

How May We Know?

1 John 2:3-11

Introduction:

In 2006, the Barna Group did a survey revealing that 84% of Americans consider themselves as Christian, but only 38% considered themselves as Evangelicals. These two figures reveal only how people view themselves, not their actual beliefs. The survey then asked a series of questions regarding the people's beliefs.

These aren't the actual questions, but questions were something like:

- Have you made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ and is it still important today?
- Do you believe that Jesus Christ lived a sinless life on earth?
- Do you believe that when you die you will go to Heaven because you have confessed your sins and accepted Jesus Christ as your savior?
- Do you believe that eternal salvation is possible only through grace, not works?

There were 9 of these types of questions. Interestingly, based on theological questions alone (so, not how they saw themselves), only 8% of adults actually fit their definition of evangelical.

That means that more than 8 out of 10 people identify themselves as Christians; 84% of Americans proclaim with their mouth that they are Christians – and yet, less than 1 out of 10 actually believe the gospel.

How does this happen? Author, Michael Horton, asks this question, "What would things look like if Satan actually took over a city?" He says, "The first frames in our imaginative slide show probably depict mayhem on a massive scale: Widespread violence, deviant sexualities, pornography in every vending machine, churches closed down and worshipers dragged off to City Hall. Over a half-century ago, Donald Grey Barnhouse, pastor of Philadelphia's Tenth Presbyterian Church, gave his CBS radio audience a different picture of what it would look like if Satan took control of a town in America. He said that all of the bars and pool halls would be closed, pornography banished, pristine streets and sidewalks would be occupied by tidy pedestrians who smiled at each other. There would be no swearing. The kids would answer "Yes, sir," "No, ma'am," and the churches would be full on Sunday ... where Christ is not preached."

Unfortunately, there are a large number of churches in America that are not committed to the centrality of the gospel or teaching the scriptures. Some of these churches are led by very gifted speakers – and people may gush over the sermons. The teaching is often described as extremely relevant to everyday lives and, there are frequently people who can give testimony of how their lives are now better through the work of these ministries. People are actually coming to church, they are listening to sermons on Sunday morning, lives are changed, and people feel good about themselves and yet they don't actually know or believe the gospel.

It's a frightening prospect. Jesus says in Matthew 7:21-23, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'"

According to Jesus, there will be people who think that they are believers who are going to heaven who, instead, will find themselves mistaken. Barna's survey says the same thing.

And so, if someone asked you how you could truly know if you were a Christian, what would you say? How do you know if you are truly a Christian? It has to be based on more than just feelings, because we all know that our feelings can change and deceive us. It has to be based on more than just actions because some will prophesy and do mighty works in Jesus' name and still be cast out.

In our passage last week looked at how Christ works in the life of the Christian when he sins. We talked of Christ's continued work on our behalf as our Advocate, as our righteousness, and our propitiation when we sin. John told us that these truths are meant to turn us away from our sin and toward Jesus.

Now John offers us a kind of self-diagnosis as an assurance of our salvation. When the letter was written, false teachers were applying pressure to the church and, as far as we know, broke away from the church to form their own, separate church. The false teachers had shaken the confidence of the true believers. And so, John intends to affirm the genuineness of their faith while also exposing the false teachers for what they were. In doing so, he provides us with 3 marks that the believer can point to in order to verify that they truly know God.

The first mark that John gives us is that...

Everyone who has come to know God through Christ...

1. Keeps his commandments (3-5a)

Throughout the book, John draws sharp contrasts – very black and white. Up to now, John's words have been in opposition to those who denied their sins. Now he speaks out against those who would deny a need to live in conformity to God's teaching.

“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.”

John knows that the knowledge of God that is found only through the gospel has an effect on our lives – and this effect, this change happens from the inside out.

It begins first as a heart change. Everyone begins their life under the curse and weight of sin. Each sin we commit further condemns us. The Bible says that we are dead in our sins and blind to the truth of God. This is true of everyone.

If you are a believer, something changed. By God's mercy you were granted newness of life in Christ. The burden and payment is lifted taken up by Jesus. And all this was done for you – He is the one who removed this bondage to sin. He then gave you new eyes to see your sin in light of His glory and a new heart to be able to respond in love.

When our eyes are opened and we are given new hearts, our allegiances change and we are freed to follow after the one who has redeemed us. All of this comes out of God's grace to you. We love him because he first loved us. This is more than simply knowing facts about God, this is a personal knowledge.

John carefully structures his sentence to assure them of the relationship that they already have with God. “And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments.” He is careful to say that the relationship with God comes first. John is not saying that we keep his commandments in order to know God. He is saying that by keeping his commandments we prove that we know him. Calvin says that John “does not understand that those who keep his commandments wholly satisfy the law (no such example can be found in the world;) but that they are such as

strive, according to the capacity of human infirmity, to form their life in conformity to the will of God. For whenever Scripture speaks of the righteousness of the faithful, it does not exclude the remission of sins, but on the contrary, begins with it.”

And so, once we have come to know God through the gospel, our entire relationship to God’s commands change. Before we were saved, God’s commands, his laws, were given to show us our sinfulness and our total inability to live by God’s standards of Holiness. Paul says, “I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, “Do not covet.” The law then inflamed our sinful hearts to sin more. Now, John says, for the believer, our desire is to live in obedience to God. In chapter 1 John 5:3, John says that God’s commandments are no longer burdensome for the believer. Here is where change of heart is revealed. The unbeliever finds God’s commands extremely burdensome because he is unable to carry them on his shoulders. There may be some commands that the unbeliever likes, but on the whole, these commands do little more than reveal his weakness.

The Christian relies upon Christ for righteousness and so, if God lays upon him a command, he is able to bear it. If, while carrying out this command he stumbles, Christ is there to work on his behalf so that he will not be crushed under it. The Christian also knows that all that God commands is for the benefit of the believer and the glory of Christ. This is why the Christian is able to strive to obey God’s commands.

This view of a believer striving to form their life in conformity to the will of God stands in stark contrast to the individual who says with their mouth that they know God and does not seek to live in conformity to God’s will. This man, John says, is a liar and the truth is not in him. Here, the apostle assures us, the man who has no regard for God’s teaching has no regard for God.

It doesn’t matter what he or she claims with their mouth, if they do not seek after God’s commands, their actions (or lack thereof) provides testimony to their relationship to God. Until the gospel has transformed their heart, they do not know God. Until they know God, they do not obey his commands. Just as a tree must be judged by the fruit it produces, so we are judged by our obedience.

What does John mean when he says that we are to keep his commandments?

Some have argued that the Old Testament commandments or laws can be broken up into moral laws and civil laws and so, as Christians, we are only obligated to keep these moral laws. Others say something similar when they say that Christians are only supposed to hold to Old Testament laws that are repeated in the New Testament. I have to confess that I’m not entirely comfortable with dividing the law up like that. There is a fair bit of tension here because elsewhere Paul says that we are no longer under the law, but under grace.

And so, the question remains, what does John mean when he says that we are to keep his commandments?

I believe that here John is pointing us to, what Paul calls, the law of Christ.

There is freedom from the law in order that we might find our righteousness in Christ and not within ourselves. We keep his commands as we understand and respond to His word in our lives. This is why he says, “but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected.”

As we respond to God’s Word by allowing it to change our thinking, our beliefs, and our behavior, our response of love for God is strengthened, it is perfected. This love is not only a feeling; it is also an ethical response.

This is love that is worked out as you take care of a dying relative or friend. It is the kind of love that is willing to sacrifice time and resources to help a neighbor fix a broken window or replace a garage door opener. Husbands and Fathers, it is this love for God that pushes you to pull out your Bible and have family devotions even after a long day. It is this love for God that causes you take a meal to a sick friend or to stop and pray with someone in the midst distress.

There are countless ways, countless decisions we are given each day to express this love for God. The Christian will be characterized by this kind of obedience, by seeking to express his love for God in this way. And yet, there lies a tension, right? You have freedom in Christ, so you don't have to do any of these things to earn God's favor or go to Heaven, but out of your love for Him you seek to obey his commands.

We do not know him by our works. Let me repeat that – we do not know him by our works. No, our good works are simply an expression of our love for God. Everyone who has come to know God through Christ keeps his commandments.

Everyone who has come to know God through Christ...

1. Keeps his commandments (3-5a) and also
2. Walks as Christ walked (5b-6)

Everyone who has come to know God through Christ also walks as Christ walked. John offers us this second mark for how we may know that we are in him. The end of verse 5 and verse 6 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."

Now, what does John mean that we are to walk as Jesus walked?

The first thing that I thought of was the last verse of John's gospel. It says, "Now there are also many other things that Jesus did. Were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written." Jesus did a lot of things when he walked on the earth. John says that Jesus did a lot of things that weren't even recorded. Jesus did a lot of things that you and I just cannot do. We can't walk on water, we can't turn water into wine, and we certainly can't die to redeem the sins of the whole world. John is obviously not asking us to imitate Christ in these ways.

How then are we to walk in the same way in which he walked? We are given our clue from John's gospel where he uses similar wording. In John chapter 15, Jesus identifies himself as the true vine, "I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing." We walk as Christ walked by abiding in him, by living in him and depending upon him. The branches must look to the vine for all nutrients, support, and life. If you were to remove the branch from the vine, it would no longer be able to produce fruit or even sustain life. The branch is nothing without the vine – it is totally dependent upon the vine for all of life. This total and utter dependence was modeled for us throughout Christ's entire time on earth. Jesus joyfully lived in total submission and obedience to the Father.

Christ's first act of humble dependence to the Father in his human life began with the incarnation itself. Being in the very likeness of God, he humbled himself to be born as a baby. Here is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, born in a stable; lying in a manger. He trusted God to work through the sinful hands of a human mother and father. He submitted to the Father as he cried out for food and waited for a human mother to feed him from her breast. Later, regarding his own authority Jesus said in John 5, "Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise." Jesus humbly submitted to the Father in every action. Daily he would have been surrounded by countless people who needed his healing touch and yet he only healed the ones that the Father told him to heal. Then, the night that he knew he would be betrayed and hung on the cross, as he was in the Garden of Gethsemane, he prayed to the Father, "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will." And then finally he endured the cross and bore the shame in submission to the will of the Father.

And this is how we are called to walk as believers. As Christ submitted to the will of the Father, so we are to submit to the Son. This is not simply an external call to obey commands, we must not simply obey his word, we must walk as Jesus himself walked; we must not only obey through our actions, we must submit our hearts and wills.

If the call to keep God's commands calls us to external moral action, the call to walk as Jesus walked calls us to an internal submission.

Abraham had finally received the son that God had promised him; a son born in his old age through his once barren wife, Sarah. It was this treasured child of promise that God called Abraham to sacrifice on a mountain. And so, Abraham took Isaac with him to the place God had revealed to him because this is what God commanded. Abraham lifted his knife in the air to strike down the son that he loved because this was what God had commanded him to do. It was only when the knife was lifted and he was ready to strike the blow that would have slain his son that God sent the angel to restrain him. Abraham was expressing his love for God by being willing to sacrifice, to give up his beloved son. Abraham did not have the advantage of having Jesus as an example of humble submission when God called him to sacrifice his one and only son. And yet, this is such a clear example of someone keeping God's command in both externally and internally. God counted Abraham's faith that he displayed in being willing to sacrifice his own son as righteousness and by it he was justified. Jesus walked in submission and obedience to the Father and his reward is that God raised him up as the Exalted One! God promises to lift up the humble who walk as Jesus walked. Everyone who has come to know God through Christ...Keeps his commandments and walks as Christ walked.

John now moves from these more general commands of obedience to a more specific command. The 3rd mark is that... Everyone who has come to know God through Christ...

1. Keeps his commandments (3-5a) and
2. Walks as Christ walked (5b-6)
3. Loves his brother (7-11)

"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."

John's last mark revolves around the believer's love for his fellow Christians. He says, "Whoever loves his brother abides in the light and in him there is no cause for stumbling." First he says that this is not a new commandment, but an old one that they had from the beginning. Then he says that it really is a new commandment. So, how can this be both an old and a new commandment?

In a sense, there are two ways in which the commandment can be said to be old. The first is that this love for one another was part of the gospel that these Christians were told when they came to Christ. There is no doubt that John, who so affectionately addresses them throughout the letter – even here at the beginning of verse 7, modeled for them the love of Christ and taught them that the proper response to the grace of the gospel is to love other believers. As every believer can attest to, part of this comes naturally – John's words are also intentional here. To these believers, loving one another was integral to their understanding of what it means to be a believer. I think that is why it probably so shook their confidence when their church split and some from among their congregation left their community. It is always heartbreaking when someone leaves the church and turns their back on Christ.

The second way in which the commandment can be said to be old is that it was part of the original law given to Moses by God in the wilderness. Jesus confirms it when he answers the Pharisee who asks him what is the greatest commandment. In Matthew 22, Jesus said, "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 and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Jesus said that these two commandments summarized the whole of the law of God. And so, every child of

God, from Moses to these believers had been taught this commandment. This teaching was not new or novel. It was a well established commandment and they had been taught it from the first that they knew the gospel.

And yet, there are two senses in which the commandment can be said to be new. The first way that it can be said to be new is that Jesus modified the commandment in John 12:34. The original commandment was to love your neighbor as yourself. And so, in all the ways that we would desire to be loved by our neighbor, that is how we are to love others. Now Jesus intensifies the command by offering himself as one to imitate. John 12:34 says, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another." Now we are called, not simply to love one another by our own internal measure, but by Christ's love. So now, as it says in 1 John 3:16, "it is by this that we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers."

Under the old command, we are somewhat bound by our own thoughts of loving one another. If you don't like people coming over to your home to help you fix a broken sink, then you will not see going over to someone else's home to help them fix their sink as a loving act. If you don't like eating food prepared by other people, then you will not see preparing food for someone else as an act of loving a brother or sister. If you are not a hugger, then you will probably not reach out and hug someone in the midst of their grief. By his own example, Jesus blows this out of the water. He calls us to love other believers beyond the comfort of our own preferences, he calls us to die to ourselves; to lay down our lives for each other.

The second way in which the commandment can be said to be new is that only through the death and resurrection of Jesus was this commandment able to be fully understood. The true light of the world, Jesus Christ and the message of the gospel is now made fully clear. Even to the disciples who heard Jesus say, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another," did not understand the full implication of how different this message was. What is true of Jesus is also true of everyone who trusts in Christ. We are able to see it in part now, but we will one day fully see and understand the full extent of the gospel. For now, we can say that the darkness is starting to pass away and the light of the gospel shines for those who believe. They can now see Christ as our redeemer and rescue and no longer a stumbling block.

One other way that the commandment can be said to be new is that it is ever current. We are called continually to love one another in the everyday circumstances of life to continually die to ourselves and love our fellow believers. This is possible only because Christ has brought us new life in Him.

But whoever hates his brother is still in the darkness. He is not able to see Christ for who he truly is because the darkness of his own sin blinds him. He stumbles through life believing that he is right with God or that there is no God. This man is to be both pitied and pursued. Unless he sees the light, he will continue in darkness and face the eternal consequences.

There is a movement within the larger evangelical church today that should both cause us to pay attention as well as give us incredible pause. There are a growing number of Christians who believe that the mission of the church is to help the poor and reach the community. They see the great need within our communities and they see the church as the solution to change their communities and change the world. These groups often move into the inner cities, in the poorer neighborhoods. I know people who have sold their own homes to move into less desirable neighborhoods in order to reach that community. They see today's church as paralyzed by their own concerns and fears and too self consumed to notice their neighbor. These are brothers and sisters who work to break down their own prejudices and stereotypes. They want to make the message of Christ accessible. They are taking the love of the gospel out into their communities; helping the poor and downcast, the widows and orphans.

I see these people full of passion for the lost in the community and I agree that there is a problem in the church. We do need to reach our community.

But within this movement are those who have lost the message of the gospel. In order to reach the community, they stop speaking of the work of Christ and only speak of the love of Christ. Some within this movement reject the truths of

the gospel in exchange for social justice. They believe that the world will be won by sharing the love of Jesus, but denying the work of the cross. This is sad.

If every church embraced this approach to reaching the community, it is possible that the community might be won over; and then perhaps “all of the bars and pool halls would be closed, pornography banished, pristine streets and sidewalks would be occupied by tidy pedestrians who smiled at each other. There would be no swearing. The kids would answer “Yes, sir,” “No, ma’am,” and the churches would be full on Sunday ... where Christ is not preached.”

As believers, we should be concerned about suffering in the world, we should focus on evangelism, and we should be dreaming of creative ways to reach the world. These are some of the marks of our belief in Christ, but these things should always be grounded in our relationship to a crucified savior that we boldly proclaim without reservation, that we earnestly pursue and humbly submit to.

We are given assurance of our relationship with Christ based on keeping his commandments, walking as Christ walked, and loving our brothers.

Everyone who has come to know God through Christ...

1. Keeps his commandments (3-5a) and
2. Walks as Christ walked (5b-6)
3. Loves his brother (7-11)

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