

## The Test of Knowing God: Obedience

Most of us have had the experience of walking into a mall that we are unfamiliar with and we have needed to get our bearings, right? What do you do? Well, you can find the map that shows you “you are here.” And so maybe you’ve walked into the Oak Park Mall in Overland Park and if you see this map, you know that if you are coming out of Dillard’s South and want to go to Macy’s that you need to take a right turn. These maps help us get oriented. And the orientation is helpful to figure out our next steps.



Like a “you are here” map, John wants to help us get oriented in terms of where we are at with God. Do you know him or not? He wants us to be clear about this so we can figure out our next steps. He does this is by giving us some tests that we can apply to ourselves to figure out where we are at with God. Today, we are looking at 1 John 2:3-6 where he talks about the test of obedience. The core truth that John wants us to understand is that **a lifestyle of obedience is evidence that one truly knows God.**

This morning, we are going to look at this passage and understand the test of obedience. And then at the end I will offer several points of application and clarification around this test. And so let’s start by looking at verse 3. He writes:

*<sup>3</sup> And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments.*

For John, knowing God is not just knowing about God. It is not just having theoretical knowledge. It is experiential knowledge. To know God is to have a genuine spiritual relationship with Him. And John says the way that we can know that we know God is on the basis of obedience. Do we *keep his commandments*? John’s point is that if we really know God it will have a powerful effect on our lives. It leads to a lifestyle of obedience.

Now, John doesn’t specify what commandments he is talking about and so we should understand that we demonstrate that we know God by obeying all that God has commanded. But it is helpful to look at how John uses the word, “commandment,” in this letter. He uses either the singular or plural form fourteen times. When it is singular it always refers to the command to love one another. In the seven occasions when it is plural, in all but two of those the context shows that he is still talking about love for one another. In our passage it is not exactly clear what *commandments* refers to, but given the fact that love for one another is such an emphasis in this letter, it is likely that that is foremost on his mind here.

Now, is John saying that only if we obey perfectly, we can claim to know God? Back in 1:10 he made the point that if we say we have not sinned we are lying. And so perfect obedience isn’t

what he is talking about. Rather, John is talking about what characterizes our lives. Yes, we still sin at times, but is there a pattern of obedience? If so, that is evidence that one truly knows God.

In verse 4, John essentially makes the same point as he does in verse 3, but here he gives a negative example. He writes:

*<sup>4</sup> Whoever says "I know him" but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him,*

Remember that in this letter John is addressing the issue of those who had left the fellowship of the churches to whom John is writing. These were people who had strayed from the truth and who were now seeking to lead John's readers astray. Likely they were making claims to have special knowledge of God, which was creating doubts and uncertainty in John's readers. And so, when John writes, *Whoever says "I know him,"* he is likely responding to claims made by these false teachers. They were making claims to know God. John's point again is that the test of this claim is obedience.

One of the things that is really important in understanding what John is saying in our passage is the verb tenses. Here, *does not keep*, is a present tense verb. And so, he is talking about ongoing disobedience. John is not talking about the occasions when a person slips up and sins. He is talking about a pattern of disobedience. The claim to know God when one lives a lifestyle of disobedience makes such a person *a liar*. The *truth is not in* that person. The claim to know God needs to be backed up with obedience. That's the test.

Now, in verse 5, John adds a key insight into the connection between knowing God and obedience. He says this,

*<sup>5</sup> but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected.*

Obedying is connected to our love for God. The one who *keeps his word*, God's word, is someone in whom *the love of God is perfected*. Here, *keeps* is a present tense verb and so again he is talking about ongoing obedience. He is talking about the pattern of one's life.

Now, what does the phrase, *love of God is perfected*, mean? First, we need to understand what *love of God* means. There are three ways that this phrase could be understood. It could mean God's love for the person. It could mean a love that is produced by God. Or it could mean the believer's love for God. I believe this last sense is what John is talking about – it is our love for God. And so, if you are one whose life is characterized by obedience, that demonstrates that you love God and that your love for God is *perfected*. *Perfected* has the sense of "reaching its intended goal." John is saying is that if you have a life characterized by obedience your love for God has accomplished what it should. It has led you to live a life of obedience.

Now, in the second half of verse 5, John uses the same phrase that he did in verse 3 – *By this we may know*. This could refer to what John just said in verse 5 or it could refer to what he is going

to say in verse 6. The ESV, as do most translations, punctuates this in a way that connects it to what he is going to say.

*By this we may know that we are in him:*

Now, before we look at verse 6, there is an important little phrase to look at here. It is the phrase *we are in him*. By saying, *in him*, he is hinting at what he will say clearly in verse 6. He is communicating the idea that as believers we are in Christ. We exist in him; we live in him. This is what John talked about in his gospel where he uses the language of abiding in Christ (Jn 15:1-11). It's the same idea here. And so how do we really know that we are in Christ, that we are living *in him*? Verse 6 says:

<sup>6</sup> *whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked.*

John is essentially making the same point he did in verse 3 where he said that if we know him, we will keep his commandments. But there is a nuance here that is important. If someone makes the claim to abide in Jesus the truth of that claim will be demonstrated by living like Jesus lived. John says *we ought to walk in the same way*. *Ought*, has the sense of obligation. If we are claiming to abide in Jesus, then our lives ought to manifest Christlikeness. John puts our obedience in very personal terms. We will *walk in the same way in which he walked*. We will follow the pattern of Jesus' life. This is the proof of abiding in him or of knowing him.

And so if I claim to abide in Jesus, then my life should increasingly look like His. This all makes perfect sense, right? If I am abiding in him, if I exist in him, then the very life of Jesus is in me. And the life of Jesus in me will transform me. Obedience is relational. We obey because we are in relationship with him. We CAN obey because we are in relationship with him.

And so, anyone can make the claim to know God. But the test of whether or not this is true is obedience. **A lifestyle of obedience is evidence that one truly knows God.** Now, as we think about this core truth that John is teaching, I want to make several points of clarification and application.

First, **this truth serves as both a warning and an encouragement.** It's a warning to those who claim to know God and yet whose lives are fundamentally unchanged. There can be a real danger for someone who has grown up in the church to assume because of that history and all of the knowledge about God that you know God. But there is a huge difference between knowing about God and knowing Him. Truly knowing God is experiential. It changes one's life. John says that the test is obedience. Do you obey? If your life is not characterized by a lifestyle of growing obedience, then hear the warning and let it lead you to some serious self-reflection about where you are at with God. If you have questions about where you are at with God, let me encourage you to talk to someone. You can go to the Center App (either through the home page of our website or through the



app) and there is a place where you can check Follow Christ and you can let us know of your desire to talk with someone that way.

And so there is a warning here, but John also writes to give encouragement. If you consider the test of obedience and see in yourself a growing lifestyle of obedience, John wants you to be encouraged. Your obedience points to the truth that you know God. And so be encouraged. John writes to give true believers confidence in your standing with God. He doesn't want you to walk in doubt and insecurity. And so, if you pass the test, be encouraged.

Second, let me say **a word to new believers about the test of obedience**. Scripture teaches that the Christian life is one of growth and transformation that continues from the moment you trust Jesus until either Jesus returns or you die and go to heaven. As a new believer you are on the front end of this journey. Jesus has just begun to change your life. And that's the thing you need to remember as you think about the test of obedience. Are your desires to obey changing? As you are learning more about Jesus and how He wants you to live, are you responding and obeying? The test of obedience isn't about perfect obedience RIGHT NOW!!, but rather it is about the pattern of your life. If you truly have come to know God, then you should see the evidence of a changed life. And you should see new longings and new behaviors of growing obedience. And if so, John wants you to be encouraged that you truly have come to know God.

Third, **the source of obedience is found in our connection to Jesus**. John gets at this when he talks about being "in him" in verse 5 and abiding in Jesus in verse 6. Scripture teaches that when one becomes a believer in Jesus that we are spiritually united with him. God comes to live within us in the presence of His Spirit. And because of this, our lives cannot help but be changed. Now, let me be clear. We are not passive in this. We do need to apply ourselves to obeying. Paul talks in Colossians (see 3:5-14) and elsewhere about how we are to put off the old and put on the new. That is talking about effort when it comes to spiritual growth. But we need to remember that it is effort energized by the life of God within us. The source of our obedience is our connection to Jesus.

Fourth, **the focus of obedience is Jesus not a list of rules**. When John says that we ought to walk in the same way that Jesus walked, he is saying that Jesus is the model. The Christian life isn't about a list of do's and don'ts. It is about following a person. It's about following Jesus. It is about being disciples of Jesus learning how to live like him.

This is what we are about as a church. We want to help each of us walk as disciples of Jesus and we believe that if we are growing in the areas of love for God, love for each other, and love for our neighbors, then we are becoming like him. And so, focus on Jesus. Let his life be the model and motivation of your obedience not a list of rules. Our hope for all of us is that we would be developing daily rhythms of seeking God in His word and in prayer. If we are going to get to know Jesus and how He walked, we need to spend consistent time with him.

Fifth, **the motivation for obedience is love for God**. John makes this connection in verse 5 when he says that if we keep His word that our love for God is perfected. Sometimes when we are

struggling to obey in an area of our lives, we just try harder. We make commitments to obey next time. And as I've already said, we do need to apply effort in these things, but the way forward in our growing obedience is love for God. It is love for God that motivates obedience. If there are areas where you are struggling to obey, that reflects some deficiencies in your love for God. And so ask God to deepen your love for Him. Spend time reflecting on God's love for you and His goodness. Spend time remembering what Jesus did for you on the cross. Contemplate your forgiveness. Jesus said in Luke 7 that the one who is forgiven much, loves much (see Luke 7:41ff). And so as we deepen in our understand in how much God has forgiven us, we will grow in our love for God.

I mentioned at the start that like a map in the mall that says, "you are here" John wants to help us get oriented in terms of where we are at with God. And so, he gives us the test of obedience: **A lifestyle of obedience is evidence that one truly knows God.** And so if you see a lifestyle of obedience then give thanks. It points to the reality that you know God. But, if on the other hand, you don't see a lifestyle characterized by obedience, what John writes has helped you understand where you are and that can be an impetuous to seek God. May we all seek God and truly know him and live a lifestyle of obedience.