

Knowing God

24/11/19 dkm

Read: John 13:1-17 & 31-35, 1John 2

Text: 1John 2:3-11

Psalms: 122old, 63:1-6, 119:97-104, 133

A couple of generations ago most people in our society went to church. If you drive around you will see at least one church building in the smallest of villages. The church was the focus of community life. My, how our society has changed! But were all those who went to church true Christians, people who believed in Jesus Christ? It is no longer popular to go to church and we might think that only true Christians will be found in church today. But this is not necessarily the case. True Christians will, of course, go to church, but this does not mean everyone in church is a true Christian. How do we know who is a true Christian and who is not? The early church was confronted with this problem when false teachers emerged within the church. The apostle John wrote to the church giving guidelines or tests that could be applied to teachers and members of the church.

True Christianity is a religion of the heart, so ultimately only the Lord knows those who are his. Many believed in Jesus when they saw the signs or miracles he did, 'but Jesus did not commit himself to them because he knew what was in man' (John 2:23-25). If only we knew what was in man the way Jesus does! If only we knew our own hearts as Jesus does! Jesus was not deceived by tears, or by toiling in Christian service. He was not deceived by emotions, by loud singing and arm waving. Words in the famous hymn of Augustus Toplady, 'Rock of Ages', come to mind: 'Not the labour of my hands can fulfil they laws demands, could my zeal no respite know, could my tears for ever flow, all for sin would not atone, thou must save and thou alone'. Yes, it is by grace alone, through faith alone, that we are saved. This is the heart of the gospel recovered by Luther and the Reformers. Of course, there is nothing wrong with tears or loud singing but without obedience to God these things are futile (Mat 7:21-23, 1Cor 13).

The tests outlined by John here in this chapter can, and must be, applied to ourselves, as well as members of the church who profess faith in Christ. How do you know that you are a true Christian, a born-again believer assured of a place in heaven? As believers who hold to the doctrines of grace we have the assurance of salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, our good works making no contribution whatsoever to our salvation. But as believers we will live in a way that pleases the Lord who saved us. 'By their fruits you will know them' said Jesus (Mat 7:16).

John is asking the question, 'How can we know that we know the Lord' (2:3). By way of answering this question he asks us four test questions: Firstly, 'Are we obeying Christ's commands?', secondly, 'Are we living like Jesus?' and thirdly, 'Are we loving our brother?' The fourth question is about knowing the truth; this is addressed later in the chapter (2:21). John puts these questions to the one 'who says' they know the Lord, and abide in him, and abide in the light (2:4, 6, 9).

1. Are we obeying Christ's commands?

Jesus told a parable about two sons whose father asked them to work in his vineyard. One son said he would go but did not, and the other said he would not go but did (Mat 21:28-32). The point of the parable is that actions speak louder than words; actions as in obedience to the will of the father. You cannot claim to be obeying your father if you refuse to do as he says, or if you go off and do your own thing, no matter how worthy and self-sacrificing that thing might be. If you love Christ you will obey his commands. Jesus said this (John 15:23), and John says the same thing, with the focus in verses 3 and 4 on knowing Christ rather than loving him.

John puts this matter both positively and negatively, just to make it clear that obedience is not optional. Many Christians think that obedience to God's commands is not important. Their focus is on a mystical experience or vision from the Lord, on speaking in tongues,

or on praise that stirs the emotions; they neglect this matter of obedience to Christ's commands. Some might claim ignorance of Christ's commands - 'is that written in the Bible' they say! But most claim to be living a more spiritual life, a life directed by the Holy Spirit rather than the word of God. This is exactly what the so-called Gnostics were teaching in the days of the apostle John.

The apostle's answer is clear and unequivocal: "He who says, 'I know Him', and does not keep His commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him" (2:4). 'O, but what are these commandments' some will ask. Let us start with the Ten Commandments that God wrote on tablets of stone. Jesus, whom they claim to know, never threw out these commandments: 'I did not come to destroy [the Law] but to fulfil it' he said (Mat 5:17). 'But Jesus gave us new commandments' they will say, 'commandments about love'. Yes, he did, but he was summarising the Ten Commandments (Mat 22:37-40).

If we say we love Jesus we will obey his commands (John 15:23). If we say we know Jesus or love Jesus and pay no regard to his commands, we stand guilty as liars, and the truth is not in us (2:4). Are you serious about obeying the commands of Christ? If you are not and yet claim to be a believer you are a liar. You are lying to yourself, lying to other people and lying to the Lord whom you claim to love! You would not be the first liar in the church, of course. Paul, like John, writes of those who claim to know God but by their actions deny him; 'they are detestable, disobedient and unfit for doing anything good' (Titus 1:16 NIV).

'But whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him' (2:4). 'Perfected' can be translated 'made complete'. Does the 'love of God' in this verse refer to God's love for us or our love for God? The RSV translated 'love for God' and Stott agreed, but the NIV translates 'God's love'. 'Love of God' points to God's love, which is the basis of our love for God (4:10). The point is that disobedience raises a barrier between us and God. We will not truly know him or

his love, and his love will not be made complete in us while ever we refuse to obey his commands. And by inference, we cannot be sure that 'we are in Him' (2:5).

2. Are we living like Jesus?

As children grow up they aspire to be like someone they know. Our two-year-old grandson loves garbage trucks; he would like to be a garbage truck driver! I think his parents will be pointing him to other 'heroes'; best of all to Jesus. Many point their children towards sporting heroes, but children often find 'heroes' in their own peer group, or in social media searches. At some stage of life most children finds 'heroes' in their parents or grandparents. This is natural and good, provided the life of their mum and dad is worth emulating. A huge problem in our society is that there are so few men or women whose life is worth emulating. Children get let down again and again by their heroes or stars. Please tell your children that Jesus will never let them down.

Back to John and his challenge to 'little children' in the church (2:1). When John speaks to 'children' he is speaking to people of all ages. Can anyone say they are too old for church! If young people are saying this they are obviously not listening to what they are being taught from the Bible. When we have Sunday School and Bible classes for people from seven to seventy and beyond, where is the age gap?

John writes to you whatever your age, saying, 'Whoever claims to live in Him [Jesus] must walk as Jesus did' (2:6 NIV). The life of Jesus is the more extensively and deeply documented than any public figure in history. We do not have much about his youth, of course, and what we have comes from just three years of his public life- but this was the extent of his life on earth. John himself admits that much more could have been written about Jesus but that what is written is sufficient for you to believe, and have life in his name (John 20:30,31). What has been written is sufficient for us to know the sort

of life we must live if we want to please our Father in heaven. Jesus was committed above all things to doing the will of his Father.

The footsteps of Jesus are huge footsteps to follow, but John calls us to 'walk just as he walked' (2:6). You must move on from walking baby steps- assuming you are not still crawling! You must get serious about walking as Jesus walked. Have you ever seen a crawling baby say they do not want to walk? Have you ever seen a toddler say he does not want to run? Yet some Christians are happy to stay crawling. Others are up and running, but not on the path Jesus has set before us. If you think you are abiding in Christ while walking the path of your own choosing, you, dear friend, are deceiving yourself.

3. Are you loving your brother?

John introduces his third test of knowing or loving Jesus with some background to the commandment Jesus gave his disciples at the Last Supper. He refers to his readers as 'beloved', beloved brothers and sisters in the Lord (2:7). Jesus called his disciples 'little children' as he gave them a new commandment (John 13:33, 34). Reflecting on what Jesus said and did in the upper room, John says that this commandment is not new but old. It is a command they had heard 'from the beginning', the beginning of their new life in Christ (2:7, 3:11). The command to love your neighbour as yourself was there under the old covenant (Lev 19:18), but it was wonderfully brought to light in the life of Jesus Christ our Lord. Only in Jesus can we truly love our neighbour. Moreover, to claim we know Christ while hating our brother or sister is to deceive ourselves.

Jesus Christ is the light of the world. In this light we know what true love is, and we are called to live in love. Love is a matter of the heart and the will. If in our hearts we know the love of Jesus, this love will be reflected in our life. If we know how much God loved us in sending his only begotten Son to die in our place (Rom 5:8), we will love our brothers and sisters in Christ. Love is the mark of a person who knows Christ. Love is the mark of Christian fellowship. 'By this all

will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another' (John 13:35). Is this the mark of the church to which you belong? Are you striving to make or maintain love as the mark of your life, and the life of your church?

Love is inherent in the light which Jesus is shining into your heart and your life. Peter writes to those born again of the Spirit of God saying, 'love one another fervently with a pure heart' (1Peter 1:22). If you are not walking in love your heart is not pure, and you are not walking in the light. If you say you are in the light while hating a brother or sister you are still in the dark (2:9). Hatred blinds us to the love of God in Jesus Christ. If you get caught up in hatred towards a fellow believer, including and especially your spouse, you will soon be out of here. If you are consumed by bitterness and hatred, if you cannot forgive a fellow believer as Jesus commands, you will not be able to pray. And if you cannot pray, you cannot praise the Lord or bear to listen to his word. As I said, you will be out of here!

John says that, 'He who hates his brother is in darkness and walks in darkness' (2:11). You will not be able to join in the prayer and worship that we enjoy, and that you once enjoyed. You will be sitting at home grumbling and stumbling. You might be walking in even greater darkness as you join the world in feeding the lusts of the flesh, binge eating, binge shopping, binge drinking or gambling or whatever. Yes, hating your brother or sister is a serious matter in the eyes of the Lord.

What is most serious to the Lord is the shame that a loveless church brings to his holy name. This is the title my Bible gives to the church at Ephesus (Rev 2:1-7). The church is Christ's church; hatred and division in the church brings shame to his holy name. 'If love is lost in the church, the lost stay lost'. Let us love one another as the Lord commanded us, and not give in to bitterness and hatred. Let us not return to the darkness from which Christ in his great love delivered us.