

3. John referred to Christian obedience as “walking in the truth.” In that way, he emphasized that obedience is *authenticity*; it is the conformity of the whole person to the truth of new creation that he partakes in and that now defines him – new creation that consists in sharing in Jesus’ image and likeness. Simply put, obedience is walking in the truth as it is “yes and amen” in the One who is the truth. Paul expressed this obedience as “*being renewed in the spirit of your mind and putting on the new self, which in God, has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth*” (Ephesians 4:23-24; cf. Colossians 3:1-11). Since God’s will for men – disclosed from the beginning in His torah and fully revealed and realized in Jesus (Matthew 11:11-15; Luke 24:13-48; John 5:39) – is that they should become true image-sons in Him, *Christiformity* is what it means to “keep God’s commandments.” Obedience isn’t compliance with religious and moral directives, and the relationship between Jesus and Christian obedience isn’t that of example, encouragement, or empowerment. Rather, it is living, transformative union through His Spirit. Obedience for Christians is the authenticity of being who they are “in God” – who they are in Christ, by the Spirit and unto the Father; it is walking in the truth.

Thus John insisted that keeping God’s commandments consists in meeting the two-fold obligation of *faith* and *love*. He stressed this in his first epistle (1 John 3:13-24), and drew out the same truth in the present one. Walking in truth involves loving the brethren and holding tightly to the truth of Jesus as the incarnate Son of God and Messiah.

- a. John spoke to the first obligation in verses 4-6, and then turned his attention to the second one in verses 7-11. These passages are related in general terms as treating the two dimensions (love and faith) of walking in truth. But, more specifically, John explained in vv. 7-11 his reason for exhorting his readers to fulfill the commandment to love one another: They were to “walk” in that commandment (v. 6b) *because* many deceivers had gone out into the world (v. 7a).

While many Christians separate faith in Christ and love for the brethren and view them as two distinct obligations, John recognized that each presupposes and implies the other. Love is the essential fruit of faith, and faith (faithfulness) is the exertion of love. This is true of faith and love for God, but also of love for other Christians. Genuine faith in Christ will express itself in love for His people, even as that love nurtures one’s own faith. But here John was concerned with how the Christian’s love for his brothers and sisters ministers to *their* faith. Loving the brethren means strengthening them in their faith, and this involves nurturing their true knowledge of Jesus, while seeking to protect them from deceiving influences that will undermine or pervert their faith (ref. Matthew 18:1-7; Luke 22:24-32).

As in his first epistle, John identified these influences as *antichrists* – individuals whose understanding of the Messiah effectively denies Him, whether outrightly or subtly through redefinition. In the situation at hand, these antichrists were likely professing Christians influenced by Gnostic ideas who’d been propagating those ideas within the communities of believers John was associated with. This was the same situation John addressed in his first letter, which suggests that the two epistles were closely related in time and circumstance (cf. 2:18-22, 4:1-3).

In his first letter, John noted that many of these antichrists had “*gone out from us,*” suggesting either that the Johannine Christian communities had expelled them, or they left of their own accord because their views had been rejected as false. Either way, it seems that the churches were having some success identifying and addressing these individuals. But the threat evidently continued, for here in his second letter John spoke of such antichrists still seeking to promote their error among the saints: “Many deceivers have gone out *into* the world.” His point wasn’t that these persons had departed from the churches into the unbelieving “world,” but that they were present throughout the world John knew. They were everywhere, leading people astray with their error and deception. Hence John’s warning to his readers to *watch themselves*. This warning had two aspects: the threat posed by the deceivers and the saints’ responsibility in light of it (vv. 8-11).

- b. First, John exhorted his readers to look closely to themselves, with the understanding that they risked great loss. Interestingly, this loss pertained, not to what they themselves had acquired or accomplished, but what someone else had labored for on their behalf: “*Look to yourselves, that **you** do not lose what **we** worked for...*” (NAB). There are variant Greek readings that are reflected in the various English translations (cf. especially the KJV, ESV and NIV), but the reading cited above has the best manuscript support. It’s also supported by the fact that it’s the most difficult reading, and so the least likely to be an alteration.

Assuming this reading, then, John seems to be referring to the apostles’ ministry of the gospel (“what we have worked for”). Commissioned by Jesus Himself after His resurrection, the apostles (and their emissaries) had taken His gospel into the world and labored to see it bear its fruit in people’s lives, Jews as well as Gentiles (ref. Matthew 28:18-20; Acts 1:1-8). But there were other ambassadors – heralds and promoters of an antichrist message, whose efforts worked to negate the true gospel by nurturing a false understanding of Jesus and His work.

This antichrist deception worked to keep the veil over the minds and hearts of the unbelieving, but it also undermined the faith of those who knew Jesus. This was John’s primary concern here. He recognized that the deceivers couldn’t rob Christ’s saints of His life in them (i.e., their salvation), but they could strip them of their reward (v. 8b). Having begun with the true foundation of Jesus the Messiah – the foundation laid by Jesus’ apostolic witnesses, Christians could find themselves building on it with “wood, hay and straw,” such that the day of reckoning will expose their fruit as rotten and consume their work in the fire of truth. Whatever their confidence and expectation, the reward obtained by such believers will be *loss* (cf. 1 Corinthians 3:10-15). This was the danger posed by the antichrist deceivers and their poisonous influence in the churches.

And the danger was all the greater because the deception was so subtle. The antichrists weren’t denying the Christ and His salvation; they were *refashioning* them. Again, John didn’t mention Gnosticism, but his description of these individuals’ error certainly points in that direction (v. 7; 1 John 2:18-22, 4:1-3).

And anyone familiar with Gnostic ideas knows their appeal and how biblical they can appear to the ignorant and immature in the faith. The vast number of Gnostic writings that present themselves as Christian scripture (and have often been embraced as such) proves the point. (Consider such examples as the “gospels” of Thomas and Philip and “The Acts of Peter and the Twelve.”) Here John singled out the error of denying the Christ’s full humanness (“Jesus Christ coming in the flesh”), which was a Gnostic tenet. So also, his language underscores that the doctrine of these “antichrists” was regarded (by some, at least) as enlightened insight and not a departure from the truth. For John spoke of those who embraced this teaching as “going *ahead*,” rather than going *aside* or *astray* (v. 9a). These “progressives” saw themselves as leading the way into a deeper and more mature understanding of the Messiah, but in running ahead they had “gone too far” (NAS); their supposed insights were innovations that actually negated the truth.

These deceivers were so dangerous precisely because they appeared to be devoted and zealous followers of the Messiah (the “Christ”). They didn’t reject Him or His work; to the contrary, they seemed to have a profound understanding and reverence for Him. They were *antichrist*, not in the sense of denouncing the Christ, but as supplanting Him with a deceptive counterfeit. And because the Christians of John’s time had limited knowledge of Israel’s scriptures and virtually no New Testament writings (indeed, most of them were illiterate), there was little to challenge Gnostic notions. In the end, many embraced the Gnostic “Christians” as brothers in Christ. Thus John was adamant about the true nature of these individuals: *Anyone who doesn’t abide in the teaching of Christ – i.e., the apostolic doctrine – does not know or have a true relationship with God.* The true God is known only in the Son, Jesus the Messiah, so that it is only those who “have” the Son (share in Him in truth through living union with Him) that have the Father (v. 9b). One cannot embrace a false Christ and know the living God.

- c. John’s warning implied his readers’ obligation to know and hold fast to the truth as it is in Jesus. They were to “look to themselves,” but this presupposed that they were “walking in the truth.” They couldn’t preserve what they didn’t possess. But their responsibility didn’t end with themselves; they were obliged to look out for one another. And this meant identifying, exposing and openly renouncing antichrist deceivers working their way into the churches. This obligation underlies John’s demand that his readers not welcome into their homes those who bring a teaching other than the “teaching of Christ” (vv. 10-11). Early Christians gathered for worship and fellowship in homes, so that John was forbidding receiving as brothers and sisters in Christ those who promote false notions of Him. His instruction has nothing to do with speaking with the cultist at the door.

The wider context shows that John viewed this conduct as critical to Christians loving one another. “Walking in truth” means holding fast to the truth, but for the sake of others as well as oneself. “Contending for the faith once for all delivered to the saints” is a *corporate* obligation, not just a personal one; it is at the heart of what it means for the Father’s children to love one another (cf. Jude 1-3, 17-23).