

Knowing God (Short Version)

Sermon Four – First John I John 2:1-17

How do we know that we know someone?

Congregation response

Let's say you are a fan of Elvis Presley. You know all the facts about his life, his favorite barber and hair jell, where he went to school, and the times he had hardships as well as when he had huge successes. You can sing most of his famous songs and you can name each of the movies he was in. You still celebrate his birthday, and mourn on the day he died. Plus, you've made regular pilgrimages to Graceland. You know everything about him and even named your children after his guitars.

But do you really know Elvis? Probably you have impersonal knowledge about him – you know about him. But you probably don't have personal knowledge – that information you gain from first hand experience, rubbing shoulders with him on a regular basis. John makes the point in this writing that he knows Jesus. He has that deeper knowledge that we can only get when we hang around someone – for a while, through troubles and celebrations.

Let's focus today on the themes of knowing and obeying and love. John had a problem. He was faced with people who saw God as an intellectual exercise and who could say, "I know God" without being conscious of any ethical obligation. There were and are no shortage of people who see religion as a logical progression, a rational exercise. Gaining knowledge of the divine is valued. Some see religion as a series of mental exercises with knowing God as the goal. So naturally doctrine is developed to help systematize and make sense of God and the world.

John also had people who relied on emotional experience and who could say, "I am in God and God is in me," but did not see God in terms of any commandments. They focused on experiences and feelings. God only was real if they could know him through various ecstatic ceremonies, rituals and encounters. I heard of a Christian charismatic evangelist who shared, with sadness, that some people followed him around wherever he preached – to get their religious fix. This was often to the detriment of their families and wallets.

So John zeros in on what it means to know Jesus, to understand God. For that reason, John uses the word 'gnosko', from which we get 'Gnostic', which is the Greek word for 'knowledge', 25 times in the first epistle of John. In Hebrew the same word is, yada. Both words convey more than intellectual knowledge. It's also experiential knowing.

John uses another similar word, 'oida', 15 times, which means to see or perceive, hence to know. What he's bringing to people's attention is that what he is sharing is the true knowledge of God. The interesting thing is that the Gnostics and Docetists, they had a great intrigue with special, superior, charismatic knowledge of God - but they had no interest in keeping God's commandments. They were living the lives of reprobates spreading false information.

So what does John teach us about knowing God? John offers us three important ways that also offer us assurance. Remember, he is writing to people who were confused by the teachings of false teachers. First of all, he says, "You know you know God if you obey His commandments."

Verse 3. John isn't focused on salvation. He's not focused on pleasing God. He's

not even focused on, “If you want to know God, then obey.” Instead he is offering the personal assurance, “You get to know God by the way you live.” One can argue that we know God by obedience. But John is pointing to something beyond rules, more than keeping commandments – as important as this is. He’s offering the assurance that we can be sure that we know God, by how we live each day.

It’s too easy for us to get caught up in rules or grace. But John is focused on practical knowledge. We know by doing. We know God by keeping the commandments – and the focus is on knowing God. John teaches that salvation is seen by obedience and in turn, that obedience contributes to our assurance. He’s giving us a way to know how we know. We know God as we try to keep God’s laws. John gives us a way to distinguish between those who claim to be followers of Jesus from those who really are followers of Jesus. It’s also a way to gain a sense of assurance.

The Nobel Prize-nominated Christian, Henry Shafer, a famous chemist, tells the story of how he came to reject Christianity. He had been raised in a nominally Christian home. One day in the midst of a discussion in the kitchen, he made a point to his father about an ethical question by saying, “Look, Dad, the Bible says such and such.”

His dad responded by saying, “I know what the Bible says; it's wrong.” Henry said, at that moment he decided, Christianity must be bunk, because his dad claimed to be a Christian and yet rejected the teaching of the Bible. Later Henry realized that it was not that Christianity was bunk; it was that his father's profession of faith was bunk.

If we believe the Living God, we will trust and believe God’s word. We will acknowledge it as our final rule of practice and faith. And we will not just do it in the abstract; we will do it where it hurts; we will do it where it's hard to obey. To know Jesus changes everything; it changes us from the inside out, & one of the ways that it changes us is it makes us love to obey His word, to believe His word, to follow His word. So, this is the first thing John says.

The **second** way of knowing God, and the second assurance John offers us is verse 4. Another way of saying what verse 4 says is, “We don’t know God if we do not desire to keep the commandments.” The point is, if we claim to know God but our life is not changed by knowing Him, that is a certain sign we don’t know God. John goes as far as calling us liars, if we say we know God, but not love to follow His truth.

John doesn’t say, they have head knowledge but have no heart knowledge. He doesn’t say, they have the truth but don’t put it into practice. Instead John tells us, They have no truth, because the truth of God turns our world upside down, once we grasp it and follow it. Knowing truth leads to a transformed life, which always leads to obedience. So when the transformed life is not there, the person has not met Jesus who is the way, the truth & the life. Knowledge of God leads to wanting to keep His laws.

In Romans 8 Paul says “Grace-salvation always leads to obedience,” and “Justification is always accompanied by sanctification,” We read in James “Faith always shows itself in works.” Truth is always seen and always expresses itself in deeds. Faith, trust, real knowledge of God are always expressed in action; especially in the joy of

obeying God's commandments. And so, we know that we don't know God if we don't want to keep His commandments.

Like the man in the full page drawing, in Billy Graham's Decision magazine. It showed a man answering the front door, with a towel wrapped around his waist, with his kids peering around him. The towel had the name of a hotel imprinted on it. "If we know Jesus, we obey his commandments to not steal hotel towels, otherwise we are liars & in such a person the truth doesn't exist."

The **third** way of knowing God in verse 5 is we come across the idea of perfection. "By obeying God's Word, in God's love we reach perfection." When someone says, "Oh, but John, I love God." And John replies, "Everyone who loves God, loves His word, and loves His commands, and longs to do His commands. In fact, every one who truly loves God, that love is perfected in his obedience to God's laws."

For John, knowing God, is not expressing true love in sentimental language. It's not expressed in some claim of mystical experience. True knowledge and love of God is expressed in moral obedience. We could say the proof of knowledge and love is loyalty. What would a spouse think of their other half who said, "Oh, honey, I love you," but every week they looked with lust at others? That profession of love would ring hollow. True love is loyal. God says, "You truly love Me? You'll be loyal to My word; you'll be committed to My word."

John is teaching us such a familiar and simple concept, that we already know, but it's important to see how he presents the Gospel as he counters what he considers false doctrine. The truth of God does not exist in order to promote merely right

knowledge about God. It's not just about being obedient. The truth exists to promote an active and experiential relationship with the Living God. And that relationship, that fellowship - knowledge, always expresses itself in love and obedience to Jesus. Love delights and is eager to do God's will.

John in a variety of ways says what Jesus taught. In the story about the Woman at the Well, Jesus tells his disciples, "It is My food to do the will of the One who sent Me." (John 4:35) Spend some time contemplating that statement this week. Jesus fed on God's will. And so, if we're like Jesus, then we will love to do God's will as well. If we love God, we are eager to keep His commands, and that obedience will in turn be evidence of our true love.

John is trying to convey that obedience has the motives of fear, just doing the right thing, and even better - love. The early Anabaptists share in many of their writings that a life of obedience to the commandments grows out of awareness of God's graciousness to us, so we can't help but respond in loving joyful obedience. This in turn enhances our knowledge of God.

Jesus on the night He was betrayed in the upper room, said, "If you love Me, you will keep My commandments." (J 14:15) This is why John can declare in verse 6, "Who ever says, 'I abide in Jesus' ought to walk just as he walked."

What does it mean to "abide in Christ"? It's experiencing a life-giving relationship of the deepest and closest sort with God through Jesus Christ. It's a relationship that is not in passive, indifferent, lethargic and gives no attention to duty. Instead it's a relationship that issues forth in activity and commitment and effort and love for God's

will and following after Christ's way of living, with delight. This is how knowledge of God, truth, obedience and love combine. It's imitating Jesus, by walking in the light. By living with his ethics and morals. By abiding in / with, and imitating Jesus.

Our section of scripture ends with a good reminder, a contrast of what this love, knowledge and obedience is not. "Do not love the world or the things in the world. The love of the Father is not in those who love the world; for all that is in the world – the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, the pride in riches – comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and it's desires are passing away, but those who do the will of God live for ever."

How are we walking with Jesus today? A sculptor once fashioned a lion out of a block of granite, and he was asked how he accomplished such a wonderful masterpiece. He replied: 'Oh, it was easy, all I did was to chip away everything that didn't look like a lion'.

Are we chipping away the things in our lives that are not Christlike? Are we being conformed more and more, by the Holy Spirit as we obey God's Word? Are we getting there, progressing to be more like Christ? Is our knowledge, our awareness of Jesus' love growing in us more and more as we feed on God's will?

Knowing someone is a life long process. Often there is new information and usually there are delightful surprises. At times we discover things about ourselves. I pray that each of us continue to be surprised by a holy God who offers us love and joy.