

That You May Know That You Have Eternal Life

The Moral Test

1 John 2:3-6

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The Moral Test

Scripture

In his First Letter, John wrote to oppose the false teaching by setting down biblical principles of fellowship with God. He showed how genuine fellowship with God is identified by three different tests. First is the moral test, which is the test of obedience. Second is the social test, which is the test of love. And third is the doctrinal test, which is the test of belief in Christ. John stated, explained, and applied these three tests repeatedly throughout the rest of his First Letter.

In today's lesson, John addressed the false teachers by stating the moral test, which is the test of obedience.

Let's read about the moral test in 1 John 2:3-6:

³ And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments. ⁴ Whoever says "I know him" but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him, ⁵ but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may know that we are in him: ⁶ whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked. (1 John 2:3-6)

Introduction

My postgraduate degree was from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School (TEDS). One course during my first semester at TEDS was Biblical Greek I. My instructor was a senior student by the name of Sandy Hull. He was a gifted instructor who had mastered about five or six languages. There were about twenty-

five first-year Greek students in Sandy's class. Our class met four days a week during the first period of the day. Sandy began each class with a brief Scripture reading and a prayer. He also gave us a 5-minute quiz that covered all the material to date. I think that approach helped us stay on top of our studies.

However, we still had a final 1-hour exam in Biblical Greek I at the end of the semester. The day finally arrived, and we took our seats. As usual, Sandy read a Bible verse and prayed prior to our exam. The Scripture passage that Sandy read before our final test was 2 Corinthians 13:5. Now Sandy never read a verse out of context—until that day, when he read this passage to twenty-five nervous students. Second Corinthians 13:5 says, “Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test?” We all laughed. The tension was broken. And then we took our exam.

As I noted, Sandy read 2 Corinthians 13:5 out of context. The Corinthians were thinking of challenging Paul and his apostleship. Instead, Paul challenged the Corinthians to examine themselves, to make sure that they were even true believers in the Lord Jesus Christ. The study note in *The Reformation Study Bible* puts it this way, “Paul’s words help clarify the doctrine of assurance of faith. Paul asks the Corinthians to examine their own lives for evidence of salvation.”¹

John was an elder statesman when he wrote his letters. He was living in Ephesus and was responsible for overseeing the churches in the region of Ephesus. False teachers were infiltrating the churches and teaching that they had a knowledge of God that was given only to the spiritually enlightened. But

¹ R. C. Sproul, ed., *The Reformation Study Bible: English Standard Version (2015 Edition)* (Orlando, FL: Reformation Trust, 2015), 2067.

this knowledge of God did not impact their lives in any way at all. Their behavior did not match their profession of faith.

The reason John wrote his First Letter was clearly stated in 1 John 5:13, “I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life.” John wrote to give assurance of salvation to those who might doubt whether or not they were truly Christians. So, in our text for today, John wrote that one way to test the credibility of one’s profession of faith was by obedience, or by what has been called the moral test.

Lesson

First John 2:3-6 gives us objective evidence that someone’s profession of faith is credible.

Let’s use the following outline:

1. The Establishment of the Principle (2:3)
2. The Examination of the Professions (2:4-5a)
3. The Exemplification of the Prototype (2:5b-6)

I. The Establishment of the Principle (2:3)

First, let’s look at the establishment of the principle.

John began verse 3 with these words, **“And by this....”** Most commentators agree that John was beginning a new section here. John was about to present additional teaching about how believers may verify that they were walking in the light and had a genuine relationship with God.

As John continued his statement, I want you to notice that John stated his principle with certainty. He did not write, “we hope” or “we think” or “we surmise.” No. John wrote, **“we know.”** Now, the Greek word for **“know”** (*ginosko*) is

most certainly a counter to the false teachers. You may recall that they were teaching an embryonic form of Gnosticism. The word “Gnostic” comes from the Greek word for “know.” So, John was saying that contrary to the teaching of the Gnostic false teachers, **“we know”** a certain truth.

And here is John’s principle as it is stated in verse 3, **“And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments.”** How do we know that we have come to know God? We know that we have come to know God when we obey his commandments.

Now, it is very important to keep the order in mind. Knowing God results in obedience to God. Obedience to God is not a *condition* to be fulfilled before one may know God. Obedience is an *evidence* of knowing God. Obedience is a *characteristic* of knowing God.

A person who has been regenerated by the Spirit of God is a new creation in Christ. He has been transformed. And one of the evidences of that transformation is a new obedience. That is not to say that the Christian is sinless. No, all Christians struggle with sin. But their great desire is to obey God.

Some Christians may get confused about the meaning of some of John’s statements. Sometimes, one may think he is suggesting that perfectionism is attainable this side of glory. But he is not. John is saying that a Christian has a new direction in life.

When I was in the South African Air Force during my basic training, we spent a lot of time marching. It took weeks of drilling to be able to get the formation to work somewhat cohesively. One of the drilling exercises was to march in one direction and then hear the command, “About turn!” The 24 Airmen in the Platoon would take the proper number of steps, pivot in two or three steps, and start marching in the opposite

direction. The goal was to do it in unison so that no-one was out of step and bumped into a fellow Airman.

John is saying that a believer is one who is marching in a new direction. That is so important. Sometimes I think that people just add a ticket to heaven to their lives. But becoming a believer means walking in a completely new direction. It is following hard after Christ. It is keeping his commandments.

My wife Eileen and I read Scripture and pray together most weekday mornings. Earlier this week, we read Deuteronomy 4. I had been thinking about today's text in the First Letter of John and was struck by how God gave his people the same message in the time of Moses. The people of God were entering the Promised Land. They had left the bondage and slavery of Egypt forty years earlier. Moses described for the people of God all that God had done in saving them. He wrote in Deuteronomy 4:34-39:

³⁴ Or has any god ever attempted to go and take a nation for himself from the midst of another nation, by trials, by signs, by wonders, and by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, and by great deeds of terror, all of which the Lord your God did for you in Egypt before your eyes? ³⁵ To you it was shown, that you might know that the Lord is God; there is no other besides him. ³⁶ Out of heaven he let you hear his voice, that he might discipline you. And on earth he let you see his great fire, and you heard his words out of the midst of the fire. ³⁷ And because he loved your fathers and chose their offspring after them and brought you out of Egypt with his own presence, by his great power, ³⁸ driving out before you nations greater and mightier than you, to bring you in, to give you their land for an inheritance, as it is this day, ³⁹ know therefore today, and lay it to your heart, that the Lord is God in heaven above and on the earth beneath; there is no other.

Moses described God's salvation of his people. Then Moses essentially said, "Because you have come to know God, keep his commandments." Here is how he put it in verse 40, "Therefore you shall keep his statutes and his commandments, which I command you today, that it may go well with you and with your children after you, and that you may prolong your days in the land that the Lord your God is giving you for all time."

So, the principle, or the moral test, is simply this: to know God means to obey God.

II. The Examination of the Professions (2:4-5a)

Second, let's conduct an examination of the professions.

John described two professions of faith. One is a false profession of faith, and the other is a true profession of faith.

A. *The False Profession of Faith (2:4)*

First, there is the false profession of faith.

John wrote in verse 4, **"Whoever says 'I know him' but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him."** John seems to be quoting the false teachers again. They claimed to know God, but they did not keep his commandments. So, John stated quite forcefully that they were liars, and that the truth was not in them.

When a person comes to the Session to be interviewed for communicant membership in our church, I always ask the question, "Suppose you were to die and stand before God, and he were to say to you, 'Why should I let you into my heaven?' what would you say?" I sometimes say that we are not looking

for works but for faith in Jesus as the only way in which a person may get into heaven. And that is true. However, it is possible for a person to say that they trust in Jesus (which is another way of saying that they know God), and not keep his commandments.

A person may have prayed the sinner's prayer, walked an aisle, signed a card, attended a membership class, or even correctly answered the Session's questions for membership. It is all for naught if there is no obedience.

A false profession of faith is when a person claims to have a relationship with God but there is no evidence of obedience in that person's life.

B. The True Profession of Faith (2:5a)

And second, there is the true profession of faith.

John wrote in verse 5a, **“but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected.”** In English and in Greek, **“the love of God”** can mean different things. Is it God's love for us (as a subjective genitive)? Or is it our love for God (as an objective genitive)? Or is it our love that is like God's love (as a genitive of quality)? All three interpretations have been used for this phrase. Some commentators think that John was being intentionally ambiguous and was not intending to make a clear distinction in meaning.

I lean toward seeing **“the love of God”** here in 1 John 2:5a as an objective genitive. That is, John was referring to our love for God. Yes, it is true that we can only love God because he first loved us. But, in this section, John was talking about evidence of our claim to know God. One of those evidences is shown in our love for God that is expressed in our obedience to God. So one evidence of my relationship to God is seen in

how I “keep his word.” When I obey God’s word I am demonstrating my love to God.

Pastor Terry Johnson writes that “love for God is not proven by fuzzy feelings. Love for God is not proven by emotional experiences. It is proven by the hard facts of obedience.”

He goes on to tell of Chuck Colson who cites the example of Boris Kornfeld, a Jewish Russian doctor in the Soviet work camps who converted to Christ. Once Kornfeld became a Christian he made two “blunders:” he quit signing health certificates which gave the authorities the legal basis to murder inmates by working them to death, and he turned in an orderly who stole food from the starving prisoners. In both cases his conscience would no longer allow him to tolerate that which everyone condoned, and which he himself had condoned. Though he knew it meant he, too, probably would be killed, he did it anyway, because he knew it was right. Late one night someone broke into his room and beat him to death. However, they did not do so before he had had the opportunity to witness of his faith in Christ to a young inmate with cancer of the intestines: Alexander Solzhenitsyn.²

Obedience to God can be costly. It can mean being denied a promotion. It can mean financial loss. It can mean loss of social standing. Obedience can also be inconvenient. It can mean assuming care for a sick person. It can mean staying in a marriage with a difficult spouse. It can mean spending time with family members who would rather not see you.

The Westminster Confession of Faith has a chapter on Assurance of Grace and Salvation. Paragraph one states:

Although hypocrites and other unregenerate men may

² Terry L. Johnson, *1, 2, 3 John*, A Mentor Expository Commentary (Ross-shire, Scotland: Mentor, 2016), 38.

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vainly deceive themselves with false hopes and carnal presumptions of being in the favor of God, and estate of salvation (which hope of theirs shall perish): yet such as truly believe in the Lord Jesus, and love Him in sincerity, endeavoring to walk in all good conscience before Him, may, in this life, be certainly assured that they are in the state of grace, and may rejoice in the hope of the glory of God, which hope shall never make them ashamed.³

The key statement is that those “endeavoring to walk in all good conscience before him, may, in this life, be certainly assured that they are in the state of grace.”

So, a true profession of faith is when a person claims to have a relationship with God, and the evidence of that claim is validated by obedience in that person’s life.

III. The Exemplification of the Prototype (2:5b-6)

And finally, let’s note the exemplification of the prototype.

John wrote in verses 5b-6, **“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.”** Here John was referring to Jesus. Jesus is the prototype. That is, Jesus is the “form from which other forms are developed or copied.”⁴

Jesus is our model. Jesus is our example. We don’t have to try and figure out for ourselves what God expects of us. We read about the life of Jesus and see how he acted in every situation. We model our obedience on his obedience. Of course,

³ *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1996).

⁴ Catherine Soanes and Angus Stevenson, eds., *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

Jesus was perfect, and he never sinned. But, he is still the prototype. He is still our model and example.

To walk in the same way in which Jesus walked will mean making changes to our lives. It means confessing our sins. It means turning from sinful thoughts and words and actions. It means seeking forgiveness from others when we have sinned against them. Jesus of course never sinned. That is why we must do all we can to get rid of sin in our lives.

Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed the moral test of obedience in 1 John 2:3-6, let us examine ourselves, to see whether we are in the faith.

I started this message with an illustration about my Greek instructor's playful misuse of 2 Corinthians 13:5. But, to use the verse correctly, we need to examine ourselves to see whether we are in the faith.

Examine yourself by the Ten Commandments. Do you have other gods? Do you give attention to God's worship? Do you take God's name in vain? Do you keep the Sabbath holy? Do you honor your parents? Do you commit murder? Do you commit adultery? Do you steal? Do you lie? Do you covet the possessions of others?

Do you want assurance that you are a Christian? Keep God's commandments. Amen.

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is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and membership in his church family,
develop them to Christlike maturity,
equip them for their ministry in the church
and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

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