in verse 7, John pinpoints one particular aspect of keeping God's commands, loving our fellow Christians.

[28 : 16] Loving our fellow Christians. As John begins this part of this section in verses 7 and 8, John seems to be contradicting himself, doesn't he? He says, I'm not writing to you a new command, but an old command, and yet it is a new command.

Well, what does he mean by that? Well, he's referencing here the command to love one another. And for Christians, that's not a new command, right? It's something that Jesus himself taught. Remember the Gospel of John, chapter 15, verses 12 through 13. Jesus said, This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.

So John here is kind of reminding his readers that he's not adding anything new to the message when he says that obedience and loving one another is essential to knowing whether you're truly a Christian.

In fact, he's saying this is the command Jesus gave us from the very beginning, and it's the command you receive from the very beginning of your walk with Christ. And yet, lest this command lose its wonder and power, John reminds us that in a manner of speaking, it is a new command.

[29 : 35] And it will always be new. Why? Well, when Jesus gave this command to his disciples, do you remember what he said? In John 13, he says, A new command I give you that you love one another just as I have loved you.

You also are to love one another. By this, all people will know that you are my disciples if you have love for one another. It's a new command because Jesus made it new.

And he made it new when he defined love by his own life and actions. Just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another.

The self-giving love of Jesus, that's what love is. And that's how our lives as Christians are meant to be lived. And as we do so, we aren't just following a new command.

John even says, We're living in a new age. It's a new commandment that I'm writing to you which is true in him and in you because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining.

[30 : 44] Jesus, the light of the world is shining, John says. The risen Lord Jesus sits at the Father's right hand, ascended in glory. The church gathers in his name, filled with his spirit.

The gospel message is proclaimed, the power of God for salvation to all who believe. And as the church gathers in the power of the spirit of the risen Lord and as the gospel is proclaimed, as this new age breaks in upon us, John says, the darkness is passing away.

That old age of sin and death and decay, the old age of self-centeredness and the desires of the world is passing away and the true light is shining.

And what does it mean to walk in this heavenly light of the risen Lord Jesus? John says, it means to love those whom the Father loves.

It means to love those for whom Christ laid down his life. The genuine mark of obedience for the true Christian will be love for the church.

[31 : 54] Love for the brothers, John says, by which he means the brothers and sisters in the spiritual family of the church. It's almost as if John is saying, okay, how do you know you know God through the gospel?

What's the sign that that's really taking place? Well, if you keep his commandments. And what's the key way to know if you're keeping the commandments? If you love your brothers and sisters in Christ.

A loveless Christian is no Christian at all. Such a person is still stumbling about in the darkness, John says. Friends, when the world looks at our church, what do they see if they care to look? Let's pray that they see a community that loves one another. And let's pray that they see a community that loves one another not because we all share the same socioeconomic background. We don't. Not because we all share the same ethnic or racial background. We don't. Not because we all share the same hobbies or interests or taste in music or vocational pursuits. We don't. None of these things are why we love each other.

[33 : 04] We love each other. because we share a common Savior. When I look at you, fellow Christian, I see someone loved by the Lord Jesus just as I have been loved.

He shed His blood for you. He rose again for your justification. The same Spirit that lives in me lives in you. And if I don't see that, if I don't live like that's true, then I'm still in darkness stumbling about. But friends, as John says here, there's good reason for hope and assurance. As John writes, this commandment to love one another is true.

It's true in Him and it's true in you. So let's live what's true. let's live this love for one another that is true in Christ and yes, is true in us.

And let's do so more and more because the true light is shining. The kingdom has dawned. And let us know we are Christians by our love.

[34 : 18] Love for God and love for one another. Let's pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Father, as we pause in light of what the Apostle John is saying in this passage, God, perhaps there are some of us who have realized that we've not really been taking your commandments as seriously as we ought.

And Father, if that is true, we thank you for the conviction of your Holy Spirit who shows us these things so that we might turn and be saved.

So, Father, if there are any here who are sensing that perhaps I don't really know God because I don't really care about His commandments, that they would not stay there, but, Father, you would open their eyes to see Christ crucified for them, loved by Him, and would they trust in you.

And, God, as we think about this passage about keeping your commands and loving one another, Lord, how much we know we need your help. Jesus, you promised you would send another helper, the Holy Spirit, who would allow us to live these things out in community.

Oh, help us to keep in step with Him. Would His love be shed abroad in our hearts? Would His power be at work in our lives and in our relationships so that what John writes about here might be true of us today and that we might live in the light?

[36 : 13] We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Amen. Amen.