

## Walking in the Light [PP1] I John 2:3-11

### Introduction:

In 1981 as a young missionary in Poland, I had hit rock bottom, emotionally, spiritually, experientially. I was in a new country, I could not speak the language, I was on a very dysfunctional ministry team. And you could not even buy coffee or chocolate, not to mention toilet paper! God seemed far away. My self-worth crumbled into dust. I was walking in the snow in Warsaw, crying my heart out. When my tears ran dry, I found words to express my pain. I told God, "Everything I had you have taken away. All I have left is you." And God broke his silence. He said three words: "Is that enough?" I paused for a moment, then replied, "It is enough. I will go on." And so I did. But the memory of my pain was so great, I did everything I could to keep from hurting that badly again. As a result, my world was safe but sterile. I went on existing but not truly living. The walls I built to protect myself shut me up in a world of darkness, without beauty, without joy, without love. I wish I could go back and share today's message with my younger self.

In our passage from last week, John challenged us to respond to God who is light by living in the light. This starts when we renounce sin. We cannot avoid the *fact* of sin, but we can avoid its *practice*. Nevertheless, when we do sin, there is still hope for us, because God's forgiveness is granted to us through his Son, Jesus Christ.

But Jesus did more than reconcile us with God, who is light. He made it possible for us to walk in the light. Christ has given us new life, a new nature and new desires. Just as he promised, we can experience the presence and power of his Holy Spirit. He has given us freedom and the power to live righteously, according to God's law, and especially the law of love. And as John will explain in our text for today, to live righteously is to live in love, in right relationship to God and to others.

### Text:

**I John 2:3-6 (3) By this we know that we have come to know him [Jesus], 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.**

### Commentary:

John says that if we truly know Jesus we will obey his commandments. If we don't obey his commandments, we don't really know Him. This is the first test of whether we know God: "we can know our relationship with God is real if we obey his directions as a lifestyle".

[PP2]: In this passage John moves from theology to ethics. He is writing against two errors: pre-gnostic antinomianism (which claimed that righteousness is unimportant) and legalism (righteousness consists of following rules). To counter both errors, John writes that moral obedience is the first standard by which one's spiritual life can be measured.

**Here in 2:3** we find the first of 25 occurrences in 1 John of the verb γινώσκειν (“to know”). Pre-gnosticism taught that salvation was gained by obtaining secret knowledge (*gnosis*). Knowledge was pursued for its own sake, and ethical behavior was regarded as unimportant. Redemption involves a release from ignorance, not from sin. When John describes how to “be sure that we know him”, he takes the gnostics’ own terms and fills them with Christian meaning. [PP3]

- “Knowledge” of God is not intellectual and speculative, but experimental and dynamic.
- “Knowledge of God” is not abstract, but historical.
- “Knowing God” is not a matter of correct thinking, but of genuine spiritual *relationship*.

In chapter one John made it clear that no one is sinless (1:8–2:2). Obedience is not the *condition* for knowing God; it is what characterizes those who do know God. What counts is not the *amount* of our knowledge of God, but the direction of that knowledge. What matters is not perfect obedience to God, but the daily practice of obedience.

Looking ahead, in I John 2:4-9 we find three bases for one's claims to know God. [PP4]

- 2:4 Anyone who says, “I know him,” must be obedient.
- 2:6 Anyone who claims to abide in him, must live as Jesus lived.
- 2:9 Anyone who claims to be in the light, must love his brother.

All three claims restate the fundamental Christian claim: to know God is to be properly related to him through Christ. Each claim has its own condition, which *tests* the primary Christian obligation of obedience. To obey God's laws (2:4) involves Christlikeness (2:6), and love, which is the summation of God's moral law (2:9).

**2:4.** In I John 1:10 we read that to say we are sinless is to call God a “liar. Here in 2:4 John says claiming a relationship to God while living immorally is to make oneself a “liar”. Truth here is more than knowledge or facts; it is an active principle. Truth describes a certain “genuineness”, a reality which is not philosophical or abstract, but rather practical and concrete.

**2:5** The proper response to our knowledge of God is obedience to God's *word*. The true Christian responds positively not just to God's moral law, but to the totality of his self-disclosure in Jesus Christ. By moving the object of obedience from God's law to God's

word, and ultimately to Christ, John speaks against his readers' tendency towards legalism. [PP5]

John writes that God's love is fulfilled in those whose attitudes and actions are shaped by their knowledge of Jesus Christ. Obedient Christians do not just *know things about* God; over time God's love attains completeness and maturity in their lives. If we love God we *want* to obey him, and we *desire* to continue to love and obey him. Loving and obeying is an active process that lasts a lifetime, because we will never reach sinless "perfection" this side of heaven.

5b: But how can we be sure that we exist (live) in him? This phrase may refer back to the first part of verse 5; we know, because we are living obediently. More likely it points ahead to 2:6: we know because we are living as Jesus lived. Either way, both are true. We show that we exist in God by living obediently, that is by living as Jesus lived. Christian obedience is worked out in practice by following Christ, by imitating Him, by being his disciple.

**In 2:6** we find another version of the Christian's claim to know God. Knowing God presupposes an intimate relationship with him through Jesus, which is lasting and continuous. How can such a claim be judged true? We "must (live) ... as he lived." The proof of union with Christ is the imitation of Christ. Abiding in Christ means to live in obedience to him, and the result is growing in Christlikeness. [PP6]

John's readers were familiar with his Gospel, so they knew a lot about how Christ lived. But it's not enough to know about God, nor to obey his word. We must follow the example of his Son. As John Stott writes, "We cannot claim to abide in him unless we behave like him". Obedient discipleship is: (1) modeled on the life of Christ and (2) is made possible because of our union with Christ. Christ's life and death has made it possible to imitate him.

Knowing Jesus means both an initial change in the direction we are travelling, and an ongoing change in how we travel through life. This is what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called "costly discipleship". [PP6]

**I John 2:7-11 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 that 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.**

So far John has argued that obedience to God is a good test of whether we truly know him. Now he goes on remind us that God's law is summed up in the command to love.

This love was best demonstrated in the life and ministry of Jesus, whom we as believers are called to imitate.

**2:7-8** In John's Gospel Jesus declared: "A new commandment I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another." Both there and in this letter, John emphasizes the importance of love. The practice of love functions as a "social" test of Christian commitment, and as an apt description of what it means to obey God's word. But why does John first say this is an old commandment, and then turn right around and declare that is a new one?

The law of love is not new. It is found in the Jewish Torah. John's readers also knew Jesus' teaching about love, which John himself often repeated. So John can write, "this old law is the message which you have heard." Love is the essence of the gospel, and the primary charge Jesus gave his disciples. By referring to the "old" law of love, John counters the tendency to treat Christian obedience in a legalistic way. He is saying, "We don't receive eternal life by *being* obedient. Once we are Christians, we *want* to be obedient."

**2:8** What then is new about this commandment? First, God's love for us was demonstrated in a new way by Jesus' offering himself as our sacrifice. Secondly, Jesus fulfilled the law through obedience, and the heart of obedience is love. Thirdly, Jesus made it possible for believers to live a new kind of life, which strives to practice unselfish, Christlike love. [PP7]

The OT prophets declared that God would write his law not on stone tablets, but on human hearts. This new law is an active principle of loving God and others. It is not external but internal. It is not static, but dynamic. This new commandment, John says, is true in you and in him, because Jesus, the light of the world, brought light into darkness. And the light that once shone in his life, now shines in you! This is indeed a "new" law, not a new legalism!

**In 2:9** we find the third version of the Christian's claim to know God, that is to "be in the light". This also comes with a test: If you hate your brother you are still in darkness. In John 12:46 Jesus said, "I have come into the world as a light, so that no one who believes in me should stay in darkness". John refers here to "being in the light" in order to counter gnostic claims about "knowing God" and therefore being "enlightened." The Gnostics claimed secret "knowledge" of God. John writes that true "enlightenment" is to share in the very life of God in Christ. And this means to embrace the daily challenge and opportunity to grow in Christian character and love.

In the New Testament "brothers" always refers to Christians. Although John wrote primarily here to address problems in a church community he himself had established, the command to love your brothers and sisters does not *exclude* those outside the Church. If we claim to live in the light, we must love others, both our friends and our enemies, just as Christ loved us when we were still his enemies. Remember the parable of the Good Samaritan, by which Jesus taught the rich young ruler that "the question is

not “who is my brother”, but rather to whom can I be a brother through my attitudes and actions.” [PP8]

“We remain in darkness” when we claim to live in the light yet hate other people. The light is shining, but we choose to remain in darkness. By this, we show that our own character is infected by darkness, not by light. Hate is a strong word. But where sympathy and love are absent, dislike and hatred will inevitably grow. Hatred takes many forms, beginning with irritation, frustration, disappointment. We soon grow to look down on others, to judge them, and in the end to despise them. And our hateful attitudes become hateful words and hateful conduct.

Hatred affects not only our families, our friends, our social contacts. Our entire society is fractured by hatred and division, whether it be political, social, theological, or economic. Even the pandemic has caused people to take sides and judge one another. Is it still possible to agree to disagree? Can we still experience unity in our diversity? Can we confess our sins to one another without fear of being shamed and rejected? Can we confront sin in others without gossip and slander? Can we respond honestly and sincerely when others confront us with our own sin?

**In 2:10-11** John tells us how we can do better. He says: “Whoever loves his brother remains in the light.” To abide in the light is to practice love for others, to do what helps them to walk in the light, so they too can practice love and not hatred. God’s love for us is the basis of our love for each other. Love is a sure sign that we have a living faith and a personal knowledge of God.

John says there is no cause for stumbling in those who abide in the light. He could mean that believers won’t trip over their own feet. Or that they won’t cause others to fall into sin. Both meanings are possible and perhaps intended. When we walk in the light we can see where we are going. Thus we avoid both stumbling and causing others to stumble. [PP9]

John concludes with a negative warning. To hate your brother is worse than being lost in the darkness; it means to walk around in darkness, to make the darkness your home. A lack of love for others demonstrates a lack of love for God. To hate others is to cut ourselves off from the light and love of God. Hating others is like blindly staggering around in the darkness. Those who hate have lost their way, and do not know “where they are going.” When we “lose our way” spiritually, when we ignore God’s signposts that point us back in the right direction, we drift further and further away from the light.

As John writes, living in darkness makes our eyes blind. We are not blinded by the light, but by the darkness. [PP10] We have become like the blind fish that live at the bottom of the ocean. We are like the Gnostics, who were blind even though they claimed to see.

Hatred inevitably produces more hatred, and the possibility of loving becomes increasingly remote. As is often true in Jewish thought, John here describes God’s method of dealing with those who insist on going their own way. God does not cut

himself off from us or block our way back to him. We isolate ourselves from God's love by our own failure to love God and others.

***Conclusion:***

John's message in this passage is quite practical. Our claim to be in the light must be worked out in our everyday lives. Faith and love belong together. We "remain in the light" by practicing obedience to God through Christ (2:9–10). When we can abide in God who is light, we remain in constant communion with him and we practice Christ-like love for others.

William Law once said: "Though the immediate effect of the light is to expose sin, its primary purpose is to reveal duty". This is true, but would I argue together with John that duty is not the ultimate purpose of the light. God shines his light into our lives so that we can live in right relationship with God and with others. [PP11]

Remember the story I began with today? Two years later, I was driving along a country road in the mountains. The sunset was stunning, so I stopped to take a picture. As I stood there in awe of the beauty of God's creation, it was as if someone suddenly plunged a knife into my chest. I was stabbed in the heart - by joy. And for the first time in two years, I stood naked and vulnerable in the face of God's love.

I realized then that I had a choice. I could turn away from the light, and further darken the windows of my heart. I would again be safe from pain, but at what cost? I would continue to live in that shadow world, where the only colors are shades of grey. Or I could welcome the light. I could once again risk knowing joy and sorrow, pleasure and pain, love and loss.

Each and every day we choose light or darkness. The light of that sunset did not blind me. Instead, it opened my eyes, and more importantly my heart.

Jesus asks each one of us today: Are you blinded by the darkness in which you chose to live in? Come back to the light. Because the one who loves abides in the light, that is abides with Me. Come back to Me! I'm waiting for you and my arms are open wide. [PP12]