

Knowing God: *Can I Know God and Keep Sinning?*

1 John 2:1-14

Preached by Minister Jason Tarn to HCC on September 15, 2013

Introduction

- ❖ The story goes that one day the great scientist, Albert Einstein, was on a train heading out of town. As the conductor made his way through the car punching everyone's ticket, the brilliant, yet absent-minded, physicist was rummaging through his coat pockets and briefcase frantically searching for his ticket. It was nowhere to be found.
 - ▶ But the conductor reassured him, "*Don't worry, Dr. Einstein, we all know who you are. I'm sure you purchased a ticket. It's okay.*" And he went on down the aisle checking other passengers.
 - But as the conductor was about to move on to the next car, he looked back and saw Einstein on his hands and knees looking under his seat for his ticket. So he came back and gently said, "*Dr. Einstein, please don't worry about it. I know who you are.*" But Einstein looked up and said, "*Yes, I too know who I am, but what I don't know is where I am going.*"
- ❖ Do you know where you're going? That's the real question. So much of popular religion these days is just focused on knowing who you are – getting to know the real you. "*I want to know myself and be true to myself.*" But when you're lying on your deathbed, I guarantee the question you'll be asking is not "Who am I?" but "Where am I going?"
 - ▶ **When you're confronted with your own mortality, the question you have to deal with is not "Who am I?" but "Who is God and do I know him – that is, do I share a sweet communion with him that extends beyond this life?"**
 - Do I know with any confidence that, after I die, I will be in fellowship with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ for all eternity? (1:3) Or is there a chance that I'll be led away into eternal punishment where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth? (Mt. 25:30, 46)
- ❖ The Bible regularly raises this existential question in passages like ours. We began a series last week through First John, and today we're beginning chapter 2. Here we have an added factor. **Our passage suggests that a person may think he knows where he's going because he thinks he knows God, but in the end, he's self-deceived.**
 - ▶ This was a concern for John's readers. There were those in the church who had departed from the faith having been lured away by false teaching (2:19). And yet these individuals still claim to believe in Jesus, but John says it's a different Jesus than the one proclaimed by the eyewitnesses, by him and the rest of the apostles. So these people are lying to themselves in saying they know Jesus.
 - But that just begs the question: ***How then do we know if we really know Jesus?*** If it's possible for someone to say he knows him and yet be wrong, then could that happen to me? Could I be self-deceived?
- ❖ That's a good question that we shouldn't shy away from asking ourselves and each other. **2 Corinthians 13:5** tells us to, "*Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves.*" It goes without saying that this kind of self-testing is good for the soul. It'll reveal the state of your soul. So ask yourself: ***How can I know that I know God?***

Knowing That You Know

- ❖ Now before we answer, we need to address any objections out there of whether it's even possible to have such confidence to say, "*I know God. I know I share in fellowship with him. I know where I'm going in this life and the next. I know.*"
 - ▶ Some would call that arrogance. They'll say it's not possible to know. No one can know for sure that they're saved.

- ❖ *Why? Why do people think it's impossible to know that you know?* Because the default attitude that most people have towards religion is moralistic in nature. In other words, religion is about being a good person. It's about being good and doing good. It's about morality, producing good, selfless, moral individuals.
 - ▶ **It's fair to say that, in most religions, you're basically saved by your life.** Your salvation is based on how you lived your life – if it was lived in adherence to whatever standard is upheld in your faith tradition.
 - But if that's the case, then you don't really know if you've made it (you don't hear a verdict) until the end of your life when you stand before whoever or whatever is going to hold you accountable. In the present, there is no way to be certain. So the idea of saying, "I know," is arrogant. It's presumptuous.

- ❖ But here we have John the Apostle saying, in v3, here's how you know. "*By this we know that we have come to know him*". How can he say that? **First, because he knows that he knows God.** That's what he wrote in chapter one. I heard God. I saw him. I touched him when I touched God Incarnate, the man Christ Jesus. John's speaking out of personal experience.
 - ▶ **Second, he says you can know that you know because he knows that in Christianity you're not saved by your life. No, instead you're saved by someone else's life.** In Christianity, you're saved by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, who graciously took your place.
 - So you don't have to wait for that final day to hear a verdict over your life. You can know today that you know God, that you're saved – if Jesus is your Savior, if you're depending on his life to save you and not your own.

- ❖ John starts off chapter 2 grounding us in this truth. Look at v1, "*My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin.*" Notice he's addressing Christians, and he's writing with the expectation and hope that they won't sin.
 - ▶ But that's the problem. Christians do sin. We fall short. And it's because we struggle with sin that we're sometimes not sure if we know God in a saving way.

- ❖ John understands that fear. Listen to what he goes on to say, "*But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.*" Now here's hope! Here's God's provision to cover sin.
 - ▶ Not just sin in theory but that particular sin you recently committed, that sin that brings so much shame, that causes you to even question your salvation. Yes, that sin.

- ❖ It's for that sin (and others like it) that God has sent us an advocate. What Christians need most is an advocate. We don't need another Judge to come and justify us again, to render another verdict over us. We're not standing in a courtroom anymore.
 - ▶ **No, we're in a living room standing before our Father.** *Did you notice that in v1?* We have an advocate *with the Father*. Christians are children of God. What we need is not another verdict from a divine Judge but the forgiveness of a heavenly Father.

- ❖ Thankfully we have an advocate with the Father. And I like how John describes God as Father and Jesus as "*the righteous*". That runs counter to the unbiblical image many people have where they picture Jesus the Loving pleading with a firm, strict Judge, begging him to show mercy to Christians who fall into sin. But that's not what's happening at all.
 - ▶ **Rather it's Jesus the Righteous pronouncing before a loving Father that he is free to act with mercy towards his children who are covered by their Savior's blood and righteousness.** The Father is free to forgive without betraying justice because justice has been preserved through the sacrifice of his Son.

- ❖ Look at what John says in v2, "*He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.*" That word *propitiation* is a religious term that describes what sacrificial lambs in the Old Testament were intended to accomplish when they bore, in the place of sinners, the punishment of God against sin.
 - ▶ **But when Jesus came, he didn't just offer a propitiation for us – he became the propitiation.** He's not just the priest working on our behalf. He's the sacrifice dying on our behalf. He's the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (Jn. 1:29).

- ❖ So if you sin, as a Christian, it need not shatter all confidence of salvation. **You can be honest with your sin and still honestly know that you know.** Again, that's because you're not saved by your life but by an advocate who is at the Father's side, continually interceding for you and applying his once-for-all death to you.

- ❖ That's why John doesn't think it's presumptuous for Christians who sin to say they know God. **But he does go on to say that it would be presumptuous to say you do but then live like you don't.** You can be confident, but it has to be a chastened confidence that has been thoroughly examined. So John offers three diagnostic tests to help you know that you know.

- ❖ **First, there's the obedience test.** That's found in vv3-6. Here John says that you can claim to know God, but you're lying to yourself if you don't actually do as he says, if you don't keep his commandments (v4). His point is that if you really do know God, then your actions will prove it. The way you live will begin to conform in obedience to God's Word.
 - ▶ **Second, there's the love test.** That's in vv7-11. Here John is recalling how Jesus summed up the entire Law with two commands: Love God and love your neighbor. So the test goes like this: You can say you're living in the light, but if you've got hate and not love in your heart, it just goes to prove that you're still in the dark (v9).

- ❖ **Third, there's the truth test.** That's in vv18-27. We're not covering that today, but John is careful to include this test because there are plenty of people who obey all the rules and who are loving, nice people, and yet their beliefs don't accord with the truth. They see God as a harsh taskmaster or see Jesus as simply a good moral example. But that's a different God.
 - ▶ Yes, you have to walk the talk, but your talk itself has to accord with God's truth. All of us know nice, moral people who aren't Christians. Many of us, before we became Christians, we're nice, moral people. Yet we know that's not enough. You have to pass the truth test. All three need to be taken together.

The Obedience Test

- ❖ This morning we're just going to look at the first two tests, starting with the obedience test. Let's read v3 again, "*And by this we know that we have come to know him if we keep his commandments.*"
 - ▶ Now that conditional clause, "*if we keep his commandments*" is in the present tense. It's a continuous present reality. So you can know (present tense) that you have come to know God (past perfect) if you're presently keeping his commands.
- ❖ **Obedience to God is a necessary component in your salvation.** Don't let anyone fool you into thinking Christianity is about this easy-believism where all you have to do is know a bunch of facts about God and Jesus, and then just mentally agree.
 - ▶ Salvation is not just in the mind. We said, last week, that's what the Gnostics were teaching. They were saying the body is nothing. The mind/spirit is everything. And they claimed to have a secret knowledge from Jesus. What matters is learning this knowledge. What you do with your body, your actions, is inconsequential.
- ❖ But here John counters and says what you do with your body, your actions, your behavior, matters. If what you believe in the mind doesn't translate into obedience in the body, it means you don't really know what you claim to know.
 - ▶ **Obedience to God is necessary in salvation – not as a conditional cause – but it's a necessary result of being saved.** Obedience is not a condition you have to achieve before you can know God. But it is a sign. It's evidence that you do. So if you examine your life and there's no evidence of obedience, then you're fooling yourself to claim with any confidence that you know God in a saving way.
- ❖ So put yourself to the test. Ask yourself: ***Do I keep his commandments?*** Now in v4, John gives a negative example and then a positive one in v5. Let's read those verses, "*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.*" (vv4-5a)
- ❖ I realize "liar" is a strong word. It suggests a willfulness to deceive. But we'll see later in v11 that John's talking about a self-blindness, a lying to yourself. So he's not just calling out false, deceptive teachers. He's warning everyone of self-deception.

- ▶ But look in v5. There's a way to test yourself: If you keep God's Word, in you the love of God is perfected. I take that to mean that through your obedience, *your* love for God is perfected – made evident, visible (cf. 4:12). **The proof of your love for God is your loyal obedience to his Word.**

- ❖ Imagine if your boss went on a business trip and left you in charge of the office. He said while he's away, he'll send you instructions for how to manage the team and carry on the work. So your boss takes off. You're in charge. And for the next three months he emails you a weekly correspondence with careful instructions. But the day your boss returns, he find the office in shambles. Employees are shuffling in late or just absent. Phones are just ringing. Trash and empty pizza boxes are everywhere. And the boss' voicemail is filled with angry messages from upset clients. So he says to you, "*What happened? I thought I put you in charge. Didn't you get my weekly emails with all my instructions?*"
 - ▶ Imagine if you say to him, "Yes, of course I got them. Thank you for sending them. I love them. They were the first thing I read each morning. I love them so much I forwarded them to everyone else. We printed them out and posted them on the walls. We formed small groups to study what they said, and some of us are even memorizing them word for word. We love your instructions because we love you."

What's your boss going to say?

 - He'll call you a liar. **Actions speak louder than mere words, and they speak more truthfully.** The proof of your love is your obedience. Jesus said to his disciples, "*If you love me, you will keep my commandments.*" (Jn. 14:15)

- ❖ Look at vv5b-6. Here's the obedience test put differently. "*By this we may know that we are in him: whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked.*" In other words, we ought to walk the walk and not just talk the talk. We have to practice what we preach (Mt. 23:3). Yes, they're cliches, but they're true. They're biblical.
 - ▶ ***What would Jesus do?*** It's more than a slogan, more than a bracelet. It's an ethic by which Christians ought to walk in discipleship to Christ. If you say you abide in him (that you're in Christ), then you ought to walk in the same way in which he walked.

- ❖ Now I'm not saying you can't be confident that you know God unless you're perfectly obeying God's Word, unless you're perfectly imitating Jesus' life. You don't have to be perfect to have assurance. **Remember, you're not saved by your life, by your obedience. You're saved by Jesus' perfect life, by his perfect obedience even unto death.**
 - ▶ But the Bible does say that when you're saved, there is a necessary change that occurs in you. You become a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17). John describes it later in chapter 3 as being born of God. **When you become a Christian you receive a second birth where you get a new heart, with new inclinations and a new disposition that bends away from sin and towards obedience to God and his Word.**

- ❖ So examine yourself. ***What's your attitude towards God's Word?*** Is it your heart's desire to live in accordance with it? And is that desire reflected in your life? Are you striving to obey his every Word? If so, then be encouraged. That is one proof that you do indeed know God.
 - ▶ Then John's warning in this passage is not for you. It's not for those who gladly strive to keep God's Word and yet find themselves disobeying at times. He already said, in v1, that Christians do sin, and there he lifted our eyes up to our Advocate who is at the Father's side.

- ❖ **So this warning is not for Christians who sometimes disobey. No, it's for those who say they know God and yet don't care to obey.** It's for those who are selective in their obedience or dismissive altogether of God's commands.
 - ▶ If you don't care about what God's Word says, if you have no desire to keep it, if your life is not bent towards obedience, then you should take no comfort in this passage. Instead you should take its warning seriously.

- ❖ John is saying to you, "*Don't be deceived. You're not a Christian. Come to grips with that.*" Confess your sins, ask for that new birth, for a new heart, and trust that God is faithful and just to save you. *Examine yourself, to see whether you are in the faith.*

The Love Test

- ❖ The second test John puts forth is the love test. It's basically an extension of the first. If the obedience test is asking if you're keeping God's commandments, then the love test narrows this general, broad term "commandments" down the specific command to love.
 - ▶ Let's read vv7-8. *"⁷Beloved, 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. ⁸At 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."*

- ❖ Notice this specific commandment is described as being both old and new. ***So what is this new commandment that John is referring to that is actually really old?*** Well in 2 John he refers to it again, and spells it out clearly. Listen to **2 John 5**, "*And now I ask you, dear lady—not as though I were writing you a new commandment, but the one we have had from the beginning—that we love one another.*"
 - ▶ See the commandment is to love one another. That immediately brings to mind Jesus' words recorded in John's Gospel in chapter 13, where after washing his disciple's feet he says, "*A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another.*" (Jn. 13:34)

- ❖ But the biblical command to love is nothing new. It's found in the Torah (cf. Lev. 19:18). And as we said earlier, Jesus summed up the entire Old Testament Law with two commands: Love God and love your neighbor (Mt. 22:36-40). So it's old.

- ▶ But it's new in that now Jesus says his disciples are to love one another – *“just as I have loved you”*. Notice how John says in v8 that this new commandment is *“true in him”*. It's true in Jesus, that is, the command to love is exemplified in him and in the way he loved.

- ❖ But now in v9, John issues another warning. He warns that those who claim to be Christians (who say they're in the light) but hate others – are actually not Christians. Look at vv9-11, *“⁹Whoever says he is in the light and hates his brother is still in darkness. ¹⁰Whoever loves his brother abides in the light, and in him there is no cause for stumbling. ¹¹But 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.”*

- ❖ Our typical reaction is to think *“hate”* is a pretty strong word. You're probably thinking to yourself, *“I don't really hate anyone.”* I might not like everyone. There might be a few people I try to avoid. But I don't hate them. I'm just indifferent towards them.
 - ▶ But John will have none of that. He won't allow that kind of equivocation. Just notice the binary nature of this test. **You're either in darkness or in light. There's no twilight.** Likewise, you either hate your brother or love him. There's no middle ground. There are only two categories.
 - So that means if you're indifferent towards someone, if you don't care much for them, if you don't treat them with selfless, sacrificial, Christ-like love, then John says you actually hate them. Those are the only two categories.

- ❖ So put yourself to the test: ***Is there anyone that you hate?*** Perhaps you have true animosity for someone, or perhaps you're just avoiding them, pushing them away. ***Either way, are you content living in this darkness or are you striving to walk away and into light?*** Are you repenting of this attitude and asking God to help you love this person like Jesus loves?
 - ▶ If after honest self-examination, the answer comes up, “No”, then John says you're not a Christian. You're still in darkness. You still need Jesus to save you. I know that sounds harsh, but it's love that motivates John to talk this way
 - He says in v11 that the darkness has blinded you. You've been deceived. So the most loving thing to do is to let the light of God's Word shine a spotlight on you, even if it's uncomfortable and hard to look at.

- ❖ So that's the warning, but the love test can also offer comfort and confidence. Look at v10. Those who claim to be Christians – and demonstrate it by their actual love for one another – confirm that they *are* Christians.
 - ▶ Now we're not just talking about love in general. Yes, Christians are to love everyone, but the love John's talking about – the kind that tells you if you know the Father – is love for his children, brotherly love for other Christians.

- ❖ Remember what Jesus told his disciples. “*By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.*” (Jn. 13:35). **So it’s our brotherly love for one another (for fellow believers) that will reveal to all people (including ourselves) that we are genuine disciples of Jesus.**
 - ▶ So is your life is characterized by love, particularly for other Christians? And don't picture Christians in the abstract. Im talking about the ones sitting next to you right now. The ones in your small group or fellowship. Are demonstrating love for these?
 - And I’m talking about a love that’s tangible, that’s selfless and sacrificial, a love that serves. If you have that kind of love in your life, then that’s one more proof that you really do know God. You pass.

Conclusion

- ❖ *So how are you going to respond to this passage?* Some of you have been awoken to the shocking reality that you’re not a Christian because your life is not characterized by obedience to God’s word. The disposition of your heart is not bent away from sin (hate in particular) and towards obedience (love in particular).
 - ▶ It doesn’t matter what you profess, or what or who you claim to know. You’re actions are speaking louder and truer than your words.
 - What should you do? Confess your sins to God and know that he is faithful and just to forgive your sins and cleanse you from all unrighteousness. He’ll give you a new birth and a new heart. A heart that longs to obey.
- ❖ Others of you are Christians who are struggling with assurance. You’re not sure if you really know God. Well if you’ve turned to Jesus and confessed your sins but can't say that you know that you know, then put yourself to these tests and do it in this way:
- ❖ Ask yourself: ***What is one thing that I know God has been asking me to do that I’ve been resisting to do?*** That one thing that is the last thing your flesh wants to do right now. Now if you actually did it, if you obeyed with a glad and willing heart, then that would be strong evidence that you do indeed know God.
 - ▶ As well ask yourself: ***What is one thing I can do to show brotherly love to other believers in this church?*** That one thing that is so unnatural to you in your flesh. Now if you actually did it, if you obeyed with a glad and willing heart, then that would be strong proof that you do indeed are walking in the light.
- ❖ Identify that one thing and then go to God and pray this prayer with me, “*Lord, grant me a willing heart. Grant me obedience to your Word and a sincere love for my brothers and sisters in this church. Grant me this that I may be sure that I know you and more importantly that you, Father, know me as your child. Amen.*”