

Sermon File # 1042

Scripture Text: 1 John 2:3-6

Sermon Title: *Being Sure We Know God*

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Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the New International Version, 2011.

Sources cited in this manuscript are listed at the end.

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Being Sure We Know God

Introduction:

We continue our look into the First Letter of John as today we examine verses 3-6 in the second chapter. As we've noted, John the Apostle writes with pastoral concern for the members of the churches in Asia Minor, that they might have assurance of their salvation in the face of false teaching about Christ and some rifts in the fellowship of these congregations. In this letter John gives the tests of having the right belief about Jesus as the incarnate God-Man, the right moral behavior as transformed children of the Light, and displaying genuine love for one another.

Last Sunday we saw in 2:1-2 what we are to do when we sin, which is unavoidable in our fallen nature; but as Spirit-empowered children of God we have a new nature and a new desire, that we no longer continue in habitual sin, but that we gain mastery over sinful conduct through the power of the risen Christ. We noted that Christ is our Helper against sin and that he has taken care of our sin problem through removing our guilt (expiation) and paying the penalty for our sin (propitiation). In the next verses, today's text, John tells us how we can know that Christ has solved our sin problem and that we know him in a personal, life-changing

relationship. John says we gain assurance that we know Christ by our keeping his commandments and walking (living) as Jesus did (Smith, 174).

Once again John balances encouragement with “grave admonition,” wanting the believers to have assurance of their standing with God through Christ; but also he is deeply concerned that they in fact know God in a saving relationship, and not make specious claims as did some of the false teachers among them (Yarbrough, 82). Even well-meaning members of the churches could be led into error and a false sense of security. John’s desire was that all in the churches might be sure they know God and not just know about God.

Read 1 John 2:3-6.

Jl Packer asks his readers to imagine being introduced to “someone whom we feel to be above us,” whether in social rank, popular fame, even in “personal sanctity.” The more we feel inferior, says Packer, the more we’ll be inclined to give deference and respect, and certainly let this superior take the initiative in any possible conversation. He says to his British readers, to think of meeting the Queen, for example. I’ll suggest you think of meeting the president of our country, perhaps the owner and chairman of a huge corporation, or even more importantly, Aaron Rogers! We’d like to get to know this person we admire so much, but realize it’s entirely up to her or him. If this person simply limits the exchange to “courteous formalities” we’ll be disappointed, but have no right to complain since we have no claim on her or his friendship.

But suppose, says Packer, this person “starts at once to take us into his confidence, and tells us frankly what is in his mind on matters of common concern, and if he goes on to invite us to join him in particular undertakings he has planned, and asks us to make ourselves permanently available for this kind of collaboration whenever he needs us, then we shall feel enormously privileged, and it will make a world of difference to our general outlook. If life seemed footling (trivial, useless) and dreary hitherto,” continues Packer, “it will not seem so any more, now that the great man has enrolled us among his personal assistants. Here is something to write home about!—and something to live up to” (31). Packer then says that this is an illustration of what it means to know God, who said through the prophet, “Let him who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight” (Jeremiah 9:24).

God desires that we know him in a personal, life-changing love relationship, and not that we just know *about* him. The verb “to Know” (Greek *ginosko*) appears 26 times in John’s brief letters, and he contrasts the way we are to know God personally and know assuredly our standing with God with the superficial claims of the Gnostic false teachers, who boasted of a special, secret knowledge they claimed as their exclusive privilege (Burdick, 1908). These false teachers who sought to wield their influence in

the churches, claimed to have a “mystical insight” into truth and a direct, extra-biblical vision of God, a claim that sounds like today’s New Agers. These Gnostics were often unconcerned about moral conduct, which they saw as a separate issue unrelated to their mystical insight (Barker, 315). The doctrinal error of these Gnostics led to ethical error, the immorality of antinomianism (Smalley, 46f, 64).

We can be sure and must be sure that we know God and to be certain, we need to understand...

The emptiness of knowing *about* God

The Message paraphrases our text, beginning with “Here’s how we can be sure that we *know God in the right way...*” There is a right way to know God and a superficial way whereby others *claim* to know God. John is thus implying that...

Talk is cheap

John Calvin noted that “the commonest evil in all ages has been an empty profession of God’s name” (245). We use the term “nominal Christian” to designate someone who is a cultural Christian, perhaps a church member by tradition, but without a personal relationship and testimony of God’s work in her or his life. In Western Europe, and specifically in Belgium where we served for nine years, we knew many people who maintain a formal church affiliation, perhaps through their infant baptism records and attendance of parochial school. But for them, faith has no personal meaning or interest, yet they would identify themselves as Christians as opposed to adhering to another world religion or cult.

But also in our evangelical churches here in the US, we find people who give little evidence of knowing God in a personal, life-changing way. These people may in fact know a lot about God, having been brought up in Sunday and vacation Bible schools. Some may even be able to quote Scripture verses they learned as children and can relate having made a decision for Christ, being baptized and becoming involved in the activities of the church. Churches are paying the price for decades of superficial, knowledge-based decisional evangelism, in which we basically asked inquirers if they want to go to heaven when they die, then we asked them to repeat after us the “sinner’s prayer.” Such people, if they remain in the church and don’t defect as teenagers, often become problematic to the fellowship. They have religious knowledge and answers to certain questions, but give no evidence of a life-changing relationship with Jesus Christ. They are often labeled as “carnal Christians,” yet more likely are counterfeit Christians. Their knowledge of God is just head and not heart knowledge.

The knowledge of God that John holds forth is the knowledge of experience, the knowledge that comes through personal acquaintance with someone or something (Westcott, 46). I can know a lot about you, but until we meet face to face and

become acquainted, I cannot say I know you. And John would say that the same is true about knowing God. You cannot claim to know God if...

Fruit is missing

John says that those who truly know God will bear the fruit of obedience, which is “one clear indication that we know Christ and belong to him” (Comfort, 2142). When John speaks of obeying Jesus’ commands no doubt he is thinking primarily of the Moral Law, the Ten Commandments, which are summarized in the Great Commandment, to love God entirely and love others as oneself (Mark 12:28-34). In his Gospel, John gives us Jesus’ new command, that we love one another as he has loved us. This love is the evidence that we are his disciples, that we truly know him (John 13:34f). The verb for God-like love (Greek *agape*) “occurs a remarkable 52 times” in John’s Epistles (Yarbrough, 83).

In his Sermon on the Mount Jesus contrasts the cheap talk of the false disciples, who claim to be productive prophets and miracle workers, yet Jesus said they never knew him, and the lack of good fruit witnessed against their false profession of faith (Matthew 7:15-23). The primary fruit that God looks for in his children is love, the kind of love Christ demonstrated toward us (John 15:12; Romans 13: 8-10; Galatians 5:22f). The absence of genuine love, expressed in sacrificial, practical and selfless actions and service toward others and a forgiving, forbearing spirit that seeks reconciliation and the unity of the Body of Christ, is a serious void according to John. In fact, he is saying in essence that a lack of obedience expressed in love “spells a bogus belief” (Yarbrough, 84).

We’ve all known professing Christians who created discord and rifts within the fellowship of the church. And quite often these are people who can quote Scripture with the best of them (In fact, the devil was good at quoting Scripture!). Some of these divisive, judgmental, difficult people have impressive testimonies of their spiritual experiences. But I remind us that the Gnostics that threatened the unity and beliefs of the church also had great testimonies of special spiritual experiences. And we also need to be reminded that “spiritual” does not always mean biblical and doesn’t always mean the spirit of Christ and the Holy Spirit, who is the Spirit of Truth (John 14:17). John would say that the so-called conversion testimony of a divisive, unloving, disobedient church person carries no weight because the fruit of real godliness and obedience is missing.

There’s a real emptiness of *knowing about* God when the fruit of love is missing, and such people are...

Guilty by association

John uses strong language here saying that anyone who claims to know God and doesn’t do what he commands is a liar and the truth is not in him (4). Yet such language is justified. “It is a serious thing that a person is, objectively speaking, a

liar who flaunts Christ's commandments while claiming to be a loyal follower" (Yarbrough, 85). To make such a claim and yet deny it by one's actions is to be guilty by association with the devil himself, whom Jesus called a liar and the father of all lies (John 8:44). To make a false profession and to live in contradiction to the Word, will and ways of God is a serious matter. It means one has become captive to the devil to do his will (2 Timothy 2:25f).

Those who talk about God and yet don't know him are in special danger, being blind and oblivious to their real condition of being separated from God. There may even be some here today who have lived for years under the deception of the devil, relying on false assurance and security based on some words said to the pastor or evangelist that you thought were your guarantee of eternal life. Yet you know there has been no change in your life, and you're empty of the fruit of the Spirit, namely love, joy and peace (Matthew 7:15-23; Galatians 5:22a). If you're relying on empty, cheap words then the devil has you exactly where he wants you. He is a masquerader as an angel of light, and leads by deceit and trickery and false, counterfeit claims (2 Corinthians 11:13f). Satan can deceive you and cause your life to be caught in a web of deceit and hypocrisy, whereby others confirm you in your false assurance, telling you what a good church member you are!

As the great writer, Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832), put it:

"Oh, what a tangled web we weave
When first we practice to deceive!" (quoted in Wiersbe, 44)

Now is the time to examine yourself to see if you're in the faith (2 Corinthians 13:5), rather than relying on a false sense of security and what others think about us. To be sure we're in the faith we must have...

The evidence of knowing and being *in* God

John uses the language of a personal knowledge of and acquaintance with God. His words in verses 5 & 6 sound like the Apostle Paul, whose concept of being "in Christ" is one of his key themes. John aspires for God's people to be certain of being and living "in him" (5 & 6), the spiritual union with God for which Christ prayed in his High Priestly Prayer in John 17:21 (Burdick, 1909). This is the personal experience of abiding in Christ that is "both permanent and continuous" (Smalley, 52), and is the assurance and reassurance that comes from the indwelling Holy Spirit (3:24). But this subjective assurance is rooted in ethical and loving behavior that reflects the life of Christ himself.

Our relationship with Christ gives us joy and peace, an inner assurance. Yet also our knowing God in a personal way gives evidence in our lives that is unmistakable. John says we give the evidence of...

Obeying the Word

The life of obedience can be summarized by the Great Commandment, to love God with all our being and love our neighbor as ourselves (Mark 12:28-34). There are the absolute commands in the Moral Law of the Decalogue (Exodus 20:1-17), which Jesus interpreted with a broader, spiritual application for us who now live in the New Covenant and are called to a greater righteousness than the legalists (Matthew 5:20-48).

There are clear commands in the written Word of God, and yet as followers of Jesus we are called to obey according to his Spirit in specific instances not mentioned in the Bible. We are given the Spirit and “the mind of Christ” (1 Corinthians 2:16) so we can obey him in the specific instances of our lives as we live prayerfully. But there are also clear commandments in Scripture that don’t require a lot of time spent in prayer and searching for answers.

For example, if your boyfriend or girlfriend asks you to live with her or him before you sanctify your relationship with the marriage commitment, you can give a clear “no” answer. You don’t have to pray about that. You don’t have to pray about whether to fully disclose your income when you calculate your tax bill. To knowingly disobey God’s clear directives in Scripture (such as the 8th Commandment) is either evidence that you don’t know God or that you, as a true believer, are grieving the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 4:30). If you’re a true believer, you sadden the Holy Spirit. You’ll not lose your salvation, which is a relationship with God; but you will interrupt your fellowship and also your assurance of salvation, which is based upon your fellowship, obedience and fruit, which are being temporarily suspended.

Obeying the written Word is also obedience to the Living Word, Christ Jesus. In the Scriptures we see the character of Christ himself, and as we live according to Scripture we see more of Christ and are conformed to his image. Jesus’ enemies, who prided themselves as experts in the Scriptures, had missed the point, Jesus said. If they had truly understood them, they would have seen them as a testimony to him (John 5:39f). John quotes Jesus using this same word for personal knowing (*ginosko*), when the Lord says that he knows his sheep and they know him and follow him as the Good Shepherd (John 10:14ff). Jesus uses this shepherd-sheep analogy to portray the relationship of intimate knowledge to following, obeying, and acting in a way that pleases God (Spurgeon, 169ff, 1870).

John is not teaching a “works salvation,” saying that obedience or good works result in eternal life. “Obeying God’s commands is ‘not the condition, but rather the characteristic of the knowledge of God’ (Marshall, 123). We don’t obey Christ’s commands in order to be saved, but rather because we are saved (being saved) and are giving evidence of our new nature (2 Corinthians 5:17).

As we obey the Word, written and living, we are necessarily...

Growing in Love

The overall narrative of the Bible is one of God's love for us and his desire that we know him and glorify him through lives of loving obedience. John says that as we keep on obeying Christ his love grows in us toward perfection, which is more like completion and not sinless perfection. John Stott says the RSV translation is "almost certainly right" to translate in verse 5 "love for God" which is being perfected (91).

John Wesley based his doctrine of "perfect love" on this 5th verse as well as 4:12, 17f. His interpretation, which was correct, taught that as we mature in our faith our love for God will be "entire and mature." This mature love is not "Christian perfectionism," which would contradict all John says in 1:8-2:2. But John says that our assurance of knowing God is necessarily tied to a growing perfection in love, which to us ordinary Christians should be a "staggering thought" (Marshall, 125).

This is simply another way of expressing the Great Commandment, to love God with all of our heart, all of our soul and with all of our mind and strength (Mark 12:30). For God's love to be completed and perfected in us means that we focus our entire being, our life experiences and our relationships, on pleasing, honoring and showing our love for God. And we express our love for God through our fellowship with him, seeking to worship and please him in all that we do, and also through loving our neighbors as ourselves (Mark 12:31).

Following Christ

John says that all who claim to know God must give the evidence of "walking as Jesus did" (6). This is more than just imitating Christ by outward behavior conformity. It's good to ask, "What would Jesus do?" but better to ask, "What would Christ have me do and what is he leading me to do as I follow him?"

The Message paraphrases verse 6 well: "Anyone who claims to be intimate with God ought to live the same kind of life Jesus lived." Some people are getting into discovering and following the kind of diet Jesus ate in 1st Century Palestine but such cultural imitation misses the point. It's good that we don't know the personality or physical appearance of Jesus because if we did many would think that if they developed a certain persona, style of dress or mannerisms they would be "walking (living) as Jesus walked."

Spurgeon cautioned his congregation against such a superficial imitation of Christ or of any human imitation of Christ. He shared that someone write to him to say that he had painted the great preacher's portrait, but that he couldn't finish it until he had actually seen him! Spurgeon remarked, "I should think not. Certainly you cannot paint a portrait of Christ in your own life unless you see him—see him clearly, see him continually. You may have a general notion of what Christ is like, you may put a good deal of color into your copy; but I'm sure you will fail unless you see the grand original. You *must* get to commune with Jesus" (420, 1883).

We see Jesus in his Word and as we live in obedience and prayerful fellowship with him. The idea of “what would Jesus do?” that has resulted in adherents wearing *WWJD* bracelets came out of a 19th Century American novel, *In His Steps*, by Charles M Sheldon (1857-1946). It’s the story of a congregation’s being transformed when the pastor challenges the people to nothing without first asking first, “What would Jesus do?” Although the novel is the 9th best-selling book of all time, with over 30,000,000 copies sold (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/In_His_Steps), it speaks of imitation, whereas John is calling the people to incarnation, or the impartation of the reality of Christ in the lives of his people (Wiersbe, 44).

This imparted life, incarnated in us is the activity of the Holy Spirit. The evidence that we know God is to faithfully follow Jesus, which is a “two way street.” We reach toward him, to “live in him,” as we follow him, but also he takes up residence in us through his Spirit (Yarbrough, 90). Only because he lives in us as we abide in him does imitation become a possibility (Smalley, 52f). It’s incarnation by impartation.

To follow Jesus means taking the way of the cross, even sharing in his sufferings (Luke 9:23ff; Galatians 2:20; 2 Timothy 3:12; 1 Peter 4:12ff). In fact, Peter says suffering with Christ is evidence we are “done with sin” (1 Peter 4:1f). A “bogus believer” and nominal Christian is not about to suffer for Christ. (This is why the persecuted church is refined and thus given power and effectiveness in witness.) Paul tied assurance and evidence of faith with the willingness of God’s people to share in Christ’s sufferings (2 Thessalonians 1:3ff).

As the late James Boice wrote, “To walk as Christ walked is to live, not by rules, but by an example. It is to follow Him, to be His disciple. Such a discipleship is personal, active and costly....It leads to glory, but before it leads to the cross. Such a path can be walked only by one who has died to self and who has deliberately taken up the cross of Christ to follow Him” (60f).

Grace that gives the assurance of knowing God also gives us the willingness and even the desire to die to self and share in Christ’s sufferings. Paul knew that knowing God to the deepest extent would involve “the fellowship of sharing in Christ’s sufferings (Philippians 3:10).

Conclusion:

Knowing God is something to live up to and something to write about. And as Jeremiah says, something even to boast about (9:24). But our boast is not in ourselves or in anything we have done. We are saved by grace and are also assured by grace, as we live in God and seek the fullness of the Holy Spirit to live in us as we follow Christ.

The God of all creation has invited us to know him and to enjoy an intimate relationship with him. Jesus spoke of his great love for us and his desire to give us

the fullness of his joy, which is conditional upon our obedience to his command to love one another. He invites us into intimacy with him as his friends, and says he will share the Father's will and truth with us (John 15:9-17).

This is something to write home about! We know God and he knows us and wants to share his life and his Kingdom work with us. But knowing God is absolutely essential. Let's be sure we don't have second-hand knowledge of God. Let's be certain we know him. To know God through Jesus Christ is a matter of eternal life and death. Unless you know him you've never experienced his saving grace through the forgiveness of your sins. Now is the time to examine yourself and make sure you're in the faith.

That we know God is the most important thing we can say about ourselves. Like Paul, we should desire to know Christ through the power of his resurrection and further, through sharing the fellowship of his suffering. Whatever it takes, we must know him and know him better, a staggering thought, amazing privilege and absolute necessity.

Thoughts and questions for personal reflection and/or group discussion:

1. What is the difference between knowing God and knowing about God? How is it possible for someone to know about God but not know him personally?
2. What's required for you to know someone personally? How are these steps and requirements like getting to know God?
3. What is a "nominal Christian" and why do you think it's possible for people who don't know God personally to put up a good religious appearance and/or performance?
4. What is the fruit that should be evidence that someone knows God?
5. What do you think is meant by "perfect love" and how are we to grow toward this kind of love for God and others?
6. In the light of verse 6, what do you think is meant by "walking" as Jesus did?
7. Someone said that what is required in verse 6 is not imitation but incarnation. What is the key to our being an incarnation of Jesus? Ask God to make this "incarnation by the impartation" of the Holy Spirit a reality in your life.

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