

# Footsteps of Jesus

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## **Text:**

I John 2:3-11

And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments.

4. Whoever says "I know him" but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him,

5. but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may know that we are in him:

6. whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked.

7. Beloved, I am writing you no new commandment, but an old commandment that you had from the beginning. The old commandment is the word that you have heard.

8. At the same time, it is a new commandment that I am writing to you, which is true in him and in you, because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining.

9. Whoever says he is in the light and hates his brother is still in darkness.

10. Whoever loves his brother abides in the light, and in him there is no cause for stumbling.

11. But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes.

## **Introduction:**

We are studying the First Epistle of John following his own stated reason for writing it, namely that we might have fellowship with God and with one another, and that we might know the full joy that comes from living in fellowship with God, Jesus Christ and others. Two things are necessary, says John, if we are to experience this fellowship. First we must walk in the light, secondly we must walk as children of God. To walk in the light and to walk as children of God requires of us that:

1. We Must Renounce Sin (1:8 – 2:2)
2. We Must Obey God and Love (2:3 – 11)
3. We Must Reject the World (2:12 – 17)
4. We Must Keep the Faith (2:18 – 29)

And that:

1. We Must Renounce Sin (3:4 – 9)
2. We Must Obey God (3:10 – 24)
3. We Must Reject the World (4:1 – 6)
4. We Must Love (4:7 – 5:4)
5. We Must Keep the Faith (5:1 – 13)

The past several weeks we have been considering the first condition: to renounce sin. We saw that John's teaching about the renunciation of sin was organized around three false claims and a counter-claim indicated by an "if", "but if" pattern in 1:5-2:2. They are:

- 1:6-7 "If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin."

- 1:8-9 “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. (but) If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”
- 1:10 -2:1 “If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us. My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.”

We are now ready to move to the second major condition for walking in the light. We must obey God’s commandments. Again we find a series of three claims. This time the claims are indicated by the expression “whoever says”. This time the claims are not patently false, but potentially true. They are true if the condition of obedience is being met. The three are:

- **2:4-5** “Whoever says "I know him" but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him, but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may know that we are in him:”
- 2:6 “Whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked.”
- 2:9-11 “Whoever says he is in the light and hates his brother is still in darkness. Whoever loves his brother abides in the light, and in him there is no cause for stumbling. But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes.

We may begin by making some general observations about the passage as a whole. The first thing we notice is that this the opposite face of the coin to the passage we just studied. Renouncing sin always implies a positive obedience. It is not enough to not do wrong, we must also do right. God’s commands are both prohibitions of wrongdoing and commands of right doing. We are not just to “have no other God’s before me”, but also to “love the Lord thy God with all thy heart soul and mind.” Sin is both commission and omission. It is doing the things we ought not to do, but it is also not doing the things we should do. The

catechism says: “sin is any lack of conformity unto, or transgression of the law of God”. A common pattern in Paul’s Epistles is an instruction to “flee” sin followed by an exhortation to “pursue” righteousness. In fact the best way, perhaps the only effective way, to avoid sin is to be actively seeking to do the will of God, to be pursuing righteousness.

A second observation is that as some were making false claims about sin, they have also misunderstood the place of obedience. Each of the claims being made indicates a right relationship with God. In our way of speaking, even though there are nuances of difference between the three, we could read it each time “if we say that we are saved”. We will take up the precise meaning of each of the claims as we come to them, but this is essentially what they mean.

A third general observation is that just as the sin that we were talking about was sin as a pattern, as a habit, so here the obedience we are talking about is obedience as a pattern or a habit. It is in the present tense. The idea is that the person who knows God, who abides in Christ, is listening to and obeying what God is saying to him, what Christ has and is showing him by his life and by his teaching. This is the normal pattern of the Christian life. It does not mean that we are perfectly obedient. The imperfection in our obedience may come from an imperfect understanding of the commands we are to obey, but in as far as we understand what God is asking us to do, our hearts are obedient. It is our sincere desire to be obedient, to do the will of God.

Finally we should note the overall pattern of the obedience that John speaks of. First he speaks of obeying God’s commands, then of keeping his word, then of walking as Christ walked, and finally of loving our brother or sister. These things are all related and they are progressive. Obeying God’s commands make us think of the Old Testament and the law, but keeping his word takes it a step further. It becomes even clearer when we are told that we are to “walk as Christ walked”. The way we are to obey his commands and keep his word is the way that Christ did. Finally, we know that ultimately everything Christ did he did from love, so our obedience too, must always flow from our love for God and his love that is being completed in us.

## I. Whoever says: “I know him”

All of these claims, we will see, are rooted in John’s Gospel. It is possible that those who are making these claims falsely are misusing what they have been previously taught. As we stated earlier to “know” God is to have eternal life. It is in the clearest terms “to be saved”. Jesus prayed in John 17:3: “And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent”. This verse helps us resolve two things. First that knowing God is equivalent to having eternal life, and secondly to be able to identify the “him” of verse 4 with both the Father and the Son. The two are closely associated in John’s writings. To know one is to know the other, to deny one is to deny the other. We know the Father by knowing the Son and when we know them we have eternal life.

The word “knowledge” was a key word for a set of false ideas and teachings that infected early Christianity. They are known under the name of Gnosticism. The word “Gnosticism” comes from the Greek work for knowledge. It was a complicated system, and it is not necessary that we spend a lot of time on it here, but it is helpful to understand two things. First the Gnostics sought salvation through secret knowledge acquired through special initiations. Secondly Gnostics believing they were saved by this special knowledge did not put an emphasis on the ethical life. “Gnosticism in any form is seldom concerned with moral behavior; redemption for the Gnostic involves a release from ignorance not sin” (Stephen Smalley, WBC, p. 52).

John may be directly confronting such false ideas when he says: “We know that we know him, if we keep his commands”. The evidence, John says of a true relationship with God is our obedience to the commands of God. Our keeping God’s commands is not the cause, but the effect of knowing God. We are not saved by what we do, by our works, but salvation always produces an inner change of heart that makes us obedient children of God. As stated earlier this obedience may be, and most likely will be, imperfect because of our imperfect understanding of God’s commands, but it is, nevertheless, a sure evidence of a right relationship with God.

## II. Ought Also to Walk as He Walked

The easiest way to grasp what it means to keep God's commands is to focus on verse 6: "whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked." Again the term "abide" comes from the teaching of John's Gospel, especially Jesus' image of the vine and the branches, where Jesus makes it clear that he abides in us when his words abide in us and that we abide in him when we are obedient to those words. This is what he says in John 15:10-11 "If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full". Notice how closely this parallels what we have been reading in I John. We abide in Christ by obedience to his commands. His obedience to the Father sets the pattern for our obedience, and the result of our obedience is fullness of joy.

Most likely, those to who John is writing had his Gospel and had received this teaching, and were perhaps even basing their wrong ideas upon it. They were claiming to "abide in Christ", but they were not "walking as he walked", they were not patterning their obedience on his obedience. John says this won't work. To abide in Christ, to be in fellowship with him and with the Father, we must "walk as he walked"

Perhaps the most important thing for us to see here is how God ultimately teaches us to walk, to live. He does not do it by giving us a list of rules to keep, but by becoming one of us and living among us. The best way to learn anything is by living example. Watching someone else do something makes it far easier to grasp the thing being learned than having it merely described in words. Jesus is our living example. For us that implies at least two things. First, if we are serious about following his example, about walking as he walked, we must be serious about getting to know him. Knowing him superficially will never lead to serious obedience. We must be like the Apostle Paul who says that his supreme goal in life is "to know him". Furthermore, to know him as he really is will require questioning some of our stereotypical ideas about him that may not be true, and

diligently seek to know him, not as contemporary culture imagines him, but as he is. Finally, we must remember that the way most of us first begin to come to know Christ is by seeing his life lived out in the lives of his followers. As we “walk as he walked”, we become examples to those observing us. Our lives are not our own. We are constantly influencing others for good or for evil. This is why it is so important that when we say that “we know him”, that we are “abiding in him” that we “walk as he walked.”