

A Sure Foundation

*A 'Soil Check' for the Soul
1 John 2:3-11*

With Study Questions

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Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. ⁴ He who says, "I know Him," and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him ⁵ But whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him. By this we know that we are in Him (1 John 2:3-5).

Vain Professions

People say they believe in God. Athletes who just won the big game, entertainers who just received the prestigious award, and people interviewed on the news who recently escaped disaster will often express a sort of gratitude or acknowledgment of God. What are we to make of these types of assertions? In the 1500's, John Calvin made the statement that "...no evil has been more common in all ages than vainly to profess God's name."¹ Is this the case?

Westminster Confession

Chapter eighteen of the Westminster Confession expresses something which can be viewed as both harsh and comforting. But we must remember that the purpose of asserting truth is never to unnecessarily castigate, but to bless.

Hypocrites and other unregenerate men may deceive themselves with false hopes and carnal presumptions about their being in God's favor and about their being saved. Their presumptions will die with them. However, those who truly believe in the Lord Jesus, who honestly love Him and try to walk in good conscience before Him, may in this life be assured with certainty that they are in a state of grace (WCF XVIII.1a).

Knowing We Know Him

The issue here is known as *assurance*. John writes, "**Now by this we know that we know him...**" John is about to give the criteria by which people can know they have a genuine, saving relationship with Jesus Christ.

¹ John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries Vol. XXII* (Baker Book House, reprinted 1993), p. 174.

Of course, what he is about to write isn't the only criteria. For example he doesn't, at this point, mention the inward testimony of the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:16) which reveals to us that we are children of God.

Nor does he mention a proper understanding of substitutionary atonement or the deity of Christ. But if what he indicates in this passage is not present in the life of a person, that person should not think things are well between him and his maker. And what are the criteria?

Keeping The Law

We know that we know Him **“if we keep His commandments.⁴ He who says, ‘I know Him,’ and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him.”** Certainly keeping His commandments does not mean living a life of perfect and flawless obedience. John had just written:

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us (1 John 1:8).

John speaks of living a life regulated by the law of God. I might also point out that the obedience should not be dispassionate or merely external. As Moses recorded, **“And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all His ways and to love Him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul” (Deuteronomy 10:12).**

God deserves both our inward affections and outward obedience. Let us never forget that as we examine three important revolving around keeping the law.

1. Not a Means of Salvation

First, we are not saved by our keeping of the law. We are saved by Jesus' keeping of the law and Him freely giving us His righteousness and victory. So critical is our understanding of this that it can never be mentioned enough.

Weekly communion is dedicated to our remembering this essential fact. I would put this 1n the top two or three items (if not the first) that I would hope those under my teaching would grasp; also, the distinction between justification and sanctification, and between law and gospel.

The lack of a Christian's ability to make this distinction is disastrous. We are called to obey the law of God but we are not saved by our feeble

attempt. We are saved by the gospel. This is the good news that Jesus kept the law perfectly and grants us salvation by His work, not ours.

2. Agreeing About the Law

Secondly, we must acknowledge God's law. Men's decision to follow Christ will often depend on whether or not His law seems right to them. They may, for example, believe that stealing and lying are wrong, but homosexuality and adultery or acceptable.

I remember watching a lawyer-based television show where one of the characters portrayed was the innocent, religious, and somewhat righteous member of the firm. He was adamantly against the selling of the woman's reproductive eggs and abortion because it went against God. He likened it to prostitution.

Yet this same character, though against certain immoral things, was having an affair with one of the judges. When questioned about his beliefs regarding the law of God, he piously made the comment that he still believed in God about "some things." In other words, there were categories where he reserved the right to overrule the law of God.

This is not an option for a person who genuinely considers himself a Christian. To think we have the right to nullify the law of God whenever it suits us is nothing more than self-idolatry. It also removes any notion of an objective righteous standard.

3. Make the Effort to Obey

Third, we must make every effort to obey God's law. It is not enough to merely agree that the law is good. It must become our standard. And when we fall short, as we all will most certainly do, we do not seek to change the standard, but repent. We are to ever call upon the sprinkled blood of Christ for the remission of sins, and to continue seeking to walk the walk of faith. In this respect the law becomes functional in keeping us in Christ.

Objects of God's Love

John tells us that whoever does this, "**...truly the love of God is perfected in him**" (1 John 2:5). In other words, the sign that we are the objects of God's love is our willingness to walk in His ways. "**By this we know that we are in Him**" (1 John 2:5).

He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked" (1 John 2:6).

Walking Like Jesus: Anti-Law Rhetoric

It might be surprising that the majority of modern Christianity would have a difficult time with this teaching (or at least my exegesis of this passage). "All this talk of law and commandments seems so inconsistent with the flavor of the new covenant," so it is said. "Keep your law. I have Jesus. You go ahead and try to keep the law. I will imitate Jesus," is the rally cry. It is interesting what John equates with law-keeping.

How Did Jesus Walk?

So how did Jesus walk? Just what is it about Jesus that we are supposed to imitate? Does not Hebrews teach us that we have a high priest who "*was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin*" (Hebrews 4:15b). Or as Peter writes, "**Who committed no sin, Nor was deceit found in His mouth**" (1 Peter 2:22). Did not Jesus keep the law?

Imaginary Jesus

I remember having what amounted to be an imaginary concept of Jesus. He was a combination of Gandhi, Chewbacca, and Billy Graham. He was big, strong, nice, righteous and fairly knowledgeable of doctrine, but not overly concerned about it. He discouraged sin, but not too harshly, and encouraged us to follow our hearts.

But the fact is Jesus kept the law of God. If we are going to imitate Him, we must seek to keep the law also. This should apply to every law in the Bible that is not abrogated in the New Testament. The laws that are abrogated are laws which, for the most part, preserved the seed and pointed to what Jesus was going to do (sacrificial activities). Since He has now done these things the laws are no longer necessary.

Brethren, I write no new commandment to you, but an old commandment which you have had from the beginning. The old commandment is the word which you heard from the beginning.⁸ Again, a new commandment I write to you, which thing is true in Him and in you, because the darkness is passing away, and the true light is already shining (1 John 2:7,8).

New but Old

Is John contradicting himself? One would be daft to think that John would be so slowwitted as to contradict himself from one sentence to the next. He is obviously making some contrasts.

Nothing New About It

First, there was nothing new about the faithful walking in obedience. That has been the teaching from the very beginning. But more specifically this was nothing new to those who had come to faith. This is something that should always be taught to new and potentially new converts—that faith involves repentance.

But in another respect there was something very new. When Jesus said, **“A new commandment I give you...love one another” (John 13:34a)**, what was so new about that? Had not God always commanded love? And what about the old covenant and the new covenant? Or the Old Testament and the New Testament? Surely God is not changing His standards or correcting His errors! So what was new?

What Was New?

That which was new was something God had planned from time immemorial. In the fullness of time Jesus would come and begin a kingdom that would bring into its citizenship men from every nation, kindred, and tongue. The old that was passing away was the Mosaic economy and temple practices. The true light that was already shining, and which continues to shine to this day, is the full expression of the person and work of Jesus Christ.

In Summary

John concludes with a summary:

He who says he is in the light, and hates his brother, is in darkness until now. ¹⁰ He who loves his brother abides in the light, and there is no cause for stumbling in him. ¹¹ But he who hates his brother is in darkness and walks in darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes (1 John 2:9-11).

Not Okay To Hate Your Brother

It is as simple as this. You are not in Christ if you think it is okay to hate your brother and make no effort to overcome your sinful passions. If you love your brother, you abide in the light and there is no scandal in you. But hating your brother (and, by the way, hating your brother means you are, in one way or another, perpetrating a violation of the last six commandments against him. We also must acknowledge that there is an assumed hatred of God in hating your brother. This is violating the first four commandments.) is a sign that you're still in darkness.

In the same way the opposite injunction of loving your brother has little to do with the way one feels (it is more of a decision), hating your brother is more of a formed and held conviction than a passion.

Call On Jesus as Savior and Lord

In short, this passage is teaching us that if we are not seeking to keep His commandments, our souls are in grave jeopardy. We must call upon Jesus in sincerity. We must trust Him as Savior and follow Him as Lord. If we fail to do both, we are evidencing that we are still in our sins. But if we have, or will call upon His name, as Paul writes, **“in sincerity” (Ephesians 6:24)**, He will wash our sins away and begin to sanctify our lives.

Questions for Study

1. Why do you suppose that people who may not be saved make professions about God?
2. Do you think these professions have any value?
3. What does the Westminster Confession say about these types of professions?
4. How do we know that we know God?
5. Is it possible to obey God perfectly?

6. Should God be the object of our affections?
7. Can we be saved by our law-keeping?
8. Why do you suppose Pastor Paul thinks it is so important to have a clear distinction between law and gospel?
9. Why is it impossible to have an objective, absolute standard of right and wrong apart from the word of God?
10. Is just agreeing with God's law enough?
11. How do we know we are objects of God's love?
12. Why do you suppose there is anti-law rhetoric among Christians?
13. What does it mean to walk as Jesus walked?
14. Have you noticed the promotion of the imaginary Jesus?
15. Explain how the message is both old and new.
16. Is it possible to hate your brother and still assume you're in a right standing with God?