

# So You Call Yourself a Christian

*You Call Yourself a Christian*

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Generally speaking, we've been teaching through the book of 1 John and that's where we're going back this morning with the Scriptures. We're going to the book of 1 John. We just completed a series on divine providence that took us into the doctrines of the sovereignty of God and his active rule over his creation. God is God and God is over all and God is over sin and God is over us and that enables us, that puts us in a great position of strength, doesn't it? It puts us in a position where fear and anxiety about the future is laid to rest when you really embrace those things, and regret and shame over the past is also put away. For those who know the Lord Jesus Christ as we just sung, the blood of Jesus Christ has washed away our sins. God is in control of our lives. God is directing the future. God is bringing us to glory if we're truly in the body of Christ. So there is only one thing to say about the life of a Christian, it's good. It's glorious and it's headed for even greater glory. And so a Christian is a person who lives life from a position of strength and the source of that strength, in part, is a doctrinal understanding, a theological understanding of the principles that govern the universe and the way that God rules.

Now, going along with that is an understanding that you actually belong to Christ. It's one thing to know these things theoretically, you need to know that these things belong to you personally; that they are things that you own in your own heart and that's not as simple a matter as it might seem because our Lord himself said there will be many on that last day who will say to me, "Lord, Lord, did we not do all these things?" And I'll say to them, "Depart from me, I never knew you." There are apparently, obviously actually from biblical teaching, there are obviously countless numbers of people going through life thinking one thing was true about their souls, thinking that they truly belonged to the Lord Jesus Christ, naming him, calling him Lord, and yet are going to be devastated on that final day to see that they are turned away from the gates of heaven and sent off into eternal destruction. What a tragic, colossal tragedy that is to even contemplate, let alone to actually have happen to you. The thought that you would think that your soul was secure and then find out that it wasn't when it was too late to do anything about it is a loss of such magnitude it's really too great to comprehend and too awful to contemplate except for the fact that, you know, it might be some of us that are like that. So that's what we want to, we want to kind of look at what the Bible says about this whole matter of false assurance, contrasting it with true assurance so that we would know the marks of a true Christian, be able to look at our lives and say what the Scripture says about a true

Christian lines up with the affections of my heart. That's what we're looking to try to bring out here today and we're going to go to the book of 1 John in our continuing series to do that.

Now, a little reminder about the book of 1 John. He wrote because he too was concerned about this issue. He was writing to Christians who were troubled on the seas of spiritual water, you might say. Their ship was being cast to and fro and it was being cast about because there were false teachers that had been in their midst teaching false doctrine and undermining their assurance in Christ. They no longer knew what to think about spiritual truth. The false teachers had told them that there was a secret knowledge reserved for those who were in the secret club and had a peculiar special knowledge that wasn't available to everyone else and if you weren't on the inside, then you didn't really belong to Christ, and that's really troubling. And the thing that we have to just realize from that is that false teaching is not a matter of trivial consequence. There are real live consequences that go from having a warped understanding of spiritual truth and that's why it is so important for us to teach with clarity, to teach with precision, the Gospel writer Luke said that he wrote so that you might know the exact truth about what you had been taught. We're supposed to know these things with precision, with exactness, and John here in this letter is writing to do that. The influence of those false teachers was undermining the truth and here's the hopeful aspect of this, here's the glory of this: John is writing to give his readers confidence; give them a sense that lifts them up out of spiritual mediocrity, out of a sense of spiritual despair and defeat and give them a sense of confidence that, "No, I truly belong to the risen Christ and therefore my soul is secure." He's writing to assure them, not to undermine them further.

Look, for example, at 1 John 5. This is what I want you to see. 1 John 5, in verse 4 as he's explaining where he's going with this, verse 4, he says, "whatever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that has overcome the world – our faith." Now look, we're about to embark over the next couple of months in our country, as you know, a very contested election and every news report that you read and every poll that comes out is going to tempt you toward anxiety and despair no matter which side of the election that you fall on and in a gathering like this I know where the majority of you fall, you know, what your sympathies might be on the election, but what I want you to see and understand is that we are coming up on times that are absolutely going to assault your sense of spiritual security because everyone profits from you being troubled and anxious about what's going to happen over the course of the next four years.

Now, I don't have to get into politics here to tell you that as a Christian you have the prerogative, the privilege and the duty to live above all of that and to not be tossed about the waves in that sense and as you understand your position in Christ, what should be framing your mind as you look to the future, the immediate future about your own soul is this promise from God's word that the Christian faith is the victory that overcomes the world. And we must put our complete, wholehearted dependence and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ regardless of what happens in the election to realize that we are confident about the future, not because one party or the other wins, but because the Lord Jesus Christ himself, the one who died to save our souls, is the one who controls the future and

whatever the future holds for the world, we who belong to Christ are in a position of peace and security and that is what the Christian testimony over the next two months must be to the world. Well, part of the way that you cultivate that and have that radiating out of your life is an assurance that you're a Christian and a clarity of your mind about what it means to be a Christian, and what the Apostle John gave to his readers 2,000 years ago are the same principles that help us today. This is why John wrote the letter.

Look at verse 13 of chapter 5. I know it's hard to believe that I'm actually going to chapter 2 when I'm in chapter 5, but trust me we'll get there soon. John says, "These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life." The very prospect of knowing that for certain casts a calming influence upon the troubled waters of life and having that assurance, I have eternal life, means that you've overcome the world. It means that whatever happens in this life is going to be subordinated and ultimately proven utterly secondary to the point of irrelevancy to the reality of belonging to Christ and being in heaven with him. And when that is our hope, nothing that happens in this world can shake us from that confidence, and if Christ died to save your soul, you have a responsibility and a privilege, it's joint, both a responsibility and a privilege, to live out that assurance and to know that confidence in your own heart.

Well, John gives his readers several tests for them to apply, truth for them to sort through. Am I a true Christian or not? That's the only question that matters in the scope of your destiny. Do you know what? When it comes time for final judgment, I'll promise you something, I'll absolutely promise you without fear of contradiction, God is not going to care who wins the 2012 election at that time. He's not going to ask you who you voted for. It's not going to be relevant. There's a whole different paradigm by which spiritual truth is measured; by which the security and salvation of souls is accomplished. It has nothing to do with politics and so we have to step out of that realm that everything in our world is pushing us to think about these days, step out of that realm, bring our minds into submission to the Scripture and say, "God, what do you say from your word?" You won't find a word about Republican or Democrat in the Scriptures and so that tells you that it must not be primarily important to God when it comes to the rest of your eternal souls. What matters is "are you a Christian or not? Are you a true Christian or not?"

I remember the days in my young days, in my teenage days, I would have told you, "I'm a Christian." I would have told you, in fact, I told a girl that asked me this one time. She asked me, "So what does it mean that you say you're a Christian? What does that mean?" And I said, "I've accepted the Lord Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior." But I was spiritually dead as a doornail. I didn't belong to Christ. I had no love for him. I had no love for the Scriptures looking back on it. I couldn't even say the name of Jesus Christ because there was something internally that constrained me, unless I was cursing and then I could use it freely, but to speak about him as an object of adoration and worship, there was nothing like that in my heart at all and yet I would tell somebody who asked me, "Yes, I'm a Christian." I was utterly deceived and the Scriptures say that there are a lot of people that are just like that throughout the world, utterly deceived about whether they are a Christian or not. And beloved, I've got to tell you, it makes my heart heavy.

That makes a pastor's heart grieve to realize that there are people like that. It's not just pastors, is it, it's true Christians. It's you thinking about your own family, your own friends, the people you care about being in that deceived condition. Well, we need a word of clarity from the word of God about it. What does it mean? What does God say? When John says, "I have written these things to you so that you may know that you have eternal life," John, what is it that we're supposed to know? What are the standards by which we look at our lives? How can we understand these things?

Well, we're going to frame it today around five questions that you can use and I've entitled this message, "So you call yourself a Christian." Well, here are five questions, clear questions, that you can ask yourself to see if your confession of Christ is real. You don't want to be in that realm of the self-deceived, those who are absolutely sure that they're saved but they're not. Here are some questions that can kind of pierce through our delusions, pierce through our false perceptions and based on clear teaching from the word of God give you a sense of clarity about the reality of your salvation, and when it's clear to you, you're secure. When it's clear to you, you're confident. When it's clear to you, you can walk in the light basically undistracted by the things of this world and that's how you have spiritual victory in this world as you go through life.

First question, 1, it's not what you think, first question, 1: do you fear God? Do you fear God? That's the first test of being a Christian. You see, God is positively true and holy. He is absolutely opposed to deception and sin. He will not allow sinners into his presence. Unforgiven, uncleansed sinners will never see the face of God. Look at chapter 1, verse 5. For those of you that have been with us, this is going to be a little bit of review from things that we looked at several weeks ago. I trust that it will go fairly quickly here, but we said that verse 5 is the cornerstone of this entire book. This is the foundation upon which everything else is built. "This is the message," John says in verse 5, "This is the message we have heard from Him and announce to you, that God is Light, and in Him there is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth."

Let's stop right there. God is holy and those who walk in darkness have no participation in his life and, listen, there are countless people all around you, all throughout the ages of time since Christ was here, countless people saying, "I have fellowship with God," by which they are saying, "I'm a true Christian," and yet, John says in verse 6, they walk in the darkness. Their lives are marked by sin, not the pursuit of holiness. Their lives are marked by an indifference or hostility to the word of God, preferring their own thoughts over the mind of God. Their life is not driven by Monday through Saturday, their mind and life are not driven by the light of God's word and the holiness of God's character, rather it's marked by conformity to this world. And what John says here is that people like that are in darkness. They are lying. They are not practicing the truth. And what is their great lie like that? Their great lie is to have a life of sin while simultaneously saying they have fellowship with God; that they participate in the life of this holy God. That's the lie. That's the utter lie and it is the lie that so many in the American church today have swallowed and imbibed and it is the lie that is going to be the fruit of the destruction of their souls. To think that they can mock the holiness of God like that with their lips

confirming his holiness, confirming that they walk in the light while actually they live in the darkness. Jesus said in Luke 6:46, "Why do you call me Lord, Lord and yet you do not do what I say? Why this travesty? Why this mocking of my name on your lips? I am a holy God," he says. "If you know me, why don't you obey me?" It's really not that complicated, is it? This isn't difficult. This isn't conceptually difficult at all.

And here's my point: the question do you fear God is designed to elicit a sense of self-examination in your life as to whether these things matter to you and whether they cause you a sense of fear and trembling. The thought of God's pristine holiness being, and God being a judge and God actually judging the thoughts and actions of men, does that cause you to respect and revere him or can you just go on your life in your little way and indifferent to those realities? If you're indifferent to those realities, if these things don't drive your thinking, it's kind of hard for you to save with sincerity that you really fear God, isn't it? You know, I mean, let's just be honest. Let's not play games with one another. There's too much at stake. This is just far too important for us to play games with. You know whether someone is playing a game with Christianity or not. If you would look at yourself honestly in the mirror, you would know whether you're playing a game with Christianity or not. Where has obedience to Christ cost you? Where has it made a difference in decisions that you've made?

Proverbs 1:7 and here's, this is a really important verse. I'll teach on this before too long, just remind me so I don't forget. Proverbs 1:7 says, "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge." It is not true that the most important, the first law of spiritual life is that God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life. That's not true. That's false. The first point, the beginning of knowledge the Scripture says over and over again is the fear of the Lord and so you have to start there in evaluating your life. Do you fear God? Does his holiness influence you? Does it impact you? Are there times where you think about holiness and it makes you shiver? If it does, that's comfortable proof that your claim to know Christ is real. If it doesn't, you have to ask yourself, "Where have I even begun in spiritual life? If fear is the beginning and I haven't known anything of this fear, maybe I'm really not a Christian after all and there is a threatening judgment ahead of me." We have to think this way. There is too much at stake. I can't pretend this isn't true. I can't ignore this and be faithful to your souls.

So, do you fear God? Secondly, do you confess that you are a sinner? Do you fear God, point 1. Point 2: do you confess that you are a sinner? This is really, I love the sheer force of the logic of Scripture. It drives you to think this way. If you have the holiness of God as a cornerstone, then it's obvious that a question about your personal sin is going to follow right on the heels of that because a proper respect for the holiness of God will expose your sin to your understanding and consciousness.

Look at 1 John 1:8 through 10. In light of the fact that God is holy, if you have any sense of the holiness of God at all, it's going to expose your sin by contrast inevitably and that's what John goes right into in verses 8 through 10. Look at the verses with me. He says, "If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from

all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar and His word is not in us." Look, it's right there on the pages of Scripture. Someone who could respond to the holiness of God and say, "I'm innocent of violating his holy character. My life does not bear the marks of one who has fallen short of the glory of God." Or here's the favorite manifestation of that, "I think I'm good enough to go to heaven." Anyone who talks like that, what they're really saying is, "I'm not a Christian." That's what they're saying. If someone says, "I think God will let me into heaven, I'm good enough," well, listen, that is a perfect equivalent of saying, "I don't know God at all," because John says it right here. Look at verse 8, "If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us." Verse 10, "If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar and His word is not in us." People who deny sin are people who are denying Christ. People who think they're good enough are saying, "I don't need anyone else to save me." That's what they're saying. "I'm good enough on my own. Why would I really need Jesus?" That's utter darkness speaking.

Notice verse 9 by contrast. John weaves the contrast right in there. He says, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." You see, my friends, true Christians, true Christians understand and know that they have broken God's law irretrievably. They have broken God's law and brought guilt down upon their souls that they cannot erase; that they cannot cleanse themselves from. No one who thinks the good in their lives outweighs the bad is a Christian because a Christian understands that his sin is so great and so vast that nothing could save him but the blood of Jesus. So only those people who realize they are lost, miserably hopeless sinners, could possibly be Christians because anyone who thinks anything differently than that is denying the reality and the guilt of sin. And this is one of the devastating impacts of the Gospel on the human heart. The Gospel forces you to acknowledge that. The Gospels says that your confession of sin is necessary before you can be forgiven and what that does is it leaves no room for human pride in the process. You can't say, "I'm good enough," and be a Christian because you're not. That's just a false lie that all of your self-esteem teachers over the past 25 years have fed you to try to make you feel good about yourself when really if they were serving you, they'd be bringing you to the Scriptures and saying, "You have broken the law of God and you have guilt on your souls and you need to seek Christ for forgiveness or you will be eternally lost." The Scripture is clear about this.

Jesus himself said in Luke 5:32, he said, "I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance." What he means by that is that, "People who regard themselves as righteous, who regard themselves as good enough, I don't have anything to say to them. You see, I came to call those who are desperately aware of their own sinfulness and know they need a Savior. When you're in that position, I'm calling you to myself." That's the second question: do you confess you are a sinner? Do you believe in the throne room of your heart that you do not deserve to go to heaven? In fact, let's take it one step further, the true Christian is the person who says freely and openly, "Not only do I not deserve to go to heaven, the truth about my life is I deserve to go to hell because my guilt against God is so great and he is so holy and I fear him so much that I realize that I'm miserably lost. I have to be saved by someone else because I cannot save myself. There is nothing

good in my hands by which I could save myself. My righteousness is as filthy rags before a holy God. There is none good, no, not one, and I'm not good. I'm bad. I'm guilty and I need a Savior." That's what we mean when we say that you're a sinner. Not a superficial, "Oh, I've made some mistakes in life." No. No. Have you incurred guilt on your soul because you've broken the law of a holy God, that's the question. Do you confess that you're a sinner like that because that's what we're talking about.

Now, third question. There is hope in the midst of all of that, of course. The Gospel is a message of hope but it starts with bad news. You've got to have the bad news before you get to the good news. Well, that's the bad news, you're a sinner. You're guilty. You need a Savior. A true Christian understands that and confesses it. Point 3: do you trust Christ alone for salvation? Do you trust Christ alone, oh, that word is so important, do you trust Christ alone for salvation? We sang about it. The true Christian is someone who trusts in the righteousness and shed blood of Jesus Christ alone as the only way that he could be accepted by God. "God, I am not good enough." Follow the logic of this. We're just going through the passages here and making a few brief explanatory comments. You can see this in the text for yourself. "God," follow the logic here, "God, I understand that you're holy and that you can't have sin in your presence. God, I understand that I bring sin to the table in everything that I think, say and do. It's all tainted. It's all fallen. God, it can't be good enough for you and I'm miserably lost." In that condition, you look outside yourself, you look beyond what you can do or what you have done, you realize that your promises to reform in the future even if you kept them, would not erase the guilt of the past. There is nothing you can do, beloved, to save yourself, and the true Christian realizes that the only means of forgiveness is found in what someone else did, someone who was perfectly holy, someone who paid the price.

Let's see it in the Scriptures here. Look at verse 7 with me. 1 John 1:7, he says, "if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light," you see, you've got passions, desires, affections for holiness, that's the mark of a true Christian, but what about the sin? How is that dealt with? Verse 7, the end of it there, "and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin." Look at verse 9 again, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." Notice what's happening here. You are the direct object in the sentences there. You are receiving the action, it's not something that you're doing to yourself. You're not cleansing your own sin, it is something that is done to you through the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ on the cross. His blood cleanses us from all sins. He forgives us. He cleanses us. It is a work of God that he has done on your behalf that you're trusting in, not the works of your own hands to save you.

Chapter 2, verse 2, "He is the propitiation for our sins." He is the one that has turned away the wrath of God. And here's what it means to be a Christian, beloved, in light of what we are saying, you understand that the Lord Jesus Christ when he died on that cross was there as a substitute for sinners. Although you're the one who deserved the divine eternal paddle, so to speak, Christ interceded, he intervened, he stepped into your place, absorbed the punishment of God on your behalf and then called you to repentance, called you to himself. And the one who comes to Christ claiming no righteousness of his own,

trusting that only Jesus can save me, that alone is the person who has been made right with God. There are no works that you can do to earn God's favor. There are no religious rituals that magically cleanse sin. Getting baptized never saved anyone. It did make them wet at various degrees of thoroughness, depending on the mode by which you were baptized, but it didn't save you. There is no works, there is no ceremony, it's only the blood of Christ and so you must look to Christ; you must see your guilt and look up and out and say, "Jesus, save me!" Look to Christ and be saved. Look to Christ and be saved because God receives sinners in Christ but only through Christ. There is no other way. So the question is: do you trust Christ like that? Have you abandoned any pretense of self-righteousness and said, "My only hope is found in the righteousness and blood of Christ"? That's what a true Christian, that's the definition of their life are those affirmations.

Now, we're going to turn a corner here into new material for those of you that have been with us. You see, on that grounds, that grounds of forgiveness, the grounds of the cross, God accepts us based on the work of Christ on our behalf. Now, we're going to talk about something a little bit different. When someone is saved, when there is true conversion in a soul, there is more than an erasure of past guilt and the imputation of righteousness by which we mean that God accepts you as righteous because he accepts Christ's work on your behalf, there is something else that happens in salvation that is sometimes overlooked and that has the guarantee of certain results in your life. When you were saved, when a true Christian is converted, God does more than take their name from the book of death into the book of life. At the moment of your conversion, God performs a spiritual heart transplant on you. He changes who you are. He gives you a new nature. He gives you his Holy Spirit to abide in you and that is why, I'm going to explain this more, but it's because God changes your heart in salvation that there is such a difference in the life of a true Christian after his conversion than there was before. It's because there is a real spiritual change that takes place. You were dead in sin but God has made you alive in Christ. If you have ever been to a funeral home, if you have ever seen a corpse, you know physically speaking the clear difference between death and life. Well, the Bible tells us to think about the reality of conversion, the reality of salvation in terms like that. It's the difference between death and life. 2 Corinthians 5:17, "if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come." You been born into God's family. Everything is changed.

Now, what we have to see is where does John say that in his letter. This is really crucial. This distinguishes that view of salvation that thinks about it just as a decision that a man made for Christ and then he just goes on living like he always did. That's not true. There is something completely different at work that guarantees a life change. Chapter 2, verse 20. I'm going to give you a string of five or six verses here to help you see this. Chapter 2, verse 20, "you," he's speaking to true Christians, "you have an anointing from the Holy One, and you all know." You have the Holy Spirit. Chapter 3, verse 1, "See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we would be called children of God; and we are." We're the children of God, not the children of the devil anymore. We're in a new family. That changes things. Chapter 3, verse 9, notice the little phrase at the end here, "No one who is born of God practices sin, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot

sin." Why? Why can he not continue in sin like that? "Because he is born of God." Chapter 3, verse 24, what I'm showing you here, what I want you to see is the presence of the Spirit in the life of the believer. Chapter 3, verse 24, "The one who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him. We know by this that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us." He has given us his Spirit, it says. And finally, one more, chapter 4, verse 13, "By this we know that we abide in Him and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit."

Now, what does this mean? It means that in true salvation there has been a real spiritual change that has taken place. You cannot see that change. It is an intangible change. We only know it through the revelation of the holy Scriptures. But what God is saying in his word is that when he saves someone, he actually changes them. He gives them a new nature, a new heart by which we mean that there are new affections, new desires, a new life and conformity toward the things of God that comes because he has breathed life into you, so to speak. It is an invisible change but it is a real change because there is now in a Christian there is now a new spiritual life principle animating everything that he thinks and does and what motivates his heart and it's because God guarantees and does that work that we can know that in someone who is truly saved, their life will change. It's because they are new now. The old things have passed away and there is a new principle of life at stake, a new principle of life at work, would be a better way to put it. From the moment of your conversion because God has put his Spirit in you and that's why, those of you that are Christians, maybe got saved a little bit later in life, with that's why you can see such a clear demarcation between the person you were and the person that you now are. That's why you used to not care about the word of God or be hostile to it and now you love it. It's not because you on your own power made a change in your thinking, it's because God changed you and did a work in your heart.

Now, that whole principle is a study all of its own, the theological doctrine of regeneration and we're going to study that in the future, but for now I just call that to your mind, I call that change to your mind, that principle of new life to your mind because it undergirds this fourth question that we need to look at. As you're asking yourself, you call yourself a Christian, good, I accept that at face value when you first say it to me. I'm not one to go around and immediately question everyone's claim to Christ. What an awful way to live that is, as if you had to prove your salvation to me. What you need to do is prove your salvation to yourself and make sure it's real. Do you fear God? Do you confess you're a sinner? Do you trust Christ alone for salvation? Here's the fourth thing and this is where it gets into the kitchen of life. Point 4: do you keep God's commands? Do you keep God's commands? Salvation has an ethical impact on your life. It changes the way that you live and the reason that it changes the way that you live is because God changed you in salvation. He gave you his Spirit and as a result of that, the presence, get this, this is really not that difficult to understand, if God has given us his Spirit and in whatever the sense the Scriptures mean, the Spirit has taken up residence in our lives, then that's going to work itself out in the way that you live. God can't suddenly show up in your life and that not have a change on things. We're talking about the holy powerful God of the universe. Well, if he steps into your life, you can expect things to change. Well, the things that change in large part are the way that you live.

Look at chapter 2, verse 3 as we move on now into new material in 1 John. John says, the Bible says, God speaking through the Apostle John says, "By this we know that we have come to know Him." Oh, that's the whole question we're talking about, isn't it? How do we know that we really are a true Christian? He says, "if we keep His commandments," because, "The one who says, 'I have come to know Him,' and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him." Now, based on what we've said so far, it's obvious that John is not telling us how to become Christian in this verse. We've already said that we are sinners. We can't keep the law of God and save ourselves so he's talking about something different here. He's not telling us how to receive salvation, he's saying how you can know that you are a Christian. It's a whole different issue. You see, true salvation produces in the heart of a Christian a love for God's word. Alan read that to us earlier out of Psalm 1. He delights in the law of the Lord. True salvation brings you to love God's word. God gave you a new heart that is tender to the things of his word, that wants to obey it. You see, God brought you into his spiritual family, gave you his Spirit for the express purpose that your life would begin to conform itself to the character exemplified in his word, and more particularly, the character exemplified by our Lord Jesus Christ. There is a purpose to salvation that transcends you going to heaven or hell. The whole purpose in this life is that your life would be transformed into the image of Christ. Now, look, look, as we're talking about this question, how do I know if I'm a Christian or not, ask yourself this question: does being like Christ matter to me or not? Let's just keep it real simple, real basic. Let's keep the cookies on the bottom shelf. Does being like Christ matter to you or not? Because if it doesn't, there's no way for you to think with sincerity, with clarity, that you belong to the family of God. There's just no way.

Think about it in physical terms. We have our physical families and the second generation looks a lot like the first in one way or another. You can look at my daughters on the front row or in the back and you can see that generally speaking the Green children, the Green girls have blondish brownish hair and fair complexions. It's been like that for generations in our family. We can't break out of it even if we wanted to. It's the imprint of being a Green. It shows up physically. You all understand that. You haven't had to study genetics to understand that. "Wow, that baby looks like his dad." Understand that part of the providence of God in weaving that into the physical world is the reality that we would take that and say, "Oh, it must be like that in the spiritual realm as well. Somebody who is born of God is going to somehow resemble the character of the one who gave birth to him." A person who is living a flagrantly sinful life with no sense of compulsion or conviction, who can just openly live in unbroken sin, is showing that they have no imprint of the life of God in their heart. It's so clear. It's so obvious because God is holy and if God gives birth to someone spiritually, he's going to give birth to something that bears some kind of family resemblance to what? To holiness. That's why John can say this with such definitive language.

Look at it again in verse 3, "By this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments." Well, the Lord Jesus Christ said, "I always do what's pleasing to my Father." If we've been saved by Christ to be like Christ and somehow his Spirit

dwells within us, then there's going to be some echo of that in our own lives. And not just in your outer life, beloved. Oh, get up on the second step for emphasis. These are my steps of emphasis for those of you that are new here. It's not just in your outward life. What the Scripture is teaching us is that a true Christian wants it to be true in his life. It's what you want. It's what you desire is to be like Christ, to be faithful to him, to love him, to proclaim him to others. If those desires are utterly foreign to your soul, on what basis, given the principle of family resemblance, on what basis do you possibly think that your salvation is real?

On the other side, for those of you that have those desires but mourn because you fall short, look, we're all in that boat. None of us have reached perfection. That's waiting for us in heaven. It's not perfection that is the test, that is the proof of this test, it's what the direction of your affection is. What is it that you desire? What is it that you are pursuing in life? What John is saying is that true conversion will result in a pattern of obedience to God and his word. Your heart will be inclined toward God's word even if your perfection is absent. What we're saying here, beloved, is really significant. It's a direct challenge to a lot of historical teaching in certain circles. A profession of faith in Christ that does not produce a changed life is not real. It's not true. Someone who says, "I'm a Christian," and can live without any desires for God's word, any love for Christ, any kind of obedience to him, is someone who is not a Christian. That's not me, that's what God says in his word.

Look at it again in verse 4, "The one who says, 'I have come to know Him,' and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him." Verse 5 and 6, "but whoever keeps His word, in him," and "keep" is not in the sense of keeping it with perfection, it's a sense of guarding it as a treasure. "Whoever keeps His word, in him the love of God has truly been perfected. By this we know that we are in Him: the one who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked." There is going to be a replication of the pattern of the life of Christ in every true Christian. And the characteristics of the character of Christ, that humility, the love, the obedience, the prayerfulness, in one way or another is going to be manifested in the life not of the super Christians, of every Christian. That's what God's word says. That is the lifestyle that marks a man or a woman who has received new life from God.

Okay? Hard question here: does that mean that if I'm struggling with sin, a particular besetting sin, that I'm not a Christian? That's not what we're saying. Paul said in Romans 7 that he struggled with sin. And look, look, the more you grow in Christ, you realize that the struggle with sin is hard. It's difficult. It requires sustained, persistent commitment to make incremental advances in your spiritual life. What you've been saved from in sin, what Christ has saved you from in sin was not a superficial force that had you by a toenail and it was just kind of barely tripping you up, he saved you from a principle of sin and disobedience that had a grip on your heart that would not let go and the remnants of that, resistance and rebellion, are still scattered in our fallenness. We're not made perfect yet and to purify ourselves from that is not easy.

The reason I'm saying that here is that your sense of assurance would not be shaken for the wrong reason. Of course your struggle with sin is hard. It was hard for the Apostle

Paul. The reassuring thought in that is that the struggle matters to you. Do you get that? It's the fact that you want to be holy. If only you could be holy, you would set all of that behind. The fact that you want holiness in the midst of the struggle is the surest sign of the reality of the presence of the Spirit of God in your life that you could ask for because that is not a natural desire. Men, you and I naturally would go after sin. The fact that there is something in us resisting it, even though the struggle is hard, is the sign that there is something different, something new, something holy, something supernatural at work in your life and the only way that that's present in your heart is if you've been born again. So don't fall down in discouragement that the struggle is hard. Realize the fact that you desire to engage the battle is a sign that you're a soldier on commission from Christ himself and praise the Lord for the salvation he has given to you in Christ.

Now, there is one more implication that we'll look at today and then we'll call it quits today. Point 5, it's not just whether you keep God's command, point 5: do you love Christians? Do you love Christians? This is such a sweet principle for us to think about. John has talked about the presence of obedience in verses 3 and 6 as being the mark of a true Christian; we've gone over that lightly today. Salvation has another impact. It's not just in the realm of obedience. In verse 7 through 9, we see that salvation produces genuine Christian love for other Christians. Look at verse 7, chapter 2, verse 7, John says, "Beloved, 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. On the other hand," verse 8, "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." Okay, okay, John, get to the point, would you? What are you saying? Oh, let me say it, verse 9, "The one who says he is in the Light and yet hates his brother is in the darkness until now." But verse 10, "The one who loves his brother abides in the Light and there is no cause for stumbling in him."

Let's stop there and think about what he's saying. He's talking about the commandment to love. He's no longer talking about obedience as the principle of true spiritual life. He's talking about another aspect. He has changed the subject. He does this throughout the letter. We'll come back to all of these topics as we continue through the book, that's why I don't have to deal with it all right now. Obedience is the mark of a true Christian, so is love. It's not an either/or, it's a both/and. When John says this commandment is a word which you had heard, he's referring to the fact that this was a principle that was in the Old Testament as well. People sometimes have a totally wrong conception of the Old Testament as if it were only a book about the wrath and judgment of God. That's totally false. That's a total misreading and superficial understanding of the Old Testament. Even in the book of Leviticus in chapter 19, verse 18, Leviticus 19:18, it says, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." So it is embedded right into the Old Testament and so it was an old principle in the sense that it was long established from the law that they had known from Moses for the prior 1,500 years or so.

Now, he says, "I'm not writing a new commandment to you when I'm about to talk to you about love." Look at verse 7 again, "I'm not writing a new commandment to you, but an old commandment which you have had from the beginning." He's talking about this

commandment to love. It's nothing new and yet it is something new. Verse 8, "I am writing a new commandment to you, which is true in Him and in you." Okay, here's the realm in which it's new. Here's the realm in which it's new. It's new in Christ and it's new in your salvation. There is a new realm for its outworking. The principle is the same but in the unfolding of God's chronological plan, love has been taken to new dimensions in our Lord Jesus Christ. In Christ, we see that love moved God to die for sinners. Wow, that's love. In Christ and in believers, we see that there is a new manifestation of love in that love marks life in the church. Love marks relationships among believers in a way that was new compared to the Old Testament. It's a fresh application of the old commandment, that's what he's saying.

Now, look, stay with me because I'm almost done here. I'm actually going really short here this morning so stay with me. We said that obedience would flow in the life of a true Christian necessarily because God is holy and when he puts his Holy Spirit into your life, there's going to be effects of holiness that are shown in the way you live, right? Not difficult. It's really not that difficult. Pretty necessary. Think this way now: Jesus Christ, the Bible says, God so loved the world that he gave Christ to save sinners, that act of Christ being on the cross was an act of incomprehensible love; incomprehensible love primarily, first of all, to his Father, to obey the commission of his Father who sent him into the world for that particular point, to save sinners at the cost of his own life. Oh, understand the love that Christ has for his own Father that he would do that so gladly, so voluntarily. Understand with equal force that it's an act of love on your behalf as well if you're a Christian, that Christ loved you by name enough to lay down his holy life, to sacrifice his life so that you could be saved before you ever knew him. That is love. That is sacrificial love, not a sentimental superficial emotion. This was a deliberate act of his will animated by a love for his Father to obey him, animated by a love for his children to save them, to the point that he totally abandoned his own self-interest in the flesh. It was not in his self-interest to leave the glories of heaven, first of all; coming to earth was a big step down for Christ, right, you all get that. This wasn't a step up for him. Even if he had stayed in a Hilton, it wouldn't have been a step up, it was a big step down. And if you've been in a Hilton lately, you understand it's a step down here too but that's something different. It's a step down. It didn't make things easier for him and when he was on earth, he went to the cross in humiliation and shame and convicted by wicked men on false charges of which he was completely innocent all to fulfill a predetermined plan of God, Acts 2:23 says, to bring about your salvation. Now, I think about that right now in the realm of this mental thought and it just crushes me to be in the presence of such holy, selfless love. This is who Christ is. This is what he did.

Now, understand, I was going somewhere with this. I'm glad I came back to it. If you have been saved by that Christ and that's the Spirit that animated him, the Spirit of love that animated Christ is the same Spirit that has now been put into your heart and life, then understand that it's going to necessarily flow out of your life that the people that Christ loved, the people for whom he died, are also going to somehow be the objects of your affection and intention as well. That's why, beloved, we love one another in the church. It's not because we have shared natural affinities; it's not because we have common interests, that stuff is all secondary and superficial. The unifying motivating power of

love within the church is the fact that you and I had the same Spirit put within us and it's the Spirit that motivated Christ to act in that kind of godly, infinite, sacrificial, incomprehensible love. A deposit of that has been put in you and me and so we are drawn naturally to one another because there is a magnetism of the same Spirit that attracts us and causes us to love each other.

Someone who doesn't have any sense of understanding of that, someone who is content to live outside the realm and every word is important here, sometimes you have to live apart from it just because there isn't the opportunity, but someone who is content to live outside the realm of that Christian fellowship and not feel a loss, someone who can be with Christians and say, "I don't fit in here," is someone who is not a Christian. There is no way that that could be true. You can't simultaneously be the one who is bought by the love of Christ and not have any affection for others who were also bought by his blood. I know a lot of you have traveled around the world and you have met Christians in other places like I have, you know and there is no cultural similarity at all, but when you connect with true Christians, there is an immediate bond and a depth to the relationship that is not limited by the length of time for which you have known each other. The reason that that's true is because there's a supernatural bond that transcends time and culture and space and it's why you can love a Christian that you just met a week and have a commonality with them that is totally foreign to people that are blood relation to you.

Well, listen, listen, if you don't have any of that in your experience, if you don't have any sense of attraction and love horizontally, listen to me, oh, please listen to me, if you don't have any attraction to that horizontally to the people of God, by what principle of skewed logic do you think that you're related to the God who gave birth to them? That doesn't make sense. So someone who is a true Christian will naturally love other Christians. Someone who says and you hear this all the time, you hear it all the time, "I'm a Christian but I don't want anything to do with the church." Look, that's just incoherent. That's like saying, "I want to drive a car but I don't want to be inside it." It's incoherent. It's incoherent and it is stated as though it were a mechanism of purity, "I don't want to be with the hypocrites in the church," when actually it's a statement of arrogance and darkness that doesn't recognize that God has deposited his love in the church and if you belong to God, you would love the people whom God also loves with a special love.

Look at chapter 3, verse 16, John says, "We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren." The principle that saved you becomes the principle that animates your relationships on earth. Verse 17, "But whoever has the world's goods, and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him? Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth." If Christ has saved you, you will love the brothers. If you don't belong to Christ, if you don't love the brothers, I should say, you have reason to question whether your salvation is real.

Look at verse 11 as we close, he says, verse 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." John is saying a guy like that, a guy who is antagonistic

toward the church of Christ is a person who has no claim on true salvation. The absence of love in his life shows what's truly in his heart no matter what he might say. In the final judgment, he will be cast into eternal hell.

Oh, beloved, these are weighty issues. It's always that way in the word of God. It plows our hearts and makes us think on deep things that we are not accustomed to. But here's what I want you to see, if you find yourself really severely convicted by what we've talked about here, do you fear God, do you confess your sin, do you trust Christ alone, do you obey God, do you love Christians, if those questions convict you and you find yourself saying, "Do you know what? This is foreign to my experience. I don't know these things." Just be honest with yourself. Be honest before the Lord. If you find yourself convicted in that way, realize that God may be showing you mercy this very day to open your eyes to your lost condition so that you would repent from your former way of life and turn to Christ and give yourself to him. Come to Christ, he won't turn you away. God brings you under this kind of teaching and convicts you so that you would know to turn to Christ and to flee to him for salvation.

At the same time, beloved, understand this, John wrote to encourage true believers with these things. He wrote so that we would know that we have eternal life. He didn't write these things to further shake us from our assurance. He wrote these things to reinforce them. Come back and see. And look, you can honestly, you can look at your life and you can say, "Do you know what? I do fear God. It matters to me, his holiness. I do admit that I'm a sinner." Look, I'm speaking for myself, I'll freely tell you, I am a sinner. I do not obey God perfectly in my life even now and before Christ, I was only fit for destruction. I don't mind telling you that because it's true. A true Christian openly admits that so it's not the fact that you have sinned in your life that would disqualify you, it's the fact that you openly confess it that would show the reality of your redeemed heart. You don't have to say, "I obey God perfectly," to say, "Do you know what? I do walk with God and that's the desire of my heart." You don't have to be involved in 15 activities a week to prove that you love Christians. You know whether you have a natural affinity for the people of God. The question is do you see the direction of these affections in your life enough to say, "This is real. This has motivated me over time." If that's you, beloved, take it on God's word you have eternal life. Your faith has overcome the world. God has saved you and has you destined for glory and that's reason enough to rejoice no matter what happens today, in the next two months or in the four years beyond that. When we orient our thinking toward these realities of eternal life, then everything else pales by comparison and that is the joy and the victory the Scripture leads us to as those who know Christ. Praise God.

Let's bow in prayer.

*Father, as we come to these things, help us to examine our lives truly. If we've been tolerating sin, help us to repent. If we've been forsaking the fellowship of believers, help us to come back to relationships and devote ourselves in love to them and in this way show forth the reality of our salvation. Father, if there are people here who don't truly know Christ, O God, I ask you by your Spirit to work in their lives, expand their*

*understanding, illuminate their minds so that they might understand and then, Father, as you would, draw them to Christ. Save them so that they might become children in your family walking on the path of light. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.*

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