

Sermon 12, Obedience, 1 John 2:3-5

Read Romans 8

Proposition: Obedience is both the way to knowledge and the fulfillment of God's love.

- I. Keep God's Commandments to Know Him, v. 3
- II. Keep God's Commandments to Know that you Know Him, v. 3
- III. Failure to Keep God's Commandments Is Proof that You Don't Know Him, v. 4
- IV. Obedience Perfects the Love of God, v. 5a

Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we have spoken before of the self-reinforcing, "spiral" process of the Christian life. Obedience, and its role in knowing and loving God, is one such spiral process. Jesus told us, "If you love Me, you will keep My commandments" (Joh 14:15). But then He quickly put it the other way: "Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me" (Joh 14:21). Brothers and sisters, if you love God you keep His commandments and if you keep His commandments you love Him. Indeed, the two things reinforce each other and flow into each other; each produces the other. It's like the chicken and egg, but even more simultaneous and ongoing. So which comes first, love or obedience? In actual fact, to love is to obey and to obey is to love. Knowledge, then, comes in as a product of this spiral between obedience and love. You don't start with knowing, then rise to loving, then begin to obey — or at least, such a sequence can never be construed to exclude a sequence in which you first obey, then begin to love, then to know. Indeed, brothers and sisters, they all feed into each other. We will see an admirable statement of this spiral process in our text this evening. John tells us essentially that obedience is both the way to knowing God and the fulfillment of God's love. Obedience is the way to know God and the activity that fulfills His love.

I. Keep God's Commandments to Know Him, v. 3

We begin with the apostle's statement that we know that we have come to know Him if we keep His commandments. We will talk in a moment about the "meta" aspect of this statement — its insistence that you and I can not only know, but know we know. That is indeed the core of what John is trying to tell us. But before we can look at what it means to know that you know Him, we need to look first at what it means to know Him.

John says that we need to keep God's commandments to know Him. We have come to know Him if we keep His commands.

What is it to know God? It is to have a personal relationship. Just as we would say "Oh, I know Bob"-- meaning that we recognize Bob, we have spoken to him at length, he would recognize us and remember those conversations — so to say "I know God" means that there is a

relationship there, such that you have spoken to Him in prayer, can recognize Him based on previous meetings, and know that He recognizes and remembers you.

In other words, knowing God is a different kind of knowing than knowing a proposition. You know a fact, but the fact doesn't know you back. But knowing God, or indeed any person, is reciprocal. You know Him, and He knows you back.

Our notions of knowing are tied to our embodied selves. We think of knowing as coming into the physical presence of someone. Thus, it is perfectly possible to say of someone with whom you've spent hours on the phone, "We've never met." But brothers and sisters, we are always in the presence of God. Knowing Him is not about being in physical proximity, nor even proximity plus conversation. John is teaching that obedience actually has a knowledge function. Obedience is epistemic. It is through obedience that we know God.

You get to know me, as a human being, by being in the same place as I am and talking to me there. But you and I get to know God as the divine being by talking to Him and doing what He says.

This is a challenge to our assumptions. We don't generally think of getting to know another human through obedience. Oh, yes, sometimes we might have to obey another human, but to get to know one we tend to think of meeting with and talking. But getting to know God requires talking and obedience.

John, of course, isn't focusing on the life of prayer here. Prayer and Bible reading are the two sides of the conversation with God that you must have if you want to know Him. But just as you can say "We haven't met" about someone with whom you've spent hundreds of hours talking, so it is just as true to say about your relationship with God "We haven't met" when you've spent hundreds of hours talking to Him but never done one single thing because He said, "Do it." *Obedience serves the same function in relation to knowing God that physical proximity serves in relation to knowing another human being.*

George MacDonald put it like this:

Instead of asking yourself whether you believe or not, ask yourself whether you have this day done one thing because He said, Do it, or once abstained because He said, Do not do it. It is simply absurd to say you believe, or even want to believe, in Him, if you do not do anything He tells you.

If we analyze this truth a bit, break it down, we see the following: God is so overwhelming, so powerful and awesome, that to have the slightest idea of who He is will inevitably lead to an unyielding urge to do what He wants.

Let's say that a battle-hardened cop and a complete ditz both get taken hostage by a drug lord. The drug lord pulls out a particular torture device, one the the cop instantly recognizes. The drug lord says, "Go into the other room and stay there or I'll use this on you." The cop hurries into the other room, while the ditz says, "What is that? An eyelash curler?" Brothers and sisters,

what motivates the cop? He knows something of this drug lord and what such a malefactor is capable of. So he is eager to comply with anything not totally evil that will keep him alive. The ditz, on the other hand, knows nothing of criminality, nothing of the ways of drug lords, and so has not the slightest motivation to pay attention to the wishes of her captor.

To know God is to keep His commandments. To keep His commandments is to know Him. Indeed, you can't know Him without obeying Him. If you refuse to do what He says, you will never know who He is.

So that's John's first point. You say "How do I know God? There's nowhere I can go to meet Him." John says, "Do what He says, and you will get to know Him."

II. Keep God's Commandments to Know that you Know Him, v. 3

But not only can we as obedient Christians know God. We can go one step beyond that and know that we know Him.

Sometimes, of course, we have knowledge of something but it's buried. We don't realize that we know something until a particular situation evokes that knowledge, calls it up out of our memory banks. Perhaps your phone has died just as you were trying to find your way to a home you haven't visited for many years. You're not sure you know how to get there, but you end up driving right to it. Perhaps you aren't sure you know the passcode, or can't quite remember how to change the fuel filter. But then you try, and succeed. You knew, but didn't know you knew.

Well, sometimes the Christian life is like that. You know God, but don't know you know Him. What does John say to you? He says that you can know that you know by keeping His commandments.

We just saw that we know God by keeping His commandments. When we do what He desires, we are showing that we know Him. But we are also showing ourselves that we know Him. It's not that we say "I can know whether I know Him by first learning whether I keep His commandments. Then I will compare my performance to the standard and see whether I kept enough commandments to be sure that I know Him." That's not what John says. He doesn't say that we step back from our obedience, take it as a premise in an argument, and then use it to justify our belief that we know God. The process is not discursive like that. It's intuitive.

If I say to you "How do you know you're looking at a tree?" you won't say "Because it looks like things that I have known my whole life as trees." You're just going to say "Because I know what a tree is." You know intuitively that you're seeing a tree, or a sheep, or whatever it is you're seeing. And in the same way, when you keep God's commandments you know intuitively that you know God.

So if you struggle with assurance of faith, what's the best thing you can do? Obey God. Do what He says. And as you do that, you will know Him — and know that you know Him. It will be obvious to you that you are a Christian. Yes, there will be discursive proof there. But before the discursive will stand the intuitive. You will simply know, just as you know that you're sitting on a cushioned chair or just as you know where your hand is without looking at it. Brothers and sisters, do you want this kind of certainty? Then obey Jesus' commands!

What are those commands? The Ten Commandments, and the moral implications rightly drawn from them. Do you worship God? Do you worship Him in the way that He desires? Do you use His name lightly? Do you keep His Sabbath, honor your parents, preserve life, property, chastity, and truth? Do you long for things that aren't yours? Brothers and sisters, if you obey His commands you will know Him, and know that you know Him. The conviction will be a certainty, something that no human argument can challenge.

III. Failure to Keep God's Commandments Is Proof that You Don't Know Him, v. 4

But, as so often in 1 John (as in Proverbs), the flip side of the truth stands at the ready to present itself before us. Just as commandment-keeping is the best proof one could ever have of knowing God, so commandment-breaking is the only proof one needs to be certain that one does not know God. Brothers and sisters, failure to keep God's commands is proof that you don't know Him!

Now, again, we ask "To what degree? In what way?" Every one of us fails at some level to keep God's commands, as John has already insisted in the previous chapter. How can one person demonstrably know God and not know Him?

The answer to this question comes in two parts. One answer is that knowledge admits of degrees just as obedience admits of degrees. It is perfectly accurate, then, to say that insofar as you keep God's commands, you know Him — but insofar as you fail to keep His commands, you don't know Him. The better you know God, the better you'll keep His commands. The less you know Him, the less you'll keep His commands. That is one part of the answer.

But the other part of the answer is that John is not talking about individual actions so much as he is the general trend of one's whole life. By and large, the commandment-keeper knows God. By and large, the commandment-breaker does not know God. What is the overall direction and quality of your life: obedience, or disobedience? If it is disobedience, then you know that you don't know God and I know it too, just by seeing your disobedience.

John is specifically addressing the person, in His day as in ours, who professes Christ but does not live for Christ. This is the person who talks the talk but does not walk the walk. That person is a liar. We all know this. Jesus used the word "hypocrite." A hypocrite is a particular form of liar; he is someone who says "People should be good" while he himself is bad. The hypocrite says "I am someone who keeps God's commandments," but actually he is someone who breaks God's commandments. It's easy to see why the epithet "liar" is justified in this context.

Brothers and sisters, to claim Christ's name and refuse to do what He says is to be a liar. Don't do it! How can you avoid doing it? By actually knowing Him. When you see Him, you will love Him and obey Him.

IV. Obedience Perfects the Love of God, v. 5a

Indeed, John goes on to say that to obey God's word is to perfect the love of God. What does this mean? It means bringing God's love to its fulfillment or completion. Let me give you a negative example. Christopher Tollefsen, in his book on lying, asks this question: Does a lie have to actually deceive someone in order to be considered bad or evil? His answer: Not at all. A lie is

evil even when it deceives no one. But, he adds, we can say that when the lie does deceive someone then it is fulfilled or completed.

Brothers and sisters, we don't want lies to come to perfection. We don't want to deceive others with false statements. But just as a lie can be fulfilled, so the love of God can be fulfilled. When is it fulfilled? When it reaches its goal. Obviously, we know that people lie in order to deceive others. That's why you and I have lied in the past too. When we do deceive, our lies have accomplished their purpose. And in the same way, when God's love evokes and draws out obedience in us, it has reached its goal. It has done what it set out to do.

Remember, love is wanting what's best and doing what's best for the beloved. What's best for us, God's beloved, is to be obedient children! And so God's love is fulfilled when it evokes in us the same kind of obedience that is also known as love. Love wants what's best for us, and what's best for us is to love God. And to love God is the same thing as obeying Him.

What if you hear the condemnation of the law in this message? What if you hear "You haven't measured up. God's love is not perfected in you yet because you don't perfectly obey?" Well, first of all, acknowledge that that charge is perfectly true. Secondly, though, don't despair or give up. God's love has been poured out in your heart. The very fact that you desire to be perfected in love, to have your obedience evoked and drawn forth by God's initiating and motivating love, means that you are already the recipient of God's love. God loves you. And if that's the case, nothing can separate you from His love. Recall the glorious statements of Romans 8. This call to obedience, this call to love, is not God's way of condemning you; it is the ultimate expression of His love! He wants you to learn to obey. He wants you to know Him by obeying, to know that you know by obeying, to tell the truth when you say "I know Him."

Brothers and sisters, God loves you. That love is not yet perfectly perfected. But if it has drawn forth some measure of obedience, some desire to please God and love Him back, then you are loved. God's love is being perfected in you even now, even through this sermon. So don't despair. You are more loved than you know, and that love is even now perfecting your obedience. And He won't rest until your obedience is completely perfected and you dwell in His house forever. Do you long for that? Then you are a Christian, and nothing can separate you from His love.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirits. Amen.