



Potomac Hills

Presbyterian Church, PCA



By Grace Alone ~ Through Faith Alone ~ In Christ Alone

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1 John 2:3-6

June 22, 2008
English Standard Version

“Knowing Christ”

This is the 3rd sermon in the series on the New Testament books of 1, 2, 3 John entitled,
“Walking with Christ when Faith is Tested.”

1 John 2:3-6

“And by this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments. ⁴ Whoever says “I know Him” but does not keep His commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him, ⁵ but whoever keeps His word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may know that we are in Him: ⁶ whoever says he abides in Him ought to walk in the same way in which He walked.”

INTRODUCTION: *The Last Christian*¹

I just finished reading this amazing book about Francis of Assisi ... *Chasing Francis* by Ian Morgan Cron ... and his relationship to the church of today. The era Francis lived in (the 13th Century) and the one we live in are very different, but there are a few fascinating parallels.

First, Francis lived in the gap between two historical periods — the Middle Ages and the pre-Renaissance (the opening days of modernity). Today we’re living in the junction between two moments in history as well — the change from Modernity to Postmodernity. People in St. Francis’s time felt the same anxiety that comes from living in a rapidly changing society that we feel today.

An interesting story about what happened back then comes from another book about St. Francis entitled *The Last Christian* by Adolf Holl. He writes, “About 800 years ago people in a

¹ The Introduction is adapted from *Chasing Francis* by Ian Morgan Cron and *The Last Christian* by Adolf Holl.

number of European cities began to feel a peculiar and unheard-of desire. They wanted to know what time it was. Of course, there had always been church bells. They summoned the faithful to worship, proclaimed the arrival of death, warned of fire and approaching enemies. Their chimes divided the day into morning, afternoon, and evening. Nobody had a watch. Then in the year 1188 the citizens of Tournai, in Belgium, got permission from the King to set up a clock in a suitable spot, to strike the hours, “for their pleasure and for the city’s business.” The first mechanical clock was installed in 1309 in Milan, Italy, and it wasn’t long before every sizeable town had one. Thus people began to live in a new era. They called it **“Modern Times.”** Nowadays, after eight centuries of modern times, and a generation of living with the atomic bomb, we find our enthusiasm for modernity somewhat dampened. We wonder what went wrong ever since people started asking what time it was.”

And supposedly, our dampened enthusiasm for modernity is what has given rise to Postmodernity and postmodernism.

Another, and not insignificant, similarity between the Middle Ages and today has to do with the state of Christendom. In Francis’s day, the church was hemorrhaging credibility; it was seen as hypocritical, untrustworthy, and irrelevant. Some people even wondered if it would survive. Clergy were at the center of all kinds of sexual scandals. It had commercialized Jesus, selling pardons, ecclesiastical offices, and relics. Sermons were either so academic that people couldn’t understand them or they were canned. Popular songs ridiculing the church and clergy could be heard all over Europe. The laity felt used by the professional clergy. The church had become dangerously entangled in the world of power politics. Disillusionment with the church inspired many people to turn to alternative spiritualities. The demise of feudalism and the return of a money economy brought the rise of the merchant class and the ferocious spirit of aggressive capitalism. Greed ran riot in the culture.

And to top it all off, Christians were at war with Muslims.

And it all sounds eerily familiar.

To finish with another quote from *The Last Christian*, “In the person of Francis the premodern world, so to speak, gathered itself together before coming to an end. For one last time, before the forces of progress thundered off on their triumphant path, one man looked into the motivating thrust behind the whole thing and decisively rejected it: Francis of Assisi, the last Christian. No one after him worked as strenuously against the forces of modernity as he did, with his body, with his very life. Francis had no new theory to offer, but an old practice — **the practice of Jesus Christ.**”

I think John the Elder and Francis of Assisi would have gotten along just fine. They both dealt with churches in confusing times, much like ours. They both dealt with a preponderance of false teachers and false teachings, much like ours. They both dealt with silver-tongued devils who knew how to talk the talk but were clueless when it came to walking the walk. They both saw right through the corruption and hypocrisy and called it out for all to see. And the people and problems of their ages were just like ours ... just without the technology. And they both offered the same answer, the same solution, to all of these confusing issues ... simply put, you need to **live like Jesus.**

Oh yes, John and Francis were twin sons of different ages.

And today, we’re learning from John.

But before we do, let’s ...

REVIEW: *What this book's about?* ²

This is the third sermon in this series on **the Epistles**, the Letters, of John. I just finished preaching through **the Gospel** of John ... and I both started it and ended it by pointing out some key things I thought we needed to learn from John.

We must know **why** the church is a community ... and then **be** a community.

We must know **why** Christians are loving ... and then **be** loving people.

We must know **why** Christianity is believable ... and then **act** like **we really do** believe it. And we must know **why** Jesus Christ is the not only the most meaningful person who ever lived, we must know **why** He brings meaning to each one of our lives, and we must know **why** it is **Jesus Christ** who lives, and reigns, and is coming again.

And we must be able to tell others in a way **they can understand!**

The Epistles of John were written to the **church**. The Apostle John was based in Ephesus, and it's most likely that this letter was written to the churches in Asia Minor, much as the Book of Revelation was. John's purpose for readers of the epistle was that they might know that they **already have** life.

The epistle was written for believers to deepen their **assurance** of faith. And they contain "**tests**" by which to judge that faith.

The enemies of the truth in the **epistle** are **professing** Christians (although the "tests given here" show that they are lying) and whose theology of Jesus is distinctly ***docetic*** and ***gnostic*** in nature.

Docetism was an opinion that Jesus had no human body and only **appeared** to have died on the cross. Docetists didn't deny the divinity of Christ, but they did deny the humanity of Jesus.

Gnosticism were the beliefs of early Christian cults that valued their own **special, revealed knowledge of God** as a means to attain redemption for the spiritual element in man, separating it from the physical element.

The purpose of 1st John is to expose **mere professors of faith in Christ** (non-believers) and to confirm **true possessors of Christ by faith** (believers) by means of the application of certain "**tests of life.**" Such is done with a view to granting assurance of eternal life to true Christians, **1 John 5:13**, "*I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life.*"

However, the problem that existed in the church was that people **couldn't tell** who the real Christians were. There were false teachers who **claimed** to believe in Christ, but **refused** to live like it, and the young Christians in the church were confused. False **teaching** always leads to false **living**, and the ethical implications of Gnosticism are John's concern throughout these letters.

Their ethical error had two ingredients: **first**, a lack of obedience to the commands of Christ that bordered on outright decadence; and **second**, an absence of brotherly love and compassion.

Let's refresh our memory of what we've learned in 1st John so far. In chapter 1, John is

² Some of the Review is adapted from the article "Introduction to First John" by Dr. Sam Storms, Enjoying God Ministries, 11/3/06, found at www.EnjoyingGodMinistries.com; *The Epistles of John: Tyndale New Commentaries* by John R. W. Stott, pages 49-50; *The Message of John's Letters* by David Jackman, pages 15-17; and the sermon, "If You Love Me, Keep My Commandments" by Ligon Duncan, First Presbyterian Church, Jackson, MS, 10/12/03.

responding to false teaching in the church regarding sin. The false teachers are teaching a number of incorrect things: they're teaching that you can have a saving fellowship with God and **still** live immorally; they're teaching that once you become a Christian, you are a person who is **without** sin; and they're teaching that once you become a Christian, you **no longer**, in fact, commit sin. Even though you may be living immorally ... but because you have this special knowledge ... it doesn't count as sin. How convenient **is that?**

And John is responding to each of these false teachings. He makes it clear in 1 John 1 that believers — though we are new creations in Jesus Christ — we're still sinners, and we still need to deal with that sin realistically and biblically. And of course that means, as he tells us, confessing our sins and seeking the forgiveness of God. Though we have been saved by grace, though we have been forgiven of our sins and spared of their penalty, as believers we still continue to grow in grace by confessing our sins and having them forgiven.

Then in 1 John 2, he says, "Now, let me make sure that you don't misunderstand what I'm saying. By saying that we, as Christians, will continue to struggle with sin, and by saying that we as Christians will continue to need to confess and repent of our sins, I'm **NOT** saying that sin is no big deal; I'm **NOT** saying that we shouldn't pursue godliness; I'm **NOT** saying that we shouldn't be active in the pursuit of holiness--far from it! In fact, he makes it clear in verses 1 and 2 of 1 John 2 that his goal is precisely that we would pursue godliness.

He explains to us the basis of pursuing godliness and righteousness is in Jesus Christ the Advocate, who is the **propitiation** for our sins ... which means that Jesus, through His death on the cross **for** our sins ... satisfies God's wrath **against** our sins.

Now, moving from dealing with sin, and dealing with false teaching about sin, and dealing with the proper view of sin in the Christian life, John moves on to another subject. And his subject is "How can you know that you know God? How can you be assured that you know God? How can you be assured that you are, in fact, a Christian?"

And in this section that begins with verse 3, he lays out three tests for knowing that you are a Christian: one of them is the holiness test; one of them is the social, or relational test; and one of them is the doctrinal test. Today, we're going to look at the holiness test. Next week, Frank Pugh will look with you at the relational test. And then we'll follow up by looking at the doctrinal test.

And so John the Elder responds to all that with this book. And we're living in a day and age where we need his words far more than we realize.

So let's dive into this text and see what it says ...

v. 3: **FELLOWSHIP IS SEEN IN OBEDIENCE**³

*"And by this we **know** that we have come to **know** Him, if we keep His commandments."*

How do we know that we know God? How is it that a person comes to know that he or she **really knows** the Living God, really has a saving relationship with Him, really has a **fellowship** knowledge of the Living God — doesn't just know things **about** Him but really **knows** Him — is in an actual **relationship** with Him? That's the question that John's asking here. And the tests he gives are designed to help you come to a firm and certain answer to that question, to strip away any self-deception that may be in your heart, and to open your eyes to see

³ The Exposition of the text is adapted from the sermon "If You Love Me, Keep My Commandments" by Ligon Duncan, First Presbyterian Church, Jackson, MS, 10/12/03.; *Notes for the Study & Exposition of 1st John* by Eric Kress, pages 17-21; *The Epistles of John: Tyndale New Commentaries* by John R. W. Stott, pages 53ff.

the truth, to find out whether you **don't** know God or whether you **do** know God.

John gives us three tests to help us determine whether we know God. We've already mentioned them — holiness, social, and doctrinal — and he starts with the **holiness** test; we'll see that right here in verse 3. It's going to be put in two or three different ways in the course of these four verses. But his design is to give Christians something by which they may **judge** their claims of true knowledge of God. Primarily, he's not giving these tests so that we will begin judging the rest of our church as to how **they** stand with God, but that we might **look at ourselves** and ask how **we** stand with God.

In verse 3, John states his point, *“And by this we **know** that we have come to **know** Him, if we keep His commandments.”* Now again, I want to stress: John is **NOT** asking the question, “How do we **come** to know God?” He's **not** saying, “If you want to come to know God, here's how you do it: obey.” That's **not** the issue that John is dealing with: how one is saved.

And John's **not** dealing with how one is declared righteous before God; he's **not** dealing with how one receives the grace of God; he's **not** saying, “If you want to receive God's grace, obey.” “If you want to be justified, obey.” He's **not** saying, “If you want to be saved, obey.” He's **not** saying, “If you want to know God, well, then obey.” He's saying something different. He's **not** saying, “If you want to know God, then obey.”

He is saying, **and this is difficult, so you have to listen carefully.** It's easy to get confused here. **John is saying,** “Here's how you **know** that you **know God** ... it's manifested in the way that you live; it's manifested **in your obedience.**” So, it's very important for us to note that John is **not** saying that we know God by keeping His commandments. Rather, he is saying, “We **know** ... **that we know** God ... by keeping His commandments.”

Those are two, distinct questions, and we need to keep them distinct.

Theologians consider this one of the great passages on **Epistemology.** That's a big word that means the study of how we know what we know. Do we know things through our senses? Do we know things by reasoning? Do we know things by experience? How do we know what we know? And the Apostle John teaches us that we know ... **that we know God** ... by our obedience.

That is, John is **not** teaching **salvation** by obedience, he's **not** even teaching **assurance** by obedience; but John **is** teaching that salvation is **evidenced** by obedience, and, in turn, that obedience **contributes** to our assurance.

It's important that we understand, then, what he's up to. He's trying to give us a diagnostic tool to let us know **how we know** the One True God. So, in verse 3, he says that *“we **know** that we **know** God in our desiring to keep and in actually keeping God's commandments.”* He's concerned to supply tests that will distinguish those who simply claim to be Christians from those who claim to be Christians and **who really are** Christians.

And test #1 is very simple: Do you obey God's word? Look at this verse, *“And by this we **know** that we have come to **know** Him, if we keep His commandments.”* Do you keep God's commandments? That's test #1. Is the Bible your final rule for faith and practice? He's saying here that “one way **grace is evidenced** in the life of a person who claims to be a Christian is in obedience.”

The Nobel Prize-nominated chemist, Henry Shafer, who teaches at the University of Georgia, tells the story of how he came to reject Christianity. He'd been raised in a nominally Christian home, attending a mainline Presbyterian church, and one day in the midst of a discussion in the kitchen, he made a point to his father about an ethical question by saying,

“Look, Dad, the Bible says such and such.” And His dad responded by saying, “I know what the Bible says; it’s wrong.” Henry Shafer said, at that moment he decided that Christianity must be bunk, because his dad claimed to be a Christian and yet rejected the teaching of the Bible. In God’s mercy, God did a work of grace in Henry Shafer’s heart and brought him to saving faith in Christ later on. And then, at that time, he realized that it wasn’t that Christianity was bunk; it was that his father’s **profession of faith** was bunk. You see, if you believe the Living God, you’ll believe His word; you’ll trust His word; you’ll acknowledge His word as your final rule of faith and practice. And you’ll not just do it in the abstract; you’ll do it where it hurts; you’ll do it where it’s hard to obey.

John’s point is that real fellowship with God — true knowledge of God — always expresses itself in a transformed life; it never leaves us unchanged. To know Him changes everything; it changes us from the inside out, and one of the ways that it changes us is it makes us love to obey His word, to believe His word, to follow His word. So, there’s the first thing John says, true fellowship with God, true knowledge of God, is seen by our obedience. But then John gives us a negative example, and he says that ...

v. 4: UNBELIEF IS SEEN IN DISOBEDIENCE

Now, by way of contrast, in verse 4 he says, *“Whoever says ‘I know Him’ but does not keep His commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him,”*

You see, there’s the other side to the truth that he’s already shared with you in verse 3. His point is, “If you claim to know God but your life **isn’t** changed by knowing Him, that’s a **sure** sign that you **don’t** know God.

Now, it’s also important for us to see what he says here. He **doesn’t** say that the problem is that you’re all caught up with truth, you’ve got all this head knowledge but you have no heart knowledge. Isn’t it interesting that he says there in verse 4, *“Whoever says ‘I know Him’ but does not keep His commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him”*? He **doesn’t** say, “He has the truth, but he hasn’t put it into practice.” He **doesn’t** say, “He has head knowledge, but he doesn’t have heart knowledge.” He says, **“He has no truth,”** because the truth of God turns your world upside down. Once you have that truth it changes everything. That truth **always** leads to love; it **always** leads to obedience; it **always** leads to a transformed life.

And so, when that transformed life is not there, then you can be sure that person’s never had the truth; he’s never met God; he’s never met the Lord Jesus Christ who is “the way and the truth and the life.” **There is no knowledge of God that does not also lead to the keeping of His commandments.**

“True grace **always** reigns in righteousness,” Paul says, **Romans 5:17**, *“For if, because of one man’s trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of **righteousness** reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ.”* And again in **Romans 5:21**, *“so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through **righteousness** leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.”*

“Justification is **always** accompanied by sanctification,” Paul says, **Romans 8:10**, *“But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of **righteousness.**”*

“Grace-salvation **always** leads to obedience,” Paul says, **Ephesians 2:8-10**, *“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God,⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast.¹⁰ For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for **good works**, which God prepared beforehand, **that we should walk in them.**”*

“Faith *always* shows itself in works,” James says, **James 2:17-18**, “*So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.* ¹⁸ *But someone will say, “You have faith and I have works.” Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.*”

Those are just different biblical ways of stressing the point that John is making here in 1 John — Truth always expresses itself in action. Faith, trust, real knowledge of God, **always** is always expressed in action, and especially in the action of **obeying** God’s commandments. And so, we know that we **don’t** know God if we **don’t** want to keep His commandments, and if we **don’t** by grace do just that.

But then John returns to another positive example, and he says that ...

v. 5: **LOVE IS SEEN IN OBEDIENCE**

Now, in verse 5, he expresses this test, this holiness test, in a different way, “*but whoever keeps His word, in him truly **the love of God** is perfected. By this we may **know** that we are in Him:*”

You see, the test in verse 3 was, “Do you obey God’s word?” The test is expressed differently here in verse 5, “Do you manifest your love of God by keeping His word?” You see, true love for God is expressed not in **sentimental** language. True love for God is not expressed in some claim of **mystical** experience. True love for God is expressed in moral obedience.

The proof of love is loyalty. What would a wife think of a husband who said, “Oh, honey, I love you,” but every week he engaged in an affair with another women? Well, that profession of love would ring hollow. True love is loyal. And, therefore, God says, “You truly love Me? You’ll be loyal to My word; you’ll be committed to My word.”

You see, the truth of God does not exist in order to promote merely right **thinking** about God; the truth exists to promote an **experiential** relationship with God. And that relationship, that fellowship, that knowledge, **always** expresses itself in love to God, in obedience to God, through love and obedience to His word. Love delights to do God’s will.

What is Jesus’ constant refrain in the gospels? John catches it so often, **John 4:34**, “*Jesus said to them, “My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me and to accomplish His work.”* Jesus loved to do God’s will. And so, if we’re like Jesus, then we’ll love to do God’s will as well. If we love God, we’ll keep His commands, and that obedience will be the evidence of our love for God.

Do you remember what Jesus said to His disciples in the upper room on the night that He was betrayed in **John 14:15**? “*If you love Me, you will keep My commandments.*” That’s what He said. And so, the Christian who teaches that you can love Jesus and **not** keep His commandments is contradicting Christ.

And finally, John wants to make it clear that fellowship with God, belief in God, and love for God ...

v. 6: **ALL OF WHICH IS DISPLAYED BY OBEDIENCE**

“*whoever says he abides in Him ought to walk in the same way in which He walked.*”

And so now John is talking about “**abiding in Christ.**” What does that mean? Well, to abide in Him is to experience a life-giving relationship with Jesus Christ, a relationship that issues forth **not** in passivity and indifference and inactivity and inattention to the Word, but a relationship that issues forth in activity and commitment and effort and love for God’s will and living like Christ did.

And so John says, “Good. You abide in Christ? Well, then no doubt your whole life has been transformed by that.” If you’re abiding in Christ; then your whole life will have been

changed. You see, everyone who is in Christ expresses that union with Christ by living like Him, by emulating Christ's love for the Heavenly Father, by doing the things He did, and by obeying the things He said.

Oh yeah, we'll never do it perfectly this side of Heaven. If you're looking for perfect obedience as the answer to this test, then no one passes. But by grace God always works **some** obedience and **some** love for obedience in the life of those who claim to be His disciples.

My friends, one of the great struggles we wrestle with in this congregation, with this community, is a desire to follow Christ **while at the same time following this world**. And it's a **strange** encouragement to me that John's having to deal with **the same problem** right here in 1 John 2, almost 2,000 years ago, with a congregation that lived less than 70 years after Christ walked the earth.

You see, they **want** to abide in Christ; they **want** to love Christ; they **want** to be Christians; and yet, **they're struggling** to be faithful to living in accordance with God's will. And what does John do? Well, John, like his Master, says to them, "You cannot serve two masters. You must either serve God, or you must serve this world. If you serve God," he says, "this is how you **know** that you're serving God: you **know** that you're serving God because you want to do what He says in His Word. And in some measure, by His grace, you'll do just that."

And now that message is important for us; it's important for at least two reasons. It's important because there may be some of us here today who profess to be Christians who aren't living in accordance with God's Word and have no real desire to do so. And what John's saying to you is, "You're not a Christian, friend. Come to grips with that. Realize that you need grace! You don't need to brush up and live it a little better; you need grace; you need saving grace!"

And there may be other Christians here today that are wrestling with a lack of assurance because of imperfections and problems and mistakes and mess-ups and repeated **sin** in their lives. And John is saying, "I'm not asking for perfect obedience to God's Word; I'm asking you to look at your heart and answer this question: Do you **want** to obey God's Word? If you answer that question 'yes,'" John says, "well, then I have some help for you here."

He's going to give that help to you in the rest of this book.

But, my friends, in that way this message is for all of us today. You know, everytime we have communion, we talk about **repentant** sinners and **unrepentant** sinners. And we say that you're in one camp or the other. And that's pretty much what John's telling us today. And if we're confused, if we're not sure just where we're at spiritually, he gives us a test to help us figure it out. Because bottom line — you're either a member of the Body of Christ or you're not. Even if you're on the inside and are fooling us ... you're not fooling God.

CONCLUSION: *The Fifth Column*⁴

The year was 1939, and the Spanish Civil War was almost over. Just outside Madrid, the rebel general Mola was ready to begin his attack. Someone asked which of his four columns of troops would be the first to enter the city.

"The fifth," he responded. His answer became world famous. The general's most important column was a band of rebel sympathizers inside the city. They were already behind the Loyalist lines helping him.

Since then, the term ***Fifth Column*** has been used worldwide. It describes traitors who assist the enemy from within. Betrayal is an ugly business, and yet it's been common throughout

⁴ Part of the Conclusion is adapted from the article "Can We Combat Apostasy?" by George Sweeting, *The Outlook*, November 1998, page 9.

history. Through the centuries even the church has had its traitors. Some professing the faith have attacked the Scripture, denied Biblical Truth, and sown division. The Bible uses the word **apostasy** to talk about opposition from within. Apostasy is opposition to the Christian faith from people who once **professed** that same faith ... and who may still call themselves believers ... but who have joined hands with the opposition.

By their apostasy, these “professors” say to the church, and to the world, that “the things the Bible teaches aren’t what they seem to be. This truth is not a truth.” And so apostates are the fifth column inside the church. The book of Jude tells us in **Jude 1:3-4**, “*Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints. ⁴ For certain people have crept in unnoticed who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.*”

One of the reasons John is writing to make sure that you don’t merely **profess** the faith, but that you actually **possess** the faith.

And he wants you to be able to tell the difference.

You need to pray.

Take a moment to do that, and then I’ll close.

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John 14:21

“Whoever has My commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves Me. And he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and manifest Myself to him.”