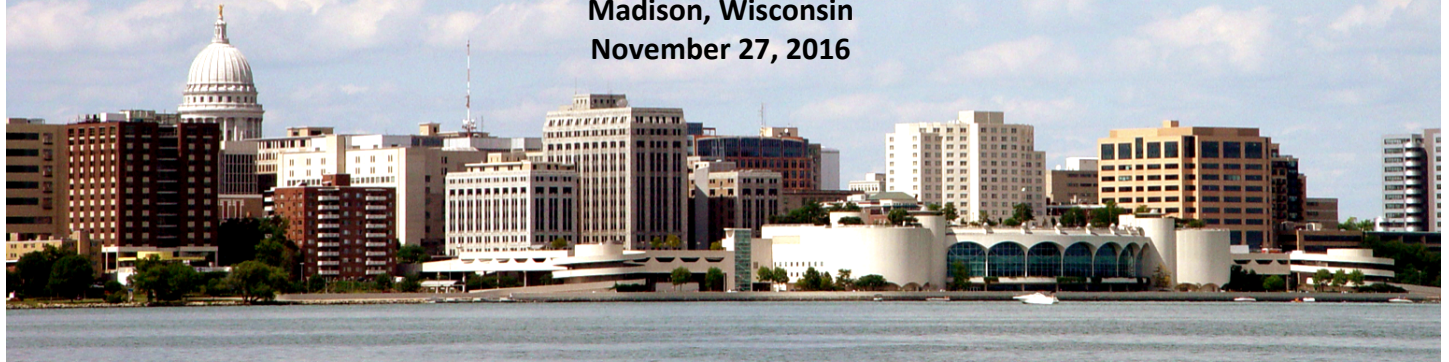


Keep His Commandments

1 JOHN 2:3-6; 5:1-4

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Some of you might know that I have always enjoyed taking tests. This, of course, is one of those qualities that makes me slightly unusual – because, as I understand it, not everybody shares this thrill of test-taking! By now, all of you should probably have a copy of one of the most feared tests ever invented, an “exam book.” I saw a huge pile of these for a few bucks at UW SWAP several years ago, and it brought back such fond memories, I just had to buy the whole stack. But the exam book is used for what we might refer to as an “essay test.” One of my favorite methods of testing in college was when the professor would give us a choice of three questions up on the board, and the instruction was that we were to spend the next hour and a half writing everything we knew about one of those questions. And the way I’ve always looked at it is: Taking a test is simply a way of proving what we know about something.

And to me, that seems to be the purpose of testing. By taking a test, we prove something. Generally, we prove what we know. And as we know, testing continues through life, and it doesn’t always take the form of what is to some, the dreaded blue booklet. We might take a drivers’ test, a hearing test, a blood test, or maybe some kind of test before we can be employed somewhere. Testing is a part of life.

This morning, we return to our study of 1 John as John basically explains God’s procedure for determining whether we are saved – in a sense, a test for knowing whether we are okay with God. So far in this study, we have looked at John’s book here in light of a certain false teaching that was starting to make its way into the church, as these people were claiming to have some kind of super secret knowledge that the soul was good and the body was evil; therefore (in their view), 1.) What they did with their bodies had no impact on their soul (since those two were completely separate), and also, 2.) (according to them) Since the body and spirit were so separate and so opposed to each other, Jesus must not have actually been God in the flesh. After all, how could God (who is Spirit, who is perfect) live inside a human body (which is evil)?

And as we have seen over the past three weeks, John plows right into this. Yes, Jesus was God in the flesh, and yes, it does matter what we do with our bodies. Sin does have an effect on us. The solution to the problem of sin is that we need to confess, knowing that we have Jesus as our Advocate, pleading our case in heaven, having already paid the penalty for our sin.

This morning, as we move into the next few verses, we find that John addresses another issue raised by this strange new teaching that was making its way into the early church. The issue is: Those who were hearing this teaching were starting to doubt whether they were really saved. I haven't pointed this out yet for a reason, but do you remember how these people were emphasizing "knowledge"? Their message was, "We have knowledge that the rest of you don't have." Their theory was still in its early stages, but over time, these people came to be known as the GNOSTICS. And this goes back to the Greek word for "knowledge." These were people who supposedly knew things that other people didn't know. They had access to special visions and revelations that others did not have. As you see this word up here, it might be a little familiar to some of you. Perhaps you know someone who is an AGNOSTIC. In Greek, the little prefix "A" indicates a negative or the opposite of something. If I believe in God, I am a THEIST. If I don't believe in God, I am an ATHEIST. And so an AGNOSTIC is someone who claims that there is not enough evidence to make a knowledgeable decision about God. A DIAGNOSIS is knowledge that comes by looking around, by making a thorough examination. A PROGNOSIS is a prediction concerning the expected progression of a disease; literally, "having knowledge beforehand." But toward the end of the First Century, the GNOSTICS were those who thought that they alone had some kind of super secret special knowledge that others did not have. It was a very arrogant position, and one consequence of this teaching is that those who heard it were starting to doubt whether they were really saved.

And I think most of us can understand the doubt these others were having. Somebody comes in with some fancy teaching that's completely over our heads, and we start to think, "Well, maybe I am the one who has a problem here. Maybe I am just stupid. Maybe I am just not smart enough to understand this." Well, that is what was starting to happen in these congregations in and around Ephesus where John was serving as an elder. These GNOSTICS were coming in with their super secret special knowledge, and people were starting to question their faith. John responds, then, with a very simple test. And the question on the test is this: Do you keep God's commandments? That is a very simple test, isn't it? In a sense, the answer is either YES or NO. But the point is: We do not need any highly complex special knowledge to KNOW that we are okay with God. Instead, the test is rather simple: Do we keep God's commandments?

We actually have two short paragraphs to consider this morning – 1 John 2:3-6 and 1 John 5:1-3 – and I have put these together, because the main point of both passages is basically the same: An emphasis on keeping God's commandments. And as we look at these two passages, I would encourage you to keep an eye out for the word "**know**," because I believe by using the word "**know**" so much, John is basically poking these Gnostics right in the eye! It starts here, and the word "**know**" is used more than 20 times in this book. So, if we want to KNOW we are okay with God, we need to ask ourselves: Are we keeping God's commandments?

Notice, please: 1 John 2:3-6,

³ By this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments. 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; ⁵ but whoever keeps His word, in him the love of God has truly been perfected. By this we know that we are in Him: ⁶ the one who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked.

And then, notice please, also, 1 John 5:1-3,

¹ Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and whoever loves the Father loves the child born of Him. ² By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God

and observe His commandments. ³ ***For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments; and His commandments are not burdensome.***

As we look back at these two passages, I want us to notice six things we can KNOW based on our obedience to God's commandments. And so, in a sense, if commandment-keeping is our answer on the test, these are the six questions.

I. So first of all, as we go back to Chapter 2:3, we find that that commandment-keeping proves that WE KNOW GOD.

And again, notice the emphasis on the word ***"know"*** here! And I hope we understand what John is doing here. These Gnostics come in with their special knowledge, and John's response is this book – if you want to truly know God, John is saying, "Listen to me!" Because, of all people, John is the only one left who actually knew the Lord as a friend, and John's message is: If you want to know that you truly know God, then keep his commandments! And so the test is: Are we keeping God's commandments? We don't need a blue booklet, we don't need some super special knowledge, we don't need any kind of special revelation, we don't need the hotline to God, we don't need to win some game of Bible trivia or Bible hangman, but we need to read the word of God and obey it. And I would point out – not just some of it, but all of it. The word ***"commandments"*** in this passage is plural. We are to keep God's commandments – not just the ones we agree with, but everything. I would also point out that the word ***"keep"*** here refers to looking at something carefully, to guard, to protect. The word was sometimes used in the ancient world to refer to the work done by a soldier on guard duty or on patrol, keeping his eyes open, on alert. This is how we study the Bible. The word translated here as ***"keep"*** was also used in sailing, specifically, with reference to "keeping the stars" at night. To "keep the stars" meant to set your course by them, to value them as your guide at night. This is to be our attitude toward the word of God. And so when we obey, when we keep the commandments, we know, first of all, that we truly know the Lord.

So, if we're doubting that we really know God, and if we'd like to have some kind of proof that we do, the test is: We look at our lives and we ask, "Are we keeping God's commandments." We don't need to be in some kind of secret club, we don't need to have some special revelation or dream or vision, we don't need some kind of special feeling to validate what we think we believe, we don't need a donkey to come talk to us (as Balaam did, but we look at our lives, and the test is: Are we doing what God has commanded? Are we obedient?

II. Secondly, as we look back at 1 John 2, we also find that keeping God's commandments proves that GOD'S TRUTH IS IN US.

In verse 4, John says, ***"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."*** And what strikes me (now that we know some of the background to this book) is that we can almost imagine some of these false teachers coming in and saying almost exactly what John says here, ***"I have come to know Him."*** And so they come in with these arrogant statements. They come in all swollen with pride over how they alone have figured out that what you do in your body has no effect on your soul, and their lives would be full of sin, and John here basically says, "No! If you claim to know God, but if you do not keep his commandments, then you are a liar!" Those are some strong words! John, as the last living apostle, as the apostle of love (as he is sometimes known), is calling people out as being liars. If you claim to know God but do not do what he says to do, you are a liar.

And I would say that we face the same danger, the same possibility, today. Today, I can say that I am a Christian, but if I do not live like it, then I am lying. Anybody can claim to know God, but without obedience, John says that the truth is not in him. And that goes for all of us. Have we thought about the fact that we can lie (to each other and to God) as we worship? If we sing and pray about how much we love and know God, but if we are not obeying God's commandments in our personal lives, John says that we are lying. If we keep his commandments, though, we prove that God's truth is in us.

III. As we continue in these two passages, we also learn that when we obey God we prove that we do, in fact, LOVE GOD.

Notice what John says in 2:5, ***"But whoever keeps His word, in him the love of God has truly been perfected."*** The idea here is that when we obey God, our love for God is demonstrated. Our love has been ***"perfected."*** The idea here is that our love has been ***"completed,"*** our love for God has grown to some level of maturity.

We think of children who grow up through several stages. At first, we as children might obey our parents out of some sense of fear, "I will do what they say, because if I don't, something bad might happen to me." Over time, that seems to mature a little, "I will do what my parents say, because when I obey, I have figured out that I tend to get what I want." The goal, though, is obedience motivated by love, "I will obey my parents because I love them. I listen because I do not want to let them down." And that seems to be the idea here. When we obey God, our love for God is perfected. We obey – not out of fear, not just to get what we want – but we obey because we love God.

John repeats this in a slightly similar way over in 5:3, ***"For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments."*** We love God, so we do what he tells us to do – we obey, not because we are scared, not because we just want something out of it, but we obey because we love God. Obedience from the heart proves our love for God. Or we could turn that around: If we disobey God, we actually demonstrating that we love ourselves more than God. Going back to the blue booklets: Commandment-keeping is a test of our love. Obedience and love go together. Years ago, as a fellow preacher here in Wisconsin was trying to convince me that it was okay to use women in worship as song leaders, he wrote to me and said, "My God is not concerned with commandment-keeping." And yet, as Jesus said in John 14:15, ***"If you love Me, you will keep My commandments."***

IV. As we go back to our texts there is a fourth test we find here as John explains that obeying God's commandments proves that WE ARE IN HIM.

We see this in 2:5-6, ***"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."*** Obedience proves that we are in Jesus, and in Jesus is where we need to be. We think of Ephesians 1 and that long list of spiritual blessings that are found ***"in Christ," "in Jesus," "in the Lord."*** And according to John, obedience proves that we are ***"in Him."*** And when we say that we abide in Him, John explains that we ***"ought...to walk in the same manner as [Jesus] walked."*** In other words, if we are ***"in Him,"*** then we ought to be acting like it. And ***"ought"*** is a word that we don't always want to hear! Being in Jesus comes with some obligation. Being ***"in Him"*** means that we ought to live like he lived – putting others first, sharing the good news, putting a priority on prayer and worship, caring for the poor, standing up for the helpless, standing in for the fatherless, serving others, and on and on and on. As we sometimes say, we are to "be Jesus" to somebody today. Our obedience proves that we are in Him, and if we claim to be in Him, then we ought to be living like it, walking in the same manner he walked.

V. **The next way our obedience proves something comes in 5:2 as John just briefly notes that our obedience is proof that we LOVE GOD'S CHILDREN.**

Notice, please, 1 John 5:2, where John says, ***“By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and observe His commandments.”*** At first, this seems a little backwards to me. It seems to me that perhaps John should have said, “By this we know that we obey God, when we love God’s children.” Instead, though, John says that when we love God and observe His commandments, then we know that we love the children of God. So the idea is: By obeying God in every area, we actually demonstrate our love for God’s children. When we obey, others benefit. When we obey, others are encouraged. When we obey, others are motivated by our example.

So, the idea behind each of these first five ideas up here is: Our obedience to God is almost like taking a test. In school, when I take a test, I prove what I know. But in these two passages, when we obey God, our obedience is proof – proof that we know God, proof that God’s truth is in us, proof that we love God, proof that we are in Him, and proof that we love God’s children.

VI. **There is one more big idea I’d like us to get out of these two passages this morning, but it’s almost the flipside to all of this, and the idea is: THE FACT THAT WE EVEN HAVE ANY COMMANDS TO FOLLOW IS PROOF THAT GOD LOVES US!**

As John says in 5:3, ***“For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments; and His commandments are not burdensome.”*** It seems that we have a tendency to not to want to follow commands. We like having freedom. But John points out here that God’s commandments are not impossible. His commands are not oppressive. His commands are not ***“burdensome.”*** The word ***“burdensome”*** in this passage refers to something that is “heavy, hard, crushing, or difficult.” God’s commandments are not this crushing weight bearing down on us; but instead, the opposite is true. Jesus himself offers rest for the weary and for those who are burdened down. His yoke is easy, and his burden is light. And this is in stark contrast to the ways of this world.

Disobedience is far more crushing than obedience. And I know – sometimes we talk about the Christian walk being a narrow way, and it’s difficult, and all that, but people rarely talk about how hard it is to NOT follow the Lord. When someone chooses disobedience, so often they are choosing a very difficult and painful path through this life, because the weight of disobedience is truly a crushing weight. I think of a friend of mine from Janesville who actually visited with us a few months ago. Right now, he is back in prison on a series of drug charges. Here is a young man who is caught up in a cycle of addiction, and violence, and dealing, and his life right now is not pleasant. We might think that ignoring God’s law brings freedom and happiness, but that is not the case. So we end this morning with a reminder that God has demonstrated his love for us by giving us commands to obey – not as a crushing weight, but as a relief, as a way to avoid so much of the pain of sin that we see all around us. As Elijah read in our scripture reading this morning from Deuteronomy 30, even when giving the Law of Moses, God said, ***“...I have set before you life and death.... So choose life in order that you may live..., by loving the Lord your God, by obeying His voice, and by holding fast to Him.”***

Conclusion:

This morning, then, we have looked at how important it is for us to keep God’s commandments. And the benefit of this (besides the obvious of going to heaven and not going to hell), the benefit here is that our obedience proves something. When we doubt, when we are scared, when we wonder whether we are really

saved, or if somebody comes in with some strange teaching and we start to think that maybe we have missed something or that the Christian faith is too complicated, too over our heads, the solution is to take this test: Are we obeying God's commandments? And if we are, then we can know that we are safe with God. If we are NOT obeying God, then the solution is to change, to repent, to turn back.

The good news is that Jesus died for our sins, he was buried, and he came back from the dead. We respond to that message by repenting, by turning away from sin, and by allowing ourselves to be immersed in water for the forgiveness of our sins. At that point, the Christian life begins, and we start doing the best we can to be Jesus to the world around us. If you are ready to start that journey, we would love to help. You can talk to one of the elders after worship, or you can talk to one of us right now as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com