

How Can We Know That We Know Him? Examine the Evidence!

1 John 2:3-11

At home, we have an aquarium with two tree frogs. We brought them with us as pets when we moved here from Indiana. We still can't determine which kind of a tree frog they are. From our study, we learned that they are either Cope's Gray Tree Frogs or Common Gray Tree Frogs. The only readily noticeable difference between the two species is the call—The Cope's Gray Tree Frog has a faster paced, and slightly higher pitched call. The other difference is the number of chromosomes each species has, one has more than the other. Even though they look the exact same, careful observation of traits shows they aren't. They are either one or the other, a Common Gray Tree Frog or a Cope's Gray Tree Frog.

Likewise, a person who is a believer, who has been born of God and a person who is an unbeliever, who has not been born of God, can look the same as we evaluate their claims. Both make claims to know Him. Both make claims to be living in the light. However, as is the case between the Gray Tree Frog and the Cope's Gray Frog, they are either one or the other and there are characteristic traits which will demonstrate which one they are.

The questions for us this morning are, "How do we know a genuine believer when we see one?" Driving this question closer to home, "How can we personally know that we know Him?" "What are the characteristic traits of a person who is in fellowship with God that show that person's claims to know God to be genuine?"

John has observed about his original audience that there are many professing believers who claim to know God, but whose lives do not give evidence of what they profess. He seems to believe most of them are in fact believers, but are not enjoying fellowship with God.

John therefore writes with two main purposes in mind. The first is that we might enjoy fellowship with other believers and with God (1:3). As the result of this first purpose being fulfilled, the second purpose will fall in line. John wrote for the purpose that believers might experience complete joy (1:4). John's message is that for us to enjoy fellowship with God, we need to be like Him, we need to be going in the same direction, we need to be in sync with Him.

As we have been learning, God's nature is that which determines the conditions for fellowship with Him. In 1 John 1:5-3:10, John addresses the holiness of God and our need to walk in holiness if we are to enjoy fellowship with a holy God.

Last week, we addressed three hindrances to our fellowship with a holy God. Each of these hindrances has to do with a denial of a problem with sin to one degree or another. Some claim to enjoy fellowship with God while living in darkness. Some claim not to struggle with sin anymore. Still others claim never to have sinned. All three of these claims are false and work to get in the way of us enjoying fellowship with God.

As John deals with these hindrances to fellowship, these false claims, He reminds us of the provisions that have been made by the Lord Jesus Christ for sinful people like us to be able to have fellowship with God restored.

“And the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.”

“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”

“But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense—Jesus Christ the righteous ones.”

We need to abide in Christ and thereby walk in holiness if we are to enjoy fellowship with a holy God. The problem is, we all sin and our sin negatively affects our fellowship with God. When sin comes to our attention, we need to acknowledge it and confess it so as to take advantage of the provisions that Christ has made for our restoration to fellowship as opposed to denying it. God’s provisions in Christ are sufficient to cover all the sin we have done and His defense of us shoots down any accusations made against us. As we consider these wonderful provisions, we need to be careful to acknowledge that these don’t give us a license to live as we please. God takes sin seriously, so should we. The best solution God gives for resolving the sin problem that hinders our fellowship is to trust Him to help us stop sinning. The third stated purpose for which John wrote 1 John is that we will not sin—“My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin.”

Thus we see the important balance John strikes for us: Sin is serious, don’t do it. Abide in Christ, depending on Him, to help us not sin. The reality is, God’s children will sin, not because God’s provisions aren’t sufficient, but because we don’t always take advantage of them as we should. When we do sin, we need to acknowledge and confess what we have done so as to enjoy cleansing, forgiveness, and restored fellowship.

In order to be in fellowship with a God who is light, a God who is holy, we need to be living in the light.

Evidence of our fellowship with a holy God (2:3-27)

How do we know that we are in fellowship with God? How can we know that we know God? John identifies in 1 John 2:3-27 four different characteristic traits, four pieces of evidence that demonstrate a person is in fact in fellowship with God as he or she claims to be. Today, we will deal with two of those pieces of evidence.

Evidence Exhibit #1-

People enjoying fellowship with a holy God obey God’s commands in general (2:3-6)

How do we know we have come to know God (2:3)?

This is a question that deals with our assurance of salvation—our knowing that we are really saved. How do we know we are really saved? John answers it in verse 3- “We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands.” Notice, John doesn’t address here how we came to know Him. We didn’t come to know Him by obeying God’s commands. Rather, John addresses the evidence that will be found in our life when we have come to know Him.

We know that we have known God when we are keeping His commands!

When do we feel most assured of the reality of our salvation? When we are keeping the commands of God, we enjoy the assurance that we know God. When we see characteristic obedience in our life as the fruit or outcome of our having come to know Him, it is during those times that we know we know Him. We never doubt our salvation when we are walking in the light.

When is it that we doubt and wonder if we are really saved? Doubts come when we aren’t keeping God’s commands.

It is important at this point to talk about John’s use of the Greek language to make his points. John is very careful and deliberate so as to be very precise, leaving no confusion as to what he is and is not saying. Throughout 1 John, the apostle frequently uses the present tense. The present tense describes ongoing, continuing action. John also frequently uses the substantive present participle. I don’t expect you to remember that title used to describe Greek grammar, but I would like you to understand the significance of this grammatical structure. The substantive present participle looks at a characteristic of the person described. Its use doesn’t claim what a person always and perfectly is, but what a person is as the characteristic of his or her life.

With this Greek grammar in mind, I would like to translate verses 3-6 emphasizing how the use of the present tense clarifies for us what John is communicating:

“By this we know that we have known him (that we have come to know Him), if (when) we are keeping (keeping on an ongoing, continuing basis) His commands.”

“The person who characteristically goes around saying, ‘I have known Him’ and who is characterized by not keeping His commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him.”

“Whoever is keeping (keeping on an ongoing, continuing basis) His Word, truly in this person God’s love has been made complete. By this we know that we are in Him.”

“The person who characteristically goes around saying he abides in Him, must (he had better) walk just as He did.”

What lifestyle characteristics demonstrate a person's profession to know God is false (2:4)?

When a person characteristically claims he knows God

When a person characteristically doesn't keep God's commands

This person is a liar and the truth isn't in him

Throughout the book of 1 John, the apostle will make the consistent argument that:

Those characterized by obedience to God's commands have been born of God

Those characterized by disobedience to God's commands haven't been born of God

As we observed last week, when there is a difference between a person's walk and their talk, it is their walk that demonstrates how things really are. Both unbelievers and believers make the claim to know God, but it is those who are characterized by obedience to God's commands that demonstrate that they are in fact one of God's children. We either know God or we don't. The demonstration of what is true of us is what we do characteristically with His commands. Those who characteristically obey give evidence they know God and are able to enjoy the assurance of that fact. Those who characteristically disobey give evidence that they don't know Him.

John's careful use of the Greek language helps us see how what he says here isn't in conflict with what he said earlier. John isn't saying those who know God don't sin anymore. As John said earlier, "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves." All people sin, even children of God. While a believer will still sin on occasion, he or she won't have a life that is characterized by sin. The believer will have a characteristic pattern of obedience; whereas, the unbeliever will have a characteristic pattern of disobedience.

How do we know that God's love has been perfected in us (2:5a)?

God's love has been perfected in us when we keep His commands

We keep God's commands because His love has been perfected in us, not so His love can be perfected in us

John is speaking here of God's love for us, not our love for God. God's love for us has been perfected in us when we keep His commands. When we are continuing to keep God's commands, it is indicative of the fact that God's love has attained its intended purpose, end, or goal in us—in this sense it has been perfected. God's love has fulfilled its mission and reached its intended goal when it has worked to produce in us obedience to His Word.

How do we know that we are abiding in Christ (2:5b-6)?

If we characteristically say we abide in Christ, we must walk as He walked

Unless we are living as Jesus lived His life, we have no basis to claim that we are abiding in Him and in fellowship with Him. People who claim to abide in Christ must live as Jesus lived.

When we abide in Christ (remember here that John has in mind the metaphor Jesus used in John 15 of the branch abiding in the vine), we draw from Him the sustenance needed to sustain our life and produce His fruit—the fruit of a life like His. It is only when we are exhibiting Christ-like behavior that we can appropriately make the claim to be abiding in Him. If we aren't exhibiting Christ-like behavior, we aren't abiding.

Here, John reminds us of the key to our being able to live a life characterized by obedience, a life like that of our Lord. We don't produce Christ-like behavior on our own. We can't walk as Jesus walked without the help of Jesus. We need Him. We need to draw from Christ what we need in order to live the kind of life that allows us to enjoy fellowship with God—a life like His.

Don't make the mistake of confusing the fruit of fellowship with its cause. Too often, we approach the issue like this, "I will obey Christ's commands so as to obtain fellowship with God." This won't work. Rather, our approach should be, "I will abide in Christ; I will live my life in communion and fellowship with Him. It is this abiding relationship, it is this relationship of dependence on Him that will produce the obedience in me that will allow me to live as He lived and continue to enjoy fellowship with a holy God."

As Porter writes, "If we try to live a godly life in our own strength—by our own efforts—we ALWAYS come up short! Godly living is the result of ABIDING IN CHRIST. We draw from Him what sustains our life. He produces godliness in us. Trying to 'do it ourselves' always leads to guilt and frustration. If we want to enjoy fellowship with God, it always begins with abiding in Him."

What is the second evidence that we are living in fellowship with a holy God?

Evidence exhibit #2-

People enjoying fellowship with a holy God obey Christ's command to love one another (2:7-11)

The command to love one another is an old command (2:7)

John, in emphasizing obedience to God's command to love one another to be evidence of one's fellowship with God, isn't bringing up a new command that His original readers didn't already know about, but an old one. This command did not originate with John. It is not some further obligation He added that was not a part of the message of Christ. John's original audience had been aware of the command to love one another since the beginning, from the very start of their Christian walk. John's reason for stressing that this is not a new commandment seems to be to emphasize the stark contrast of his message with that of the false teachers of the day who were in fact bringing new obligations that were not in keeping with the teachings of Christ.

The command to love one another is a new command (2:8)

John gives the same description to the command to love one another that our Lord gave to the command He gave in John 13:34-35- "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." Even at the time Jesus gave this command, the command to love one another wasn't new in time. It is one of the oldest commands in the Bible. Just the same, Jesus' command in these verses is new in terms of the quality or manner of love Jesus requires of His disciples—"As I have loved you." The love Jesus commands of His followers was demonstrated in His life and teaching and supremely in His death on the cross for us.

The new quality of love Jesus commands of His disciples presents His followers with new challenges. When we love one another—that is other followers of Christ—this is the opposite response the world gives to the same group of people. The world hates God's children and lets them know it. When we love God's children, it demonstrates that we are called out from the world, that we are not like the world, that we are set apart from the world. When the people of the world spot the difference in us as we love other followers of Christ in a Christ-like way, they respond with persecution. Because of this persecution, our loving our brothers and sisters in Christ can require sacrifices of us just as sacrifice was involved for Christ in demonstrating His love for us. When we love as Christ loved us, even when sacrifice is involved, the contrast between us and the world becomes readily evident. This contrast sets us apart and results in Christ's light brightly shining in and through us.

John writes that he sees evidence that this new command is already operative in the lives of his original audience. Christ demonstrated the love they were to express to one another and that love is evident in them—"Its truth is seen in Him and in you." When God is at work in the world through His children by their love for one another, the darkness begins to pass away and the true light shines through. The revelation of light isn't complete yet, but it is becoming evident to those who observe the lives of believers who love others like Jesus loved us. As Hiebert writes, "God's redeeming love has already initiated the process of eliminating moral darkness, but the process will be fully consummated only when Christ the redeemer returns to earth to banish the darkness."

What lifestyle characteristics demonstrate a person's profession to be in the light is false (2:9)?

When a person says that he is in the light and hates his brother, he demonstrates the falsehood of his claim

When someone characteristically says he is in the light while at the same time characteristically shows hatred and indifference towards his brother, that person is not in the light, but is still in darkness. A blatant contradiction between are characteristic claims and characteristic conduct as it relates to our love for God's children shows we aren't really one of His. Any claims of fellowship with God by such a person would be false.

The characteristic lifestyle of love or hatred for one's brother demonstrates the realm in which a person lives (2:10-11)

The one who characteristically loves his brother abides in the light (2:10)

The one who characteristically loves other believers in Jesus Christ in a sacrificial way demonstrates by such a life that he dwells in the light. There is nothing in the realm in which this person lives that will cause him to stumble. The only way we live this way is by abiding in Christ. He produces His love and light in us. On the other side of the coin:

The one who characteristically hates his brother is in the dark (2:11)

If a person is characterized by hatred for his brother, that person isn't in the light. He is still in the darkness. He is living in the darkness. He can't see where he is going as the darkness has blinded him. This person has never experienced the transformation which conveys the one who has trusted Christ from the realm of darkness to the realm of light.

If we're part of God's family, we will characteristically love our brothers and sisters in Christ

This doesn't mean that we will perfectly love every Christian, every moment of every day, without fail. After all, some members of the family can be hard to love or should I say that all members of the family can be hard to love some of the time. These verses are clearly not addressing the believer's occasionally falling into the sin of hate. John isn't addressing an occasional lapse into hatred, but a persistent display or a characteristic pattern of a hateful attitude. Again, John's use of the present tense in the Greek helps us to interpret exactly what he means in these verses.

Those who are members of God's family will be characterized by sacrificial love for one another. They will demonstrate the identifying characteristic of their Heavenly Father who is love.

When we observe characteristic love for God's children in our life, it provides us the assurance that we belong to God's family

How can we know that we know God and are in fellowship with Him? Examine the evidence.

What does our life look like in terms of our obedience to God's commands?

If we are characteristically demonstrating rebellion, indifference, and willful ignorance of the commands of God, it is a good indication that we don't belong to God.

On the other hand, if we characteristically keep God's commands as the demonstration of His love for us being perfected in us, we can enjoy the assurance that we do in fact know God and are in fellowship with Him.

How can we know that we know God and are in fellowship with Him? Examine the evidence!

If we hate God's people, if we avoid them, we have good cause to doubt that we really belong to God.

On the other hand, if we characteristically love our brothers and sisters in Christ, we can enjoy the assurance that we are in fact one of God's children and are in fellowship with Him.

Can we know for sure we are right with God? Yes, we know we are right with God when we are living lives characterized by obedience to His commands and by love for our brothers and sisters in Christ.