

The First Test

1 John 2:3-6

How can you know? That's really the question. How can you know that you are a Christian? How can you know that you know God? How can you know that God has saved you? Those are all very good questions, and for some people, they are very perplexing questions. Perhaps they do not know. Or they don't have any assurance or confidence that they know God.

John has just declared the great, central truth of the gospel. Namely, the forgiveness of sin, accomplished by the work which Jesus did for us. So we read,

1 John 1:9 "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

What a marvelous promise, of such great comfort to your soul. It is the work of God that every human being seeks, in one way or another. Something to satisfy the overriding sense of guilt. Something to atone for the sin and harm you have done.

Some people never find that solution to the great human need of guilt. Maybe they pretend they haven't sinned, or convince themselves that they are done with sin. We know John's evaluation of those people.

1 John 1:8 "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us."

1 John 1:10 "If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us."

So we must come to terms with our own sin, and there is only one way to obtain the blessing of forgiveness. To believe the truth of the gospel. To believe in the promise of the gospel, the forgiveness of sins. But how can you know you have it? What is

the test, that will demonstrate the reality of your faith, that will provide the foundation for your assurance of salvation? John actually identifies three tests, and we will see them in the weeks to come. This morning the first test. And that is obedience to his commandments.

v.3

We'll study that first test in detail in just a moment, but let's back up first as we start, and look at that first phrase in, v.3 "Now by this we know that we know Him..."

Then, v.4 "He who says, "I know Him..."

So before we get to that test, by which you gain an assurance of your salvation, look at how that salvation is defined.

I. SALVATION MEANS KNOWING GOD.

"We know that we know Him." The Greek verb there in the present tense may well be translated, "We know that we have come to know him." The reference is not to some event in the past, or to some future hope. Rather, it is a present experience. Knowing God.

A. You must know God personally.

That can be hard, can't it? You can't see God. You can't talk to God in the normal, ordinary verbal sense, like when we talk to one another. But still, somehow, we must come to know God. That's what salvation is all about. That's what Christianity is all about.

It's not a system of moral living, though that is what some people perceive it to be, living a good Christian life. Following the golden rule. That's what it means to be a Christian. Well, no, not at any root, fundamental level.

It's not a religious system of rituals that you perform. It's not a matter of going to church. It's not simply a matter of reading the Bible or having a daily quiet time. And it is not simply a philosophy to indulge in your mind. It's not just a theory, or an idea. In that sense, it's not a religion. Salvation is defined as a personal relationship with God. You have to know God. You must know God, personally.

Now, in the early days of the church, there was a group known as the Gnostics, which is a word that means "knowledge." But for the Gnostics, it was a special knowledge. A secret knowledge. To those uninitiated in their ways, it was a mysterious knowledge. A higher knowledge. Even a mystical knowledge. Special knowledge, available only to a select few, typically those of very high intellect.

Now, I'm leaving out a lot of details about Gnosticism, for two reasons. One, I don't understand them, and two, if I did, they would be harmful for you to grasp. Because the knowledge of God in the gospel is not secret, nor is it mystical. Rather it is simple. It is plain. A young child can understand it. And higher education is not required.

When Paul defines salvation in Romans 10, he speaks clearly, Rom. 10:9 "...that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. 10 For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. 11 For the Scripture says, "Whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame."

He basis that declaration on the word of the prophet Moses in, Deut. 30:11 "For this commandment which I command you today is not too mysterious for you, nor is it far off. 12 It is not in

heaven, that you should say, 'Who will ascend into heaven for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' 13 Nor is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will go over the sea for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' 14 But the word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may do it. 15 "See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil, 16 in that I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in His ways, and to keep His commandments, His statutes, and His judgments, that you may live and multiply; and the Lord your God will bless you in the land which you go to possess."

So you must know God, but not in a mere intellectual or philosophical way. In a personal way. As he has revealed himself to you in the Scriptures,

2 Tim. 3:14 "But you must continue in the things which you have learned and been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned them, 15 and that from childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus."

So do you know God? Not just, are you a member of the church, but do you know God? Not just are you baptized, did you read your Bible today, did you perform some religious ritual, but do you know God as a person, who has revealed himself in the Holy Scriptures, and most of all, in the person of his son Jesus. Do you know God? That is the ultimate question.

And as a corollary to that idea of knowing God, we see in our text this afternoon that,

B. You must come to live with God daily.
Or, as we read in verse 6, to "abide with him."
v.6a "He who says he abides in Him..."

It is the idea of a family living together, a husband and wife, children, sharing their lives together as they live together day by day. It is what we do together as a church, week after week. We live together, with one another. We abide together. God is not interested in a casual relationship with us. He is not interested in a superficial friendship, he wants to know us intimately. He wants us to be his wife, his bride. Knowing God is not a once a week commitment, or even a once a day commitment. It is a commitment of your whole life, a commitment to live your life in the presence of God. Knowing God is to have a relationship with God.

Interestingly, this idea of knowing God is made clear in the Old Testament prophecy of Jeremiah, when he prophesied about the New Covenant.

Jer. 31:31 "Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah— 32 not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, though I was a husband to them, says the Lord. 33 But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. 34 No more shall every man teach his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, says the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more."

So now the question, how can I know if I have that relationship? Answering that question is the overall purpose for this whole book. And I would go so far as to say that,

II. THE GOAL OF SALVATION IS TO HAVE AN ASSURANCE THAT YOU KNOW GOD.

The answer John provides in order to have that assurance is very, very practical. Nothing gnostic at all, nothing mysterious or mystical at all. But a simple and straightforward answer. A very practical test. Obedience.

A. Obedience is the first test of knowing God.

No big words. No deep philosophical insights. Nothing here to demonstrate that I have a master's degree in theology. Just a deeply felt pastoral explanation,

v.3

Now, let me define some words I am using carefully. By the word "test", I don't mean something you have to "pass" in order to prove yourself worthy. Rather, I mean evidence. The "test" of knowing God is a test to determine whether or not you know God, and the point is, if you know God, then it will show in your life. And when it shows in your life, that is the assurance that God has saved you!

This is what John Calvin wrote in the mid-1500's, nearly 500 years ago now: "The commonest evil in all ages has been empty professions of God's name."

Empty professions. You would think he was describing 21st century America, the Bible belt. The most common evil is an empty profession of faith. The most common evil is people who claim the name of Christian, but have no demonstration of their faith in their lives.

But John puts that in a positive way first. The obedience of your life, obedience coming from your heart, is the evidence that God has saved you. Isn't that what James means when he writes,

James 2:14 "What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but he has no works? Can that faith save him?"

The answer, of course, is a resounding NO!

James 2:14 "What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him?...26 For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also."

Obedience is the first test of whether or not you know God. But not obedience as an attempt to earn your salvation or atone for sins. Neither obedience simply to be an outward show. Rather, obedience from the heart, obedience as the evidence of love. And then, just to be clear,

B. Hypocrisy is condemned.

v.4

That is a necessary warning, isn't it? John has just promised forgiveness of sin. He has explained the existence of a Mediator, an Advocate.

v.2b "And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. 2 And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world."

But that gives no excuse to go on living in sinful disobedience.
v.4

Surely there are many hypocrites today, as there were then. Jesus himself said this,

Mat. 7:21 "Not everyone who says to Me, Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. 22 Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord,

have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' 23 And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!'"

And Luke 13:23 And He said to them, 24 "Strive to enter through the narrow gate, for many, I say to you, will seek to enter and will not be able. 25 When once the Master of the house has risen up and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and knock at the door, saying, Lord, Lord, open for us,' and He will answer and say to you, I do not know you, where you are from,' 26 then you will begin to say, 'We ate and drank in Your presence, and You taught in our streets.' 27 But He will say, 'I tell you I do not know you, where you are from. Depart from Me, all you workers of iniquity.' 28 There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, and yourselves thrust out."

The intent here is not to crush the tenderhearted. Remember, John is writing to enable his readers to have this assurance that they do, in fact, know God. And the standard is not sinless perfection. This "test," as I am calling it, is not an attempt to trip you up or to unsettle you, you who strive to love and serve the Lord in your daily lives, albeit imperfectly. "If anyone does sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous."

But let the hypocrite beware. Those whom Jesus would call whitewashed tombs.

Mat. 23:27 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. 28 Even so you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness."

So what about the true believer? Where is the hope and confidence for a true believer, that this test would be of great encouragement? Where is the assurance that you know God, even though you are painfully aware of your own weaknesses and temptations?

Look at,
v.5

I want you to understand what John is trying to say here. What is the source of our assurance, as it is expressed at the end of that verse, “By this we know that we are in Him.” By what? The immediate reference is “the love of God.

v.5

The idea is actually that,

III. GOD ENABLES THOSE HE SAVES TO OBEY HIM.

He enables us, here in verse 5, by his love.

A. God’s love enables us to obey him.

Now, I have to admit, “the love of God” could refer to the believers love for God, or it could mean God’s love for us. The grammar and the vocabulary would allow either translation. I think here the context would more likely refer to God’s love for us. A love that is “perfected in us.” A love that is completed in us, that accomplishes its purpose in us. God’s love for us is perfected. It is made effective and powerful. It is actually his love that enables us.

It is the same idea, I believe, in,
2 Cor. 5:14 “For the love of Christ compels us.”

The love of Christ, for us, constrains us. That’s the driving

motivation for our obedience. That’s what enables us to obey. Not the duty or obligation to atone for our sins, but the realization that our sins have been forgiven. And it is actually that love of God that enables us to obey!

Do you see how this fits together? You can know that you know God if by understanding his love for you in forgiving you your sins, that you respond to that love from your own heart with genuine and sincere obedience.

v.5

And then,
v.6

There, I believe is the idea that,

B. God’s own example enables us to obey him.

So the “ought” there in that verse is not a bare command or obligation, but the powerful example of Jesus himself. So that when you abide in him, when you live with him, you will, indeed, follow his example. An example that becomes a powerful and enabling motivation to obey him, to “walk just as he walked.” We ought to do so, as the normal, ordinary result of his presence and power in our lives.

It is not just the power of a good example. It is the power of God at work in the lives of those whom he loves, who love him.

So that’s the test, the evidence, the proof of your salvation. That is the ground and foundation for you to be able to know that you know him. Namely, does your relationship with Jesus determine how you live your life? Because if it does, then only God could have accomplished that great work in you.