

Love Perfected in Obedience

1 John 2:1-6

Introduction

This passage contains a number of terms or phrases which often appear to us to be like trying to catch wind inside a mason jar—amorphous, wispy, hard to get our heads around or our hands on. What does it mean to know God, to abide in Him? And what does it mean that God's love is perfected in us? Yet, this passage is grounded in the gospel, and as such, like the gospel, it is both simple and incomprehensible at the same time. In this passage, John confirms to believers that Christ is their mediator and shows them how they can have assurance of their salvation. Spoiler: Assurance of salvation comes by obedience.

The Advocate

In the previous section, John delivered some stern warnings. Now the apostle tenderly addresses his audience in v. 1. He desires to drive Christians away from sin, though not expecting us to never sin (remember 1:8,10). When we do sin, instead of being overcome and crushed with guilt, we have an Advocate before the Father. This is good news for us, because recall that if God marked our sins against us, we could not stand before Him (Ps. 130:3). Yet, Jesus stands before the Father because He is the propitiation for our sins, meaning that He satisfied the wrath of God against our sins by His atoning death on the cross. This is why dealing with our sins is in a very real sense so simple. This is the grace and love of God for us (1 John 4:10, Rom. 5:8). Jesus paid for our sins by His death such that we have but to turn to the Father and confess our sins, and He declares in His word that He will forgive us. Not only that, but John points out the vastness of God's grace spread over the whole world. John is not here implying a universal salvation or offer of salvation to every individual. Rather, he is showing that Jesus' work is effective and sufficient such that people from every tribe and tongue and nation, Jew and Gentile alike, past and present and future believers will be saved (Rev. 7:9-10, Is. 11:9). Even the earth itself experiences the grace of God (Rom. 8:20-22).

Knowing That We Know

Jesus said that eternal life was to know the only true God and Jesus Christ whom He sent (John 17:3). So, John moves right from claims about Christ as our propitiation to giving assurance to Christians about whether they know Him. Do you know God? How can you tell, how do you experience, how do you know that you know Him as Lord and Savior? "To know that we have come to know God means that we have a *full experience* of being in a right relationship with him, and that we are *assured* of being in a right relationship with him." The proof, the assurance is simply if we keep His commandments. We don't know we know Him by thinking about knowing Him. Those who know Jesus, who love Him, obey Him (cf. John 14:15). The fruit of knowing God is obedience to Him. ~~We can look to the fruit of our lives for assurance of whether or not we know Him.~~ We are not saved because we keep His commandments. We keep His commandments because He saved us, and we love Him. It is the fruit of our faith.

John issues another warning, though. If we claim to know Jesus, but do not keep His commandments and live disobedient lives, we are liars. This is one way in which we bear God's name in vain.

One of God's commands that we need to learn to obey and walk in is confessing our sins (1 John 1:9; cf. Lev. 5:5, Num. 5:7). Again, like in the previous passage, John is not arguing that if you ever sin as a Christian, you are a liar and do not know God. He is saying that if we refuse to obey God, to repent from our sin, to call it what God calls it, to confess it,

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then first, we have no assurance that we know Him. Second, if we find ourselves claiming, “I know Jesus, I have a personal relationship with Him,” while not keeping His commands, then we are indeed lying and the truth is not in us (cf. John 8:42-44).

Perfected Love

John returns to those who do actually keep God’s word in v. 5. Whoever keeps Jesus’ word, in him the love of God is perfected. There are a number of questions about this phrase. First, commentators disagree over whether it is God’s love for us or our love for God. But perhaps the ambiguity here is not incidental. Just like God works in us to work out our salvation (Phil. 2:12-13), so too He loves us such that we love Him (1 John 4:19). It seems that John is first speaking of God’s love for us, but knowing that His love engenders our love. Second, the term “perfected” here means more “completed” than our idea of pristine or without flaw. John means that the love of God has accomplished its purpose. John later says that we love God because He first loved us (4:19). He loved us and so sent His Son to die for us (4:10). We have already seen that we love Him in return by obeying Him. So God’s love is perfected and completed when we turn to Him and love Him and know Him by keeping His commandments. Similarly, our love reaches its end, its goal in keeping His word, in obedience. Because God’s love is not given once and then it’s over, it is continually being perfected, reaching a completion, in our obedience to Him.

Again, we have assurance of our fellowship and relationship with God (“we are in Him”) by keeping His word. In other words, we walk just as Christ Himself walked (v. 6; cf. John 14:31, John 15:10). This is in contrast with what John said in v. 4. The fruit of our lives should line up with our claims. If we claim we know God and abide in Him, it should be obvious in how we live.

The term to “abide” can also be simply translated as “remain.” Do you remain in Christ? Do you remain with Him, walking with Him, walking in His ways? Having been baptized into Him, do you remain there? We prove it by walking as He walked, “looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith” (Heb. 12:1-2). In all of this, we do not keep His commandments or walk as He walked as the cause by which we know Him and abide in Him. Rather, we keep and walk as the result or the fruit of His love (cf. 4:19), and also as the providential means of furthering our love and knowledge of Him.

Conclusion

So what does it mean to know God? If the Spirit is working in us, I think we want to experience what it is to know God. John instructs us here how to have a full experience and assurance that we have a relationship of love and friendship with Christ. We experience our relationship with God by obeying Him. Do you want to know God better? Do you want to experience God? Don’t wait for the assurance in order to obey.

There is a temptation to think that you only really know God or experience Him by dropping what you’re doing and going and doing “Christian ministry.” Or, you only really know Him through some wild and ecstatic experience. This is not what the Scriptures indicate, though. Actually, we experience and have assurance of our relationship with God by obeying Him in whatever it is He calls you to. You grow in your knowledge of God, in your relationship with Him, *in* your work, *in* your vocation, not apart from it. It is in this way that you know Him and that you abide in Him.