

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(January 13, 2019)

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Walking in the Light with Jesus

(Studies in the Apostle John's first letter)

Progress on the Path (into the knowledge of God and love)

(1 John 2:3-11)

Study #2

Introduction: One foot in front of the other, for a lifetime...

Artistic wannabes don't begin by trying impressionist painting, aspiring pianists don't begin with an assignment to play a piece by a classical master, and hopeful football players don't start in the NFL.

The newcomer to any art or skill begins at the beginning with the basics. First, brushes and color schemes, notes and scales. Learn the rules of the game.

But after the foundation is laid, no artist is going to stick with paint-by-numbers and no pianist will long be content with "Mary Had a Little Lamb."

A strong foundation is laid so that the beginner can move on to bigger and better things; more challenging songs and more adventuresome art projects.

(This was what happened when I started camping with my sons when they were young. We bought camping gear and learned how to use it in the Texas Hill Country. Then, for some years we took bigger and bigger trips every year as our backcountry skills developed.)

Life in Jesus follows a similar course.

There are foundational truths and practices we learn right out of the chute. These are crucial and will be necessary for the whole journey. But those foundation stones are there to be built upon

Last Sunday, the Apostle John laid some foundation stones. Today, he points us toward a lifetime of "next steps."

Review...

Last Sunday, we began John's first letter and heard him tell us about "**walking in the light.**" That's all about living openly before God - transparently, genuinely - and being ready to confess sin.

He said that there is no need to despair when we sin, because we can rest in the knowledge that Jesus, who died a sacrificial death for us, is our Advocate. By His death on the cross God's righteous anger was turned away (it was propitiated). We are forgiven and cleansed.

This walk in the light is a path you can follow whether you have believed in Jesus for decades or days. John's first words apply equally to spiritual infants and to grown-ups. They are first-steps.

In what follows, John takes us deeper into the light, focusing on two goals toward which a life of fellowship with God will always lead.

First, he casts a vision for a life of obedience to God on the way to knowing God.

On the Path to Knowing (vv. 3-6)

Knowing that We Know Him (v. 3)

[3] By this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments.

Keeping God's commandments

John imagines people who believe in Jesus doing what God says to do. It's obedience, but it's more than simple, rote obedience.

He is picturing us giving attention to God's commands about things like truth-telling, generosity, and compassion. We're actually concerned to do what He says, obeying from the heart.¹

We're not perfect, but we're making progress on the path.

And he makes a comment about something we can know about ourselves if we obey. Keeping God's commandments will let us know that we have come to know God.

Now, here we need to be careful because it is at this point that it's easy to miss what John is saying.

What do we know if we keep God's commands?

That we are saved/justified?

One way to read these words is to hear John saying that obedience to God's commands will tell us whether we are *really* saved. But it is impossible that this is what he is saying.

The Apostle Paul tells us repeatedly that we are saved by grace alone through faith alone. And John says dozens of times in his writings that we are saved by believing in Jesus for eternal life.²

OK. We are saved by faith. But, maybe (you wonder) John is addressing the *sincerity* of our faith. Maybe we *thought* we believed in Jesus, but we didn't *really* believe, because if we *really* believed, we would keep God's commandments. And if we don't obey, we must not have *really* believed and aren't *really* saved.

To that line of thinking I would say this.

If we start down the road of questioning, "*Can I trust my faith in Jesus?*" we're traveling down a path that leads to a special kind of crazy-making. The Bible doesn't urge us to question our faith's genuineness, but to be sure that we have placed our faith in Jesus.

Just look at the story of Jesus giving sight to the man who had been born blind. It's a wonderful story that takes up most of John, chapter 9.

There are a few twists and turns, but near the end of this story, after the man had been thrown out of the Jewish synagogue for siding with Jesus against the Pharisees, Jesus found him and asked, "***Do you believe in the Son of God?***"

The formerly blind man did not respond, "*Well, I hope I believe*" or "*I guess we'll see if I believe if I obey God's commands, won't we.*" He said, **[9:38] "Lord, I believe."** (9:38)³ - and that was good enough.

Our verse - 1 John 2:3 - is not talking about how to know if we have a saving knowledge of Christ. It is about giving us who believe in Jesus a "metric" to measure the depth of our knowledge of the One in whom we have believed.

That we are coming to know God better!

ON "KNOWING" AND "KNOWING"

I know lots of people - Tim Duncan and Harry Reid and Benjamin Netanyahu and Dak Prescott - whom I don't really know. You do, too.

This concept of "knowing" is a fluid word and we use it in all kinds of ways.

I know some people because of their fame, but I "know" them by recognition only. I know others casually. I know some friends really well. And there are a few - friends, family members, my wife - I know deeply.

³ See, too, John 11:25ff where Jesus asked Martha if she believed His words about being the resurrection and the life. She confidently responded, "***Yes, Lord, I believe...***"

¹ This is the sense of the Greek word for "keep" (*τηρησω*).

² See John 3:16; 5:24; 6:35 and many, many more passages in John's writings.

The sentence, “*I thought I knew you, but now I see that I don’t really know you*” makes perfect sense. “*Knowing*” takes place on more than one level.

ON “KNOWING” GOD

We find this distinction between levels of knowledge all through the Bible as we are urged to “*press on to know the Lord.*”⁴

The Lord said to the prophet, Jeremiah, [9:23] “*Let not a wise boast of his wisdom, and let not the mighty man boast of his might, let not a rich man boast of his riches; [24] but let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me⁵, that I am the Lord who exercises lovingkindness, justice and righteousness on earth; for I delight in these things,” declares the Lord.*

The importance of Christians pursuing the knowledge of God is what prompted J. I. Packer to write Knowing God - among the best books I’ve ever read - which makes a distinction between a Christian who knows “about God” and one who “knows God.”⁶

So, we’re not surprised when we hear Jesus speaking to His disciples - men who “knew” Him - on the night before His death, about knowing Him.

JESUS, ON “KNOWING” HIM

After telling them, [John 14:7] “*If you know Me, you also know the Father*”, Philip replied, [8] “*Lord show us the Father and it will be enough.*”

Jesus shot back, [9] “*Have I been with you so long and you do not know Me? The one who has seen Me has seen the Father!*”

They know Him, but they don’t know Him in whom they had believed to the extent that they could.

On that same night, Jesus added another layer on top of the theme of knowing Him when He said, [21] ***He who has My commandments and keeps them is the one who loves Me; and he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and will disclose Myself to him.***

So, there is a moral element involved in “knowing” Jesus. Knowing Jesus has to do with growth into a working knowledge of God’s character and His ways that shows in our lives.

All believers know Jesus at an elementary level. But at the level of deep fellowship, a believer may not know His Lord well at all.⁷

Jesus says in John 14 and John says here in his letter that any claim that we have achieved a real and personal knowledge of God can be at once tested by whether we keep His commandments.⁸

The key to knowing if you are growing in your knowledge of God is to reflect on your obedience, because those who know God best, obey God best.

So...

Keeping God’s Commandments (vv. 4-5)

The one in whom truth does not abide (v. 4)

[4] The one⁹ who says, “I have come to know Him,” and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him;¹⁰

⁷ The believer who knows Jesus as Savior and knows God as the true and living God (John 17:3) may be very much a stranger to God in terms of intimate knowledge of His character and ways.

⁸ Thus, the test suggested by 1 John 2:3 is not of saving knowledge of God, but of the experiential knowledge of God and His Son.

⁹ John does discuss those who don’t know God absolutely, those who are not Christians, later in the book, but here he is talking to and about Christians.

¹⁰ Same as verse three, only stated negatively.

⁴ See Hosea 6 for this exact language.

⁵ The New Living Translation captures the sense of the verse with “*...those who wish to boast should boast in this alone, that they truly know Me*”.

⁶ Knowing a god in ancient religions, especially Gnostics, was mostly about esoteric knowledge, having little or nothing to do with quality of lifestyle.

And this is simply to say that Christians should not lead, but might lead, disobedient lives.

John is speaking to and about someone who believes in Jesus - he is saved - and ***“does not keep His commandments.”***

John doesn't beat around the bush here. That guy is lying. And he's not lying about his profession of FAITH (that's not at issue here). He's lying about his claim to KNOW GOD.

On the other hand...

The one in whom God's love has been perfected (v. 5)

A Christian who keeps God's Word

[5a] but whoever keeps¹¹ His word...¹²

Now, think about the woman, the man, who does obey God. They keep His word.

These are people who walk in the light, confess sin and accept God's forgiveness. They give careful attention to God's commands about purity and gossip and truth-telling. That kind of thing.

They're not perfect, but there is a general striving to obey.

The “perfected” love of God

[5b] in him the love of God¹³ has truly been perfected.

Our love for God isn't proved by sentimental feelings or by bold claims to love God. We nurture a growing love for God, over time, by a growing appreciation for Who He is and for what He has done for us.

And it is proved by sacrificial, gut-wrenching, back-breaking obedience to His commands.

Which means...

The knowledge such perfected love provides

[5c]...By this we know that we are in Him.¹⁴

Here, I'll take a minute to say that the Apostles Paul and John believed the same things about life, God, Jesus, and salvation. But, being different guys, they had different ways of expressing themselves.

Both were inspired by God's Spirit to write exactly what they wrote. And the Spirit used their mindsets and personalities to produce books and letters that uniquely reflected them. And what they both wrote was completely true.

When studying the Bible, keep in mind that Paul is Paul and that John is John.

They are in complete agreement with each other, but they sometimes use different words to express the same things and will also use the same phrase to communicate something different.

For instance, the term *“in Him.”*

Paul, and to be “in Him”

In Paul's writings, to be *“in Christ”* is to be a Christian.

¹¹ Again, ***“keep”*** (Greek, *τηρειω*) also in Matthew 28:20, the Great Commission, translated there ***“observe”***.

¹² This verse contrasts with the false claim of verse 4.

¹³ The Greek permits us to read this as ***“our love for God”*** (use of an objective genitive) or ***“God's love for us”*** (subjective genitive). For contextual reasons, I see John's point being that our love for God is perfected by our obedience to His commands. (objective)

¹⁴ Looking at John's use of the term ***“in Him”*** (i.e. - in Jesus) we see that it refers to people ***“believing”*** in Him or ***“abiding”*** in Him”. This is different than Paul's use of the term to describe someone who is justified by God.

If you are “*in Him*” you face no condemnation (Romans 8:1); those who are “*in Him*” will be loved by God forever (Romans 8:39).

John, and to be “in Him”

But, when John writes of being “*in Him*” (as he does here) the thought is not of being justified before God (as in Paul’s writings). It is about being in a growing, intimate, abiding relationship with Jesus.

Here in 1 John 2:5, John is remembering what Jesus said on His last night with the disciples. He spoke of his relationship with them as being like a branch that is vitally connected to a vine.¹⁵

The salvation relationship (sonship, justified, redeemed) can never be lost. If you are “*in Him*” as Paul uses the term, you will never be put “*out of Him*”. It’s permanent.

But, as John uses the term, being “*in Him*” (abiding in Him) is fluid. We are “*in Him/abiding*” when we are “*keeping His word*” and we are not “*in Him/abiding*” when we are not obeying.¹⁶

Those who abide “*bear fruit*”. They exhibit the marks of Jesus in their lives and they reproduce those marks in the lives of others. (Another way to say that would be to say that they take next steps with Jesus and they help others take next steps with Jesus.)

So, to be clear, John is not here telling us how to know if we are saved. He is explaining what it means to be an abider / disciple.

Love for Christ and obedience to His word are tests of genuine discipleship to the One who loved us and gave Himself up for us.

And this is how you and I who believe in Jesus ought to live.¹⁷

The Way Things Ought to Be (v. 6)

[6] the one who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked.

The great “ought to”

Notice John’s word choice here. He didn’t write this as a suggestion, as in, “*You who say that you abide in Jesus might want to seriously consider the possibility of thinking about living as Jesus lived.*”

And he didn’t put it down as a certainty either, as in, “*You who claim to abide in Him will - no question about it! - live like Jesus lived.*”

No, John says we “**ought to.**” All who make a claim to have this intimate, abiding, fellowship with Jesus ought to live as Jesus lived.

There is the possibility that we might not so live, but there is a moral imperative, an obligation, that we should so live.

This is our calling. And it will take a lifetime to work out all the ways in which we live as Jesus lived.¹⁸

This is a work in progress

Walking as Jesus walked will require that you learn how, down into the details, Jesus walked.

- How did He deal with enemies? With the poor? With the sick? With notorious sinners?
- How did He demonstrate dependence on the Spirit and submission to His Father in heaven?
- What can we learn about His character - humility, courage, love?
- What was His ministry strategy with crowds? With His followers?

¹⁵ See John 13-17, an extended section we call “The Upper Room Discourse”.

¹⁶ See John 15:6 - the branch that does not abide in Christ is cast out as a branch. To be cast out “as a branch” means to lose the disciple / Teacher relationship.

¹⁷ Validating that “*in Him*” is John’s way of describing an intimate, abiding relationship, we come to the very next verse and hear that exact word to describe that exact kind of relationship.

¹⁸ Zane Hodges describes the movement in John’s letter to this point: In **1:5--2:2**, fellowship with God requires an openness to the light and a willingness to confess whatever sin the light reveals. Even a brand-new believer can live in this close fellowship with the Lord. **1 John 2:3-11** lays out a vision for the future for any believer who will learn how Jesus walked and imitate Him.

- What did He teach about money? Heaven and Hell? God's kingdom?
- How did He react under pressure? How did He handle secular and religious power?

As you learn how Jesus walked, you'll need decades to apply to your life what you see in Him. There is a lifetime of next steps with Jesus in front of you. And, as you grow and change, you will abide in Jesus more and more deeply.

I've been walking with Jesus for a while now.

I have discovered that there is always more to learn about Jesus and His ways, that there are always new ways in which God wants to use me and to change me, and that each plateau of growth is a stepping-stone on the way to the next peak.

Your life with Jesus will be a dynamic life filled with ups and downs and the constant assurance that He is with you every step of the way. It is a beautiful life of coming to know Him more and more deeply.

Making progress on the path with Jesus involves obeying God's commands, generally. Progress on the path speeds up exponentially when we give priority to one very special command.

On the Path to Loving Each Other (vv. 7-11)

The New, Old Commandment (v. 7)

[7] Beloved,¹⁹ I am not writing a new commandment to you, but an old commandment which you have had from the beginning; the old commandment is the word which you have heard.

The need to remember the old

John's an old man, and old men are often not given to new things. Innovation is for the young. So, we're not surprised that he wants us to think about an **"old commandment."**

¹⁹ **"Beloved"** - could not be more clear that he is writing to, for, and about people who believe in Jesus.

It's just like an old guy to want to go old school. But, then, let's remember that not all that is old is old-fashioned and not all that is dated is out of date.

It's really good to dredge up memories of old things.

God required the Jews to observe an annual feast at Passover so that they would never forget that He brought the nation out of Egypt and delivered them to freedom on the other side of the Red Sea.

He told them to set up a big pile of stones on the shore of the Jordan River so they would remember that God dried up the Jordan so that they could cross over to the Promised Land.

We take the bread and the cup of communion on the first Sunday of every month, to remember that Jesus died on the cross for our sins, that He rose from the dead, and that He's going to return.

Remembering is an integral element of faith-building and John invites us to remember an old commandment.

The old commandment

There's really no mystery here. He doesn't "name" the commandment, but we know what he's referring to. It goes back the beginning of the Jesus story.

John's readers had been hearing this command since they first came to Christ. So have we. This commandment is basic. Fundamental.

[John 13:34] A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. [35] By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.

On the night Jesus gave this command, but before He gave it, He washed His disciples' feet. He loved them, put them first, served them, considered His own needs after He had taken care of theirs.

Before this night, He had loved them for three solid years. He taught them and mentored them, shared meals with them and traveled with them. He prayed with them and for them.

And remember that this group included Peter the bombastic, Thomas the doubter, James and John, the “sons of thunder”, Matthew the tax-collector, James the political zealot.

Were they hard to love? One time He said to them, **[Matthew 17:17] “How long must I put up with you?”**

He loved them. Perfectly. To the Nth degree.

The old commandment is Jesus’ command that we who believe in Him love one another, which John, the old man, now calls the new commandment.

The New, True Commandment

[8] On the other hand, I am writing a new commandment to you, which is true in Him and in you, because the darkness is passing away and the true Light is already shining.

The command to love has been around a long, long time. But it’s always fresh, never stale. It’s an invigorating command.

Love is the real deal. And it’s timely.

It fits the age to come when Jesus will reign. His kingdom reign will be one of truth and justice and love and light. The present age is one of darkness and brokenness. Love doesn’t reign now as it will then.

But we, who are subjects of the King who will reign over that kingdom, have this new/old commandment.

When we obey this commandment, we give outsiders a mouth-watering taste of what life looks like under the reign of King Jesus. When we love our believing friends, we give them a tangible expression of the love that has been lavished on us.

We are equipped by God to love like that. We can love like that. We might just love like that...and we just might not.

Hating and Loving (vv. 9-11)

The one who hates his brother (vv. 9, 11)

The claim vs. the reality

[9] The one who says he is in the Light and yet hates his brother is in the darkness until now...²⁰

Imagine two Christians.²¹ Brother #1 claims to be walking in the light, doing great with God, spiritual boxes all checked. He’s taking next steps with Jesus.

But there is Brother #2 - maybe they go to the same church; maybe they don’t - and Brother #1, who says he’s doing great with God, **“hates”** Brother #2. (The gender isn’t important here. It could be two women, or a man and a woman.)

Hatred is obviously a very strong word. It might be that Brother #1 just doesn’t like Brother #2 very much, they don’t get along.

We could think of milder ways to put it. We might say, *“Well, sure, Brother #1 doesn’t exactly LOVE Brother #2. But he doesn’t HATE him.”*

I wonder if John might shoot back, *“All non-love is hate.”*

²⁰ Again, this is not a test of salvation. Great practical problems arise when we try to hold out love for the brethren (or not) as a test of salvation.

(1). Where do you draw the line for the manifestations of love or hate? How much is enough? How much is too much hate?

(2). What would this do to assurance if, every time I acted out of malice or even hatred toward a brother, I had to question my salvation?

(3). Even if love could be quantified, what would you say to or about the Christian who hates only one Christian brother? Two? Very infrequently?

²¹ John is certainly picturing Christians here.

Hatred involves active attempts to do harm, malicious intent, hoping for the worst. It can also include a passive failure to render aid, a refusal to pray for health, not giving a blessing.

If you've been a Christian for very long at all, you know that John knows what he's talking about.²²

It's completely possible for a Christian to not love a fellow Christian. It sometimes rises to the level of active hatred. It often sinks to the level of not caring, unkindness, ignoring, dismissing.

To allow non-love/hate to exist among us who believe is a terrible thing. To walk in hate is to walk the path to destruction.

The consequence

[11] But the one who 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.

Choosing non-love/hate is to choose to not enjoy Jesus' abundant life. It's to choose to live in a moral fog (remember the fog last week? It's like that...), because hate blinds our sensitivity to the Spirit's guidance.

Who knows what terrible damage we do to the cause of Christ when we don't love? Who knows what discipline we are inviting into our lives when we hate? (See Hebrews 12:3-11)

There's no future in a life where love isn't the priority. So, let's you and I agree to put aside hatred and choose love.

The one who loves (v. 10)

[10] The one who loves his brother²³ abides in the Light and there is no cause for stumbling in him.

When we live in the darkness of non-love, we set up the conditions for a very likely fall into all kinds of traps. Hatred's dark and we can't see where we're going. In the dark, we stumble and fall.

Walking in the light of love provides a safeguard against stumbling. We can see where we're going. We're protected against traps that would ensnare us.

So, let's rise above the fog of hate and live in the light of love.

- If there is someone with whom you need to reconcile, go. Take the first step.
- If you have been passively withholding love from someone, admit that you have been hating them and actively love.
- If you can think of tangible acts of love you might lavish on those around you - hospitality, service, encouragement, generosity - give it lavishly.

You who have come to know the amazing grace and love of God have a world of love to give to others, for Jesus' sake.

²² Hodges: "Every honest believer knows perfectly well that he or she must often struggle against feelings of hostility and animosity toward other believers."

²³ There is no claim here, "I love my brother!", as none is needed where love is.