

“KEEPING HIS COMMANDMENTS”

We have noted that the dominant overall theme in this letter is the theme of assurance of salvation. Christian assurance is a matter of great concern to us. We all want to be assured that we are in God's favor. We all want to know that God really does accept us. We saw in our study of 1 John 2:1-2 last week that the basis of a Christian's standing with God is the fact that Jesus Christ is our advocate with the Father and the propitiation for our sins. Christ and his saving work is the ultimate ground of our assurance. Still, there are times when we may wonder whether we truly belong to Christ. How can we be sure that our faith in Christ is genuine, Spirit-worked faith? After all, it is possible, as our Westminster Confession of Faith reminds us, for “hypocrites and other unregenerate men” to “vainly deceive themselves with false hopes and carnal presumptions of being in the favor of God and estate of salvation.” [WCF 18.1] There is such a thing as false assurance. There are people who believe that they are saved but who are not truly born again. So how can we be certain that our faith is genuine faith?

Some of you may know that the New England Puritan Jonathan Edwards wrote his most famous work, the *Treatise Concerning Religious Affections*, to address this very question. He did so because the great religious revival of his day, the Great Awakening, had produced both true and false professions of faith in Christ. Edwards saw a number of people who had experienced seemingly powerful workings of the Spirit return to their ungodly ways after a short period of religious fervor. He wrote *Religious Affections* to

help people differentiate between reliable and unreliable signs of genuine religious experience.

This is a distinction that we still need to be able to make today. And this is especially so because many of the things that people in our day point to as evidence of salvation would actually fall under Edwards' category of unreliable signs of saving grace. For example, the fact that a person has once prayed the so-called "sinner's prayer," asking for forgiveness through faith in Christ, is no certain evidence salvation. There are plenty of people who have prayed such prayers but who are not walking as true followers of Jesus Christ. Likewise, the fact that a person has gone forward during an "altar call," as you see people doing at Billy Graham crusades, is no certain evidence of salvation. As with the sinner's prayer, there are plenty of examples of people who have responded to altar calls whose profession of faith later proved to be false or unfruitful. No, we want our assurance of salvation to be grounded upon the right criteria, upon biblical criteria. And this is precisely what John provides for us in this letter. He gives us three tests of true Christianity: the test of obedience, the test of love, and the test of doctrine. Our passage this morning sets forth the first of these tests, the test of obedience. In these verses John tells us that *one of the signs of genuine faith in Christ is that it bears the fruit of Christian obedience*. To use the language of our Westminster Confession, one of the ways in which we can be certainly assured that we are in the state of grace is by endeavoring to walk in all good conscience before Christ. [see WCF 18.1]

Our passage begins with this statement: “And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments.” Now, as we study this verse, it is important that we make note of what John does not say. He does not say that we come to know Christ by keeping his commandments. He does not say that our obedience is the basis of our salvation. Rather, he says that obedience is evidence of salvation. This is an extremely important distinction. It makes the difference between true Christianity and a legalistic distortion of Christianity. Obedience is not the condition that we have to meet in order to come to know God. If it were, none of us could know God. Instead, obedience is the characteristic that is present in the lives of those who have come to know God. It is evidence of salvation, but not the basis of it. As the 16th century Reformer Martin Luther reminds us in this quote, salvation is by faith alone, not by works:

“For if you ask a Christian what the work is by which he becomes worthy of the name ‘Christian,’ he will be able to give absolutely no other answer than that it is the hearing of the Word of God, that is, faith. Therefore, the ears alone are the organs of a Christian man, for he is justified and declared to be a Christian, not because of the works of any member but because of faith.” [cited in Horton, *People and Place*, 47]

John said essentially the same thing back at the beginning of this letter, where he told us that his purpose in proclaiming the apostolic message was that his hearers might enjoy

fellowship with God. We come to know Christ by hearing the gospel and responding to it in faith.

Obedience is not the basis of salvation, but it is evidence of salvation. True knowledge of God is efficacious in a person's life. It brings about a change. Those who profess faith in Jesus Christ should exhibit a changed life. True faith, the faith that the Holy Spirit works in the lives of the elect, results in union with Christ. And true faith is accompanied by rebirth, as we are made into new creatures in Christ. As Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:17, "if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come." For this reason, a profession of faith in Christ needs to be acted upon. Your claim to be a Christian is authenticated by your life of obedience to God's commandments. Your works are a testimony to your faith. Again, this is in no way to make works the basis of salvation. Salvation is by grace alone through faith alone. But, as the apostle Peter tells us in his second letter, we need to cultivate Christian character in order to make sure that our knowledge of Christ is not ineffective or unfruitful. We are to "be all the more diligent to make [our] calling and election sure." [2 Peter 1:10]

Now perhaps you are wondering about something at this point. Perhaps you are wondering what level of obedience is necessary in order to have the assurance that John is talking about here. Well, it is obvious that John is not talking about perfect obedience, because that would contradict what he said in the previous chapter about how no one can claim to be without sin. John is not talking about perfectionism here. Rather, he is

talking about the need to continually strive, in reliance upon the strength that God provides for his children through Christ and his Spirit, to live a life of grateful obedience. The question for us to ask ourselves is this: 'Is it my desire to please God with my life?' John is saying that it should be your desire, if you truly belong to Christ.

The amazing thing about Christian obedience is that it is actually possible for a Christian to please God. It is possible for you to live your life for Christ and at the end of your days have your Lord say to you, "Well done, good and faithful servant." This is possible even though you will never be able to live a life of perfect obedience and perfect holiness. It is possible because of what John said in the first two verses of this chapter. You have an advocate with the Father. Jesus Christ has turned God's wrath away from you. Your acceptance by God is not based upon your obedience. It is entirely based upon Christ and his work on your behalf. For this reason, your obedience as a Christian is not done in order to procure God's favor. If it were, you would have no hope. Not even your best works would be good enough to earn God's approval. But God accepts the imperfect good works of believers on the basis of Christ's merit. Listen to how this is explained by John Calvin in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. He writes:

"After forgiveness of sins is set forth, the good works that follow are appraised otherwise than on their own merit. For everything imperfect in them is covered by Christ's perfection, every blemish or spot is cleansed away by his purity in order not to be brought in question at the divine judgment." [3.17.8]

As a believer in Jesus Christ, you can live a life that is pleasing to God.

Not only can you do so, but you must do so, if you want to have assurance that you have truly come to know God. John expands upon this in verses 4 and 5, where he shows the contrast between a true Christian and a false one. First, he says that the person whose Christian profession is contradicted by his conduct is a liar. The truth is not in him. Our words are tested by our works. This brings to mind what Jesus said in the Gospels about a tree and its fruit:

“For no good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit, for each tree is known by its own fruit. For figs are not gathered from thornbushes, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush. The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.” [Luke 6:43-45]

Our thoughts, our words, and our actions reveal what is inside of us. The person who claims to be born again but whose life is characterized by a disregard of God's commandments is proven to be a hypocrite. If God's truth is truly active in a person's life, it will produce the fruit of obedience.

This brings us to what John says in verse 5: “whoever keeps [God’s] word, in him truly the love of God is perfected.” Now we need to be careful not to misunderstand this verse. When John speaks of the love of God being perfected in a person, he is not talking about Christian perfectionism. He is not saying that it is possible for a believer to attain to a state of sinless perfection in this present life. Again, that would contradict what was said back in chapter 1. There is no one who can say that he is without sin. What John is saying here is that Christian obedience shows that our love for God, which is our response to God’s love for us, is complete and mature. Our love for God is demonstrated by our obedience to his commands. For the Christian, keeping God’s commandments is not a burden. It is the way we express our gratitude for all that God has done for us. As the Heidelberg Catechism puts it, “we do good because Christ by his Spirit is also renewing us to be like himself, so that in all our living we may show that we are thankful to God for all that he has done for us.” [HC 86] The believer in Jesus Christ delights “to do every kind of good that God wants [him] to do.” [HC 90] This is what it means to have the love of God perfected in you.

John summarizes the overall point of this passage in verse 6. The way for us to be sure that we truly are in Christ is by walking in the same way in which he walked. If we truly abide in Christ, we will pattern our lives after his life. Jesus said the same thing in John 15:4-5:

“Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.”

Those who abide in Christ will bear fruit for Christ. And the reverse is also true. The only way you can bear fruit for God is by abiding in Christ. Jesus is the one who empowers us to walk as he walked. The person who tries to do so in his own strength will fail. Apart from Christ you can do nothing. You must abide in him.

Obedience is necessary for the Christian, but it must not be attempted in our own strength. This point is made by the Puritan Walter Marshall in his classic book on sanctification. In that book, Marshall explained that there are several things that we stand in need of before we can begin to practice God's commands. First, we need to be given an inclination to the duties that are set forth in God's law. We have to be brought to the point where we see the beauty and goodness of God's ways and actually want to keep his law. This is something that God has to produce within us. Second, we need to be persuaded of the fact that through Christ we really are right with God. If we are not persuaded of this, we will think of our works as something by which we can earn God's approval. We will fall into a works-oriented mindset. Our works of obedience need to be done in response to God's love for us, not in order to try to obtain God's favor. Third, we need to be persuaded of the future enjoyments that await us in heaven. Christians strive

to live obediently because of the hope that is set before us. Obedience to God is not always rewarded in this life. We need to be persuaded that our reward is not here in this life, but in heaven. And fourth, we need to be persuaded that God will grant us the strength that we need in order to do what is pleasing to him. The way to walk as Jesus is to trust that God will indeed lead us in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

In the letter to the Hebrews, we are instructed to “Strive...for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.” [Heb. 12:14] Listen to the words of the 19th century preacher J.C. Ryle as he expounds upon that text:

“[W]e must be holy, if we would see the Lord. Where is our Christianity if we are not? We must not merely have a Christian name and Christian knowledge, we must have a Christian character also. We must be saints on earth, if ever we mean to be saints in heaven. God has said it and he will not go back: ‘Without holiness no man shall see the Lord.’...’Let not men deceive themselves,’ says Owen, ‘sanctification is a qualification indispensably necessary unto those who will be under the conduct of the Lord Christ unto salvation. He leads none to heaven but whom He sanctifies on the earth.’” [Ryle, *Holiness*, 45]

Your life of obedience as a Christian is not the condition upon which your salvation is based. We are not saved by works of righteousness done by us. We are saved by God's mercy, as he pours his Holy Spirit upon us to regenerate and renew us. But the Spirit

who is poured out upon us is the Spirit of holiness, and he produces holiness in the lives of those whom he indwells. As the Lord said through the prophet Ezekiel, "I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules." [Ezekiel 36:27] This is why John can say that if you truly know God, if you truly abide in Christ, you will strive to please God with your life. And this is why you should pray, each and every day, for the Spirit of God to fill you and to lead you in the path of God's commandments.