

1 JOHN

Part 3: “How We Know That We Know”

1 John 2:3–14

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Sunday, May 14, 2023 (Easter Season, Mothers’ Day)

Scripture Reading

“And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments. 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. By this we may know that we are in him: whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked. Beloved, I am writing 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. But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes. I am writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven for his name’s sake. I am writing to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning. I am writing to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one. 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 have overcome the evil one” (1 John 2:3–14).

Introduction

In Acts 19, we get a glimpse of the culture-shaping force of the early Christian movement. The Apostle Paul has just established the church in the ancient city of Ephesus. As the gospel goes forth in Ephesus, the ethnic barrier of hostility that once divided Jews and Gentiles is broken down [**1Paul in Ephesus**]. New converts turn away from their old sins and idols in such a profound way that it reshapes the economic fabric of the city. New converts become disciples, disciples become leaders, and those leaders are sent to plant new churches throughout the entire region until it seems like virtually “...all people in Asia [Minor] had heard the word of the Lord” (Acts 19:10).

As Paul preached and prayed, people were healed of their diseases and delivered from spiritual oppression. In fact, his ministry was so powerful and effective that people would take garments that Paul had touched and then carry them to the sick and the afflicted so that they would be miraculously made whole.

Around the same time in Ephesus, there is a group of seven guys known as the “sons of Sceva,” who also claim to be spiritually empowered healers. But unlike Paul, they are pretenders. They are charlatan soothe-sayers who would prey upon the desperate. Claiming to have descended from a family of Jewish high priests, the sons of Sceva rely on theatricality and sleight of hand to profiteer from those who would hire their supposed services.

One day, the sons of Sceva are hired to help a man who is apparently possessed by a demon. These guys have heard about all of the attention that Paul is getting by preaching about Jesus and praying in Jesus’s name, so they decided to incorporate Paul’s tricks into their own act, so to speak.

When they enter the demonized man's home, they shout, "I command you to come out by the name of Jesus, who Paul proclaims." But then something unexpected happens.

The demon speaks to them directly, saying, "Jesus, I know, and Paul, I have heard about, but who *are you guys?*" After this, the demon immediately attacks and fights all seven sons of Sceva at once [2Sons of Sceva].

Now, if you have ever seen a fight in real life, whether as a sport or a spontaneous fight, you know there are many cases in which it is quite difficult to determine a clear winner. In a professional fight, for example, the winner of a fight might come down to a decision made by a panel of judges. And even then, that decision might be a split or disputed decision.

That is not what happens between the sons of Sceva and the demonized man. Scripture tells us that despite the seven-to-one odds, the demon mastered and overpowered the sons of Sceva until they fled out of the house naked and wounded. Now, typically, if a person begins a fight with their clothes *on* and they end the fight with their clothes *gone*, the fight has not gone well for them.

You see, the sons of Sceva knew about Jesus. But they did not truly know Jesus, and their failure to truly know Jesus was their undoing.

However, when word gets around Ephesus about this event, even more people become intrigued and amazed by the name of Jesus. They recognize that even demons know the name of Jesus, and unlike the charlatans and pretenders, men like Paul and the other true apostles seem to truly know him. And as a result, even more, people become followers of Jesus.

Fast forward a few decades in the city of Ephesus. Most of the early apostles have died, and many of them—including Paul—have even been martyred for their faith. Nevertheless, the church that Paul planted in Ephesus still endures.

Yet, a new generation of pretenders and charlatans has now risen up. They claim to possess a special and hidden knowledge of Jesus. In fact, they are preaching a different version of Jesus. And through their deception, they seek to divide the church.

It is in this situation that the Apostle John—the last of the original living disciples of Jesus—writes the letter of 1 John to the church. He is saying, “These false teachers do not preach the real Jesus. Sure, they have heard the name of Jesus. And they certainly know the name of Jesus has power. But they do not truly *know* him.”

This happens today as well. Our culture is replete with charlatans who are willing to use the name of Jesus to build their brand, advance their politics, increase their wealth, or justify their own personal cause. Like the false teachers of the ancient world, we are tempted to take the name of the true God and instrumentalize it by putting the name of Jesus on our own biases and desires.

But all of this provokes a very real question, “*How do we truly know that we know the true Jesus?*” In a world of pretenders, how can we recognize whether or not we are true followers of Jesus?

In today’s passage, the Apostle John will answer that question by showing us “**How We Know That We Know.**” And as we delve further into this text, we will discover three ways that we know that we truly know Jesus: **1.) We Keep His Commandments, 2.) We Love One Another, and 3.) We Rest in the Simple Truth of the Gospel.**

Exposition

1.) We Obey His Commandments

Christian obedience is a tricky subject. After all, one of the most foundational truths of the Christian gospel is that we are saved by God's sheer grace, not by our own good works. We are saved by what God has done for us, not by what we can do for God.

But there is a massive difference between saying our obedience does not *save us* and saying our obedience does not *matter*.

Our obedience does matter. For it is in keeping the commands of Christ that we can know that we have truly come to know Christ. John tells us, “***And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments. Whoever says ‘I know him’ but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him***” (1 John 2:3–4).

In this passage, the word “keep” (τηρῶμεν) is an active word. It means to “watch over, guard, hold onto, and preserve.”¹ John is saying the people of God are called to guard

¹ William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 1002.

God's word and the commands of his word, as we would an immensely valuable and irreplaceable treasure (cf. Ps 19:9–10).

My sons recently watched one of the great classic films of my childhood name *The Sandlot* [show **3The Sandlot**]. The movie is about childhood and summertime and baseball. But the central conflict involves a little boy named Smalls who makes the ill-fated decision to steal his stepdad's favorite baseball and then use that baseball for a pick-up game with his friends.

During this game, the little boy hits his first-ever home run. Initially, Smalls is ecstatic. But once the ball sores over a fence and into the yard of a vicious junkyard dog, his joy becomes terror.

As he watches the beastly dog steal, chew, and slobber over his stepdad's ball, his heart fills with dread. He knows that this particular ball is treasured by his stepfather, but he does not know why. When his teammates ask about why this ball is so important, Smalls tells them it was signed by some guy named Babe Ruth.

Suddenly, everyone realizes that Smalls has no idea who Babe Ruth is, although earlier in the film, he lies and pretends he knows all about Babe [show **4Babe Ruth**]. He has no idea that Babe Ruth was arguably the greatest and most legendary baseball player of all time. He has no idea that Babe Ruth is the Sultan of Swat, the Colossus of Clout, and the Great Bambino. He had no idea that a Babe Ruth autographed ball was rare, priceless, and virtually irreplaceable. Because if he did know who Babe Ruth was, he would not have taken such a precious treasure to be thrown and hit around in a kids' game and chewed on by a dog. Instead, he would have guarded it with his life!

So too, if we truly understand who Christ is, if we truly know what he has done for us, if we grasp his goodness and his greatness, we would not treat his word with disdain or disrespect. We would not pick and choose which of his commands we would honor and obey and which commands we would minimize and ignore. No, to truly know Christ is to treasure Christ, and to treasure Christ is to treasure his word.

We do not obey God's commandments to earn God's love. We obey God's commandments because God has loved us so extravagantly. To keep the commands of the God who saved us is the natural response to his goodness, the necessary response to his Lordship, and the perfect response to his love. As John writes, **"...whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected"** (1 John 2:5a).

In this context, the word "perfected" (τετελείωται) does not mean that we are perfect and without error. Instead, it means that when we walk in righteous obedience, God's love is made complete; it has achieved its perfected goal; it has accomplished what it has intended to do.

And what does God intended for his people? He intends to conform us to the image of Christ, his Son (cf. Rom 8:29). He is birthing within us a new way of life that flows from knowing Christ.

Later this summer, my wife and I will celebrate our fifteenth wedding anniversary. For fifteen years, we have known one another and shared nearly unbroken time with one another. And I must say, I feel like she knows me better than anyone else, and I know her better than anyone else.

When you truly know someone, you can discern the smallest subtleties in the way they speak. You know what their slightest mannerisms mean. You can even anticipate their responses to certain situations. But the longer I've been married to Kate, I have noticed something else. We have begun to mirror, mimic, and imitate one another in some of the ways we speak and act.

So too, when you know Jesus, abide in Jesus and walk with Jesus, you will find that the Spirit of God is forming you to mimic the ways of Jesus. This is why the Apostle will say, *"...By this we may know that we are in him: whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked"* (1 John 2:5b-6).

In fact, before the followers of Jesus were ever called Christians, they were simply known as "The Way," for they were those who lived out the ways of Jesus. I pray that when the people of our community and the people of this world see our lives and hear our words, they will say that we are those who walk in the *way* of Jesus.

2.) We Love One Another

At the time 1 John was written, the false teachers had infiltrated the church and sought to deceive many early Christians with their new, hidden "knowledge." They proudly claim to know about spiritual things that no one has ever heard before. Novelty is their gimmick.

But the message of the Apostle John is fundamentally different. He writes, *"Beloved, I am writing you no new commandment, but an old commandment that you had from the beginning. The old commandment is the word that you have heard"* (1 John 2:7).

John is very upfront that the message he intends to impart is not radically original. Instead, he speaks of deeply ancient commandment. And that commandment is *love*.

Love is not just the greatest of the commandments of God; it is the umbrella category under which all other biblical commands reside.

Once when Jesus was asked to define the greatest commandment of the Old Testament Law, Jesus responded, *"...You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets"* (Matt 22:37-40).

In the same way, the Apostle Paul writes in the book of Romans, *"Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the*

commandments, 'You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,' and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law" (Rom 13:8–10).

Likewise, the primacy of love will be a vital theme within the letter of 1 John as well. In fact, John will repetitively come back to the idea of love several more times as we walk through this book. But for now, what I want you to know is that Christianity's view of love is often radically different from the way we use the term "love" within culture and within everyday conversation.

Love is not a fleeting emotion that we cannot control. Love is not the uncritical and unconditional celebration of the thoughts, words, deeds, and desires of the people around us. Love is to will and actively seek the highest good of another.

Love is the central commandment of the law of God, the fundamental truth at the foundation of the cosmos, and the essential core of what it means to be fully human and bear forth the image of God.

Yet, while love is a deeply ancient command, there is a sense in which love still seems profoundly revolutionary and otherworldly. Even though love is at the foundation of God's good creation, our world has been fractured by the powers of sin and death. Endless war, famine, starvation, poverty, human trafficking, and gun violence were never part of God's design. But because of sin, such darkness has become a normative and inescapable part of our reality.

But now, since Jesus Christ, the Son of God, came to live among us; since he came to die for our sins and defeat death through his resurrection; since he sent his Spirit to live within us and dwell within us and empower us; love has become a light that shines in the midst of darkness.

This is why John writes, *"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" (1 John 2:8).*

The love that Christ has embodied to us and the love of Christ that shines through us is a beacon of hope testifying to the day when Christ returns and makes all things new.

Whenever a friend or guest comes to visit Amarillo for the first time, I usually try to avoid the roadside attractions like the Big Texan or the Cadillac Ranch. Instead, if I have the chance, my favorite thing is to take them to Palo Duro Canyon just before dawn.

Driving toward the canyon, the West Texas panhandle is not an impressive place at first glance. The wilderness plains can appear dry and dreary, especially in the early morning darkness.

But then, seemingly out of nowhere, the Palo Duro opens up into a new universe [show 5Sunrise Over Palo Duro]. And when the sun begins to rise over the eastern ridge, all of the monotony of the darkness and the flatness of the surrounding world is suddenly transformed into an eruption of color and light that signal the arrival of a new day. And in those moments, you can almost hear the heavens declare the glory of God (cf. Ps 19:1).

So too, the normal Christian life may not seem like anything important or impressive. But when we forgive as Christ forgave, when we welcome the lonely as Christ welcomed us, we serve with his humility and kindness, and speak with his grace and truth, when we suffer with hope, when we love as he has loved us, our lives are like the first rays of dawn that shine in the darkness and testify of a new kingdom that is coming in Christ.

But in the same way, when we forsake love—when we choose the way of selfishness and pettiness and hate—we show that we have yet to truly know Christ, and we still living in the blindness of the present age.

As the Apostle says, *“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. But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes”* (1 John 2:9–11).

We live in a culture that often incites hatred, fear, outrage, cynicism, and constant cynicism. It is easy to get caught up in the flow and frenzy of this world. But such a way of life is darkness and spiritual blindness.

Yet, the people of God are called to be distinct and different from the ways of a world that is passing away. We are called to be a people who are defined by love.

3.) We Rest In The Simple Truth of the Gospel

If you are like me, passages like this in 1 John can almost create a sense of doubt and worry about your salvation. It is easy to look at a text like this and only see the ways we have failed to live as we ought to live and love as we ought to love. It can, at times, seem like we are still missing out on some special secret to the Christian life that has eluded us.

But the greatest problem is not in what we have failed to learn. Our problem is what we fail to *remember*. We are victims of our own spiritual amnesia.

The antidote to this forgetfulness lies within secret knowledge or a radically new teaching. Instead, we need to be reminded over and over again of the truth of Christ, the truth of Christ’s redemption, and the truth of who we are in Christ.

It is not enough to know the gospel. It is not enough to even mentally assent to the gospel. Our truest freedom is known when we teach our hearts to *rest* in the gospel.

That is why the Apostle John will now explicitly state the very truths we are so prone to forget: *"I am writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven for his name's sake. I am writing to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning. I am writing to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one. 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 have overcome the evil one"* (1 John 2:12–14).

People of God, you no longer need to carry the crushing weight of self-condemnation for your failures and your shame—for you have been forgiven in Christ's very name. He has born your sin upon his cross, and he has given you the gift of his righteousness.

You no longer need to crave significance or live for the approval of others—for you have known and are known by the God who was, from the very beginning, the author of all creation.

You no longer need to white-knuckle your way through life, seeking in vain to control the uncontrollable, running and working to the point of weariness—for, in Christ, you are strong, and you have overcome the evil one. The very power of Christ's resurrection lives within you!

You no longer need to be enslaved to the power of sin—for God is your Father. He is alone good. He alone can satisfy you. He alone is enough.

These are the truths we need to preach over and over again to our own souls when we are burdened with fear, sorrow, rage, and doubt. These are the truths we need to remind one another over and over again within the Christian fellowship we share with one another.²

For the truth of the gospel is so big, we simply cannot grasp it in a single glimpse. Instead, we must sit patiently before it. We must teach our hearts to rest in it. And like a long-exposure lens opened before a clear night sky, so too our hearts will find that the things of this world will indeed grow strangely dim in the light of Christ's glory and grace.

So, Redeemer Christian Church, may we be those who treasure the commandments of the God who has saved us. May we love one another and, in so doing, shine the light of the kingdom that is to come. May we rest in the truth of the gospel. And may we know that we truly know Christ. AMEN.

² That is why, I believe, John even repeats himself almost verbatim on some of these points. He knows all too well that there are truths that we need to be reminded of over and over again. There are some truths that we need to not only learn but also meditate on and deeply ponder in contemplation.

Discussion Starters for Gospel Communities

- 1.) According to 1 John 2:3-6, how can we know that we truly know Jesus?
- 2.) Read 1 John 2:7-11. In what way is the commandment to love both an old and new commandment?
- 3.) How might a Christian understanding of love differ from how many in our culture understand love?
- 4.) Read 1 John 2:12-14. Notice how these verses contain some of the most fundamental truths of the gospel, yet John repeats himself within these verses. What is the purpose of John's repetition?
- 5.) How and why should we seek to remind ourselves and one another of the fundamental truths of the gospel on a regular basis?