

# Believing, Obeying & Abiding

*1 John 3:23,24*

*With Study Questions*

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## **Review**

A quick review of chapter three of First John may be appropriate considering the amount of time spent working through the chapter. In order to grasp the intentions of the author in any particular verse or passage, it is always valuable to seek to respect the context. If I have studied it correctly, 1 John 3 unfolds as follows:

In verses one through three we see that being called a child of God is a demonstration of God's love for us and guarantees that we shall be like Him and someday see Him as He truly is.

In verses four through nine we are told that practicing sin or practicing righteousness reveals if one is truly a child of God or a child of the devil.

In verses ten through fifteen John becomes more specific about what righteousness is, lest we think we can define it as we please. The act of loving our brothers evidences that we are children of God.

In verses sixteen through nineteen John gets even more specific by defining love itself. John teaches that we know what love is by the example of Jesus.

In verses twenty through twenty-two John assures us that if we are a true child of God, we know God hears and responds to our prayers.

So we see John developing and fine-tuning his explanation through the course of the chapter. It goes something like this: **“The great love of God produces children who love one another the way Jesus loves them. And it is this kind of fruit-producing faith which assures the believer that the ear of God is attentive toward them.”** Now we will approach the last two verses of the chapter.

## **I. His Commandment**

**“And this is His commandment: that we should believe on the name of His Son Jesus Christ and love one another, as He gave us commandment” (1 John 3:23).**

### **Belief in Jesus—Is it Morally Neutral?**

Amidst all this talk of law-keeping, one might begin to wonder if John had forgotten one very important aspect of the Christian faith, belief in Jesus. We often hear belief in Jesus presented as if it were morally neutral. What I mean by this is that gospel is presented as a choice, and surely there are choices

to be made. But often times the rejection of Christ is viewed as the rejection of some morally neutral proposition such as not liking a certain color or a certain food. The rejection of Christ is somehow not viewed as morally reprehensible. In light of the passage before us (and many more like it) we must question this attitude.

### **The Last Six Commandments—Violation is Clearly Sin**

We all recognize, and expect the world to recognize (at least to a certain extent) the immoral nature of violating the second half of the Ten Commandments. Of course, most would agree, it is wrong to dishonor parents, murder, commit adultery, steal, be dishonest and covetous. And it is quite interesting to note that it is not uncommon for even unbelievers to argue for the placement of the Ten Commandments on civil properties for these moral reasons. Now I am certainly not arguing against doing this, but the first half of the Ten Commandments seem to slip their minds.

### **The First Four Commandments—Violation is Also Sin—A Specific God**

The violation of the first half of the decalogue (first four commandments) is every bit as immoral as the second half. And one must realize that the first four commandments address man's disposition toward God—a very specific God. There is nothing generic about this God. His creatures are not given the liberty to define Him as they see fit. The very beginning of the Ten Commandments is self-addressed, similar to Paul's self-address at the beginning of an epistle.

**“And God spoke all these words, saying: <sup>2</sup> “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage” (Exodus 20:1,2).**

### **Belief—A Moral Imperative**

The Ten Commandments were given by a very specific God who had done very specific things in history. And, as stated earlier, the first four commandments address man's disposition toward that God. It is important to recognize that the first commandment—that we should have no “other gods before” that God—is a moral imperative. In other words, atheism, agnosticism and the embracing of false religions, is not morally neutral, but a clear violation of the law of God, and every bit as immoral as lying or stealing.

### **Unbelief is Denying What We Know is True**

The Christian faith is not to be thought of as some optional world-view. As the author of Hebrews points out, unbelief is sin. He writes, **“Take care, brethren, lest there should be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart, in falling away from the living God” (Hebrews 3:12)**. It must also be pointed out that this is not some arbitrary imposition on the part of God. There is a reason why unbelief is immoral. The same way people know it is wrong to lie, they know it is wrong to deny the existence of this specific God. The scriptures declare that men know of this God (Romans 1) but suppress this truth, not in intellectual confusion, but in unrighteousness.

### **Eliminating Authority**

An agnostic or atheist may feign righteousness, but righteousness is at a pretty low premium when you give yourself the benefit of defining what it is. It has been my observation that people who are about to engage in some type of immoral behavior, systematically remove all authority figures from their lives, the most obvious authority figure being a specific God who has given specific commands.

### **Goodness Or Self-Idolatry—The Need to Obey The First Commandment**

Goodness defined and sought, apart from God is not goodness at all, but self-idolatry. It has no boundaries, no standard and no barriers beyond the imagination and power of the one who dreams it up. And men who have had this method, along with great power, have proven to be most evil despots in history. In short, you cannot believe in true, objective goodness, without believing in a true, specific God who has revealed His absolute moral standards to the human race. As Paul says of Christ, that in Him are **“hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Colossians 2:3)**. Therefore, the first commandment is to believe in Him.

### **The Second Half Will Happen**

In the second half of the verse we see what John has been telling us over and over again about what will happen if the first half of the Ten Commandments are obeyed. Namely, that the second half of the Ten Commandments will be obeyed<sup>1</sup>, which states that we should love one another. Love for God can never be separated from love for the brethren. This very familiar theme is probably most clearly proclaimed by Jesus Himself in a discussion He had with a lawyer. Matthew 22 records the conversation:

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<sup>1</sup> We must be reminded that keeping the commandments does not mean we keep with perfection but rather seek to obey in faith.

**“Then one of them, a lawyer, asked Him a question, testing Him, and saying, 36 “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?” 37 Jesus said to him, “ ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ 38 “This is the first and great commandment. 39 “And the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ 40 “On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 22:35-40).**

### **Summing Up The Law**

The summary of the Law can be given in this simple phrase, “Love God and Love your neighbor.” Again, we are not given the liberty to determine how this is to be done. God determines what love is and how it is to be displayed and He has used all sixty-six books of the Bible to make this clear to us. Starting with a summary and building our thinking out from there it would be something like this: Loving God and loving our neighbor is a summary of the law. How we are to love God and love our neighbor are found in the Ten Commandments which is the law. Hundreds and hundreds of examples of people obeying and disobeying the Ten Commandments, in differing forms, are found throughout the scriptures which reveal an even fuller expression of the commandments.

### **Summing Up The Verse**

In summary then, this verse can be understood thus: There is a command of God which carries with it every moral obligation of any other command, namely to believe in Jesus. And people who truly believe in Jesus should and will demonstrate that belief by loving one another.

## **II. Abiding in God**

**“Now he who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him. And by this we know that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us” (1 John 3:24).**

There are numerous passages in the Scriptures where we are told that God, by His Spirit, dwells, or abides, in us (1 Corinthians 3:16; 2 Corinthians 6:16; 2 Timothy 1:14, etc.) We see others places where the idea of abiding is used as well. Jesus states in John 15,

**“If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you. 8 “By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My**

**disciples. 9 “As the Father loved Me, I also have loved you; abide in My love. 10 “If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father’s commandments and abide in His love” (John 15:7-10).**

And in perhaps the most intimate and mysterious expression Jesus states in John,

**“Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. <sup>55</sup> “For My flesh is food indeed, and My blood is drink indeed. <sup>56</sup> “He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him” (John 6:54-56).**

### **The Biggest Preposition**

So what are to we make of this idea of abiding in God or Christ and Him abiding in us? It has been said that the word “in” is the biggest preposition in the Bible. We abide *in* Christ and by His Spirit, He abides *in* us.

### **Searching For The Indiscernible**

It is my observation and fear that people have turned this into something mystical and virtually indiscernible, leaving many of us in a spiritual lurch. Everything from letting go and letting God to tapping into God’s power to clichés such as stop trying and let God do it, etc., have left most of the Christian community either utterly confused, left out, or seeking something that is ill-defined and incomprehensible. I must admit that abiding in God and Him abiding in me is a bit mysterious. But it is not mysterious in the ways I have just articulated. The mystery is one of unity. As Jesus taught in His High Priestly Prayer,

**“And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one: 23 “I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me” (John 17:22,23).**

So before you find yourself confused and depressed because you can’t find something that Scriptures don’t teach you should be looking for anyway, let’s examine what we do know about abiding in God and Him abiding in us.

### **You’re Not Missing Out—Simply Trust and Obey**

Excuse me for over-simplifying this, but this verse may tell you all you really need to know about abiding in Christ. Namely, if you're seeking to keep His commands (which includes believing in Jesus) you are abiding in Him and He in you. Please don't live under the delusion that you're missing out on some super-power God is granting to those who approach Him with mystical know-how. I find no Biblical precedent for that kind of Christian faith and I have known too many who have named the name of Christ and sought to live and promote this "mystical-secret-power-approach" to the Christian life crash and burn as soon as they hit the atmosphere, which is inevitable for anyone who lives for more than fifteen minutes after adopting this method.

### **Virtues Belong to the Godly**

Life can be very difficult. It is part of the fall of man. We are to make every effort (heart, soul, mind and strength) to love God and love our neighbor in the face their sin, our sin and the sin of the world. I think it is a shame and a sin that so much of Christendom has turned to a mystifying and occultic method of trying to overcome their problems and weaknesses and have consigned, to the world, virtues like, honor, patience and effort. I am not sorry to inform you that God honors those who, in faith (with a mind toward God) work hard, exercise long-suffering, pursue dignity and seek to lead a chaste and holy life. And He despises those who seek Him with strange fire.

Do not under-estimate that flicker of faith which resides in your soul and that feeble effort at obedience. They are signs that the living God abides in you. Who else would provide those things? John seems to indicate, in summary of the chapter, that knowledge of these things are "**by the Spirit whom He has given us.**" Next chapter we will launch into the testing of the spirits, but we will leave this alone for now.

### **Summary**

In summary then, these two verses can be understood thus: There is a command of God which carries with it the same moral obligation of any other command, namely to believe in Jesus. And people who truly believe in Jesus should and will demonstrate that belief by loving one another. And if you believe in Jesus as the Savior of your soul and evidence the genuine nature of that belief by seeking to love your neighbor, you are demonstrating that you abide in God and He abides in you. Amen.

## Questions for Study

1. Discuss the way John develops his thesis through the chapter
2. Is belief in Jesus morally neutral? Why? Why not?
3. How do we know that the Commandments come from a specific God?
4. Is it reasonable for belief to be a moral imperative? Explain.
5. Can there be absolute truth apart from God? Explain.
6. What has John been teaching will happen if the first half of the Ten Commandments are honored?
7. Discuss the idea of the summary of the law.
8. What is the “biggest” preposition in the Bible and why?
9. What odd teachings have you heard regarding “abiding” in Christ?
10. What does it mean to abide in Christ?
11. How do you know you’re abiding in Christ?