

Sermon Series: Flourishing Fellowship with God: A Study in 1 John

Sermon Title: Flourishing fellowship trades plateaued living for the pathway of obedience.

Scripture: 1 John 2:3-11

Pre-Introduction: Mountain hiking on Horn Peak, CO

Main Introduction: Themes in 1 John include

- The Confession of the Christian
- The Commandment of the Christian
- The Conduct of the Christian
- The Conflict of the Christian
- The Confidence of the Christian

Sub-Introduction: Gary Burge wrote, “If John’s first exhortation (1:8–2:2) had in mind the secessionists who were making false theological claims about themselves and God, this second exhortation is aimed primarily at the believers in his church, the Christians who have remained under his tutelage but have been influenced by the debates in the congregation. Therefore, even though the tone is somewhat less polemical, it still maintains the rhetorical style of the earlier verses.”¹ While I agree with Burge that John has those who seceded from the church in mind throughout the letter, I don’t think there’s even one sentence in the letters of John where he doesn’t have the believing community as his primary audience. I do think Burge is right to identify three assertions with which John is concerned in 2:3–11: “I know him,” “I live in him,” and “I am in the light” (2:4, 6, 9).²

Compared to only four in verses 1:1–4, there are eleven first-person, plural, present tense verbs in 1:5–10, indicating a shift in the identity of the “we” in John’s writing from this point. Exegetically, readers can see that John has shifted focus from his apostolic introduction of the experience of the Twelve with the Lord Jesus Christ during his earthly ministry to his current ministry context in the late first century with his contemporary companions and churches. This continues in our text today, 2:3–11.

John’s dualism between light and darkness continues in chapter 2. While theologian Udo Schnelle has some views on authorship that I do not share, I think his insights about Paul responding to gnostic elements in the pastoral epistles and about John’s engagement with “Gnostic systems” are helpful.³ Schnelle wrote, “The creation precedes the ‘darkness,’ and thus is not considered, as in the Gnostic systems, a work of ‘darkness.’ ‘Light’ and ‘darkness’ are constituted as such in view of revelation, as positive response or rejection, so that the dualizing tendency in the Johannine writings, in contrast to that of the Gnostic writings, has no protological (“first knowledge” or original knowledge”) significance but must be understood as a function of Johannine Christology. *God’s gracious turning to the world in Jesus Christ precedes every dualism!* In the Fourth Gospel, no anti-worldly dualism is temporally or factually prior to the revelatory event; rather, in response to the revelation, a separation occurs between the believing community and the world that has become hardened by its own unbelief.”⁴ That is to say, “light” and “darkness” is not some kind of first order principle preceding the creation and therefore

¹ Gary M. Burge, *The NIV Application Commentary: Letters of John*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 95.

² Burge, *Letters of John*, 95.

³ Udo Schnelle, *Theology of the New Testament*, trans. M. Eugene Boring, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 684.

⁴ Schnelle, *Theology of the New Testament*, 684.

dividing unseen things into “light” and visible, material things into “darkness.” Rather, creation was made by him who is light. For John, the dualism of light and dark is related to one’s response to God’s revelation of his Son.

I. Howard Marshall reminds us of the aim and audience of John’s writing in his first letter, “The writer’s aim is to proclaim this life so that readers may have ‘fellowship’ with ‘us’ and thus share in their fellowship with God the Father and with the Son. This would appear at first sight to be an evangelistic aim, the sharing of the message that offers life with those who are not yet in a positive relationship with God. Nevertheless, the letter seems to be addressed more to those who are already Christian believers with the aim of helping them to persist in their faith, to develop further in it and to avoid being led astray by people with wrong teachings and a sub-Christian way of life.”⁵

Need: Obedience.

- Burge is generally helpful here, where he wrote, “Theological orthodoxy, no matter how stringent, is hazardous if it is not linked to a living Christian faith.”⁶ However, I would want to add that the very root of the problem with those who seceded is that they are marked by a falsehood that led to a consistently false lifestyle. Contextually, I believe, it was their failure in true Christology that led to a failure in the life of love. Obedience is native to sound doctrine. It springs from it. When obedience doesn’t flow from doctrine, then there is indeed a problem. I think what John has shown us in his first letter is that darkness of conduct flows from darkness in confession. The lack of love from those who left the church and from those who stopped showing hospitality to the believing community originated from a departure from apostolic Christology. Put simply, when we get Christ wrong, we get the Christian life wrong. When we notice that we have the Christian life wrong, we should take a serious look (again) at the biblical presentation of the doctrine of Christ.

Subject: Assurance in our fellowship with God

- In 1 John, there is a relationship between obedience and assurance. Many times, the statements showing the relationship between obedience and assurance are grammatically found in conditional constructions, like we saw in 1:6–2:2 (“If . . . then”). This conditional construction appears again in 2:3 and twenty times in all in 1 John (cf. 1:6-2:1; 2:3, 15a, 15b, 24, 28-29; 3:2, 20-21; 4:12, 20; 5:14-16). Nineteen of twenty times, the word “if” is followed by a verb in the subjunctive mood (everywhere except 2:15a). This makes the corresponding statements about reality (in the indicative mood) contingent upon the condition (e.g., John 2:3 in the THGNT reads, “καὶ ἐν τούτῳ γινώσκουμεν ὅτι ἐγνώκαμεν αὐτόν, ἐὰν τὰς ἐντολὰς αὐτοῦ τηρῶμεν.” John 2:3 in the ESV reads, “And by this we know that we have come to know him (indicative statement about reality), if we keep his commandments (contingent condition necessary to realize the potential of the reality).” John utilized these contingent conditional constructions to show readers what is characteristic of a

⁵ I. Howard Marshall, *New Testament Theology*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 533. Marshall goes on in footnote 9, “The existence of a group of people, at least some of whom had left the congregation(s) addressed, who fell short of John’s understanding of Christian belief and behavior is a fixed point in interpretation of 1 John and 2 John. Greater precision is difficult to achieve . . . In my view it is most probable that we have to do with some people who were unable to believe that Jesus was truly the Messiah and the Son of God come in human form, who attached considerable importance to Spirit-inspired utterances in the congregational meetings, and whose standard of Christian love within the community was low; it may be that these three characteristics were found in one and the same group of people, but this is not certain.”

⁶ Burge, *Letters of John*, 96.

joyfully mature life in the light of biblical Christology in contrast to a life in the darkness of false christologies.

Biblical Idea: Jesus Christ secured and **showed** believers how to live in fellowship with assurance.

Evidence of Fellowship Found in Obedience (2:3-6)

- The Fellowship of **Knowing** God – “Whoever says, ‘I know him’” (v. 4).
 - The shift in the identity of the “we” moves from the past to the present.
 - Duplicity is darkness, where truth is not found.
 - Consistency is light, where truth results in love.
 - "Love of God is being perfected."
 - Τελειόω—to overcome or supplant an imperfect state of things by one that is free fr. objection, *bring to an end, bring to its goal/accomplishment*.⁷
 - Parsing: 3 person, singular, perfect (intensive), passive (divine), indicative (mood of reality)
- The Fellowship of **Abiding** in God – “Whoever says, ‘I abide in him’” (v. 6).
 - Comparison with Jesus clarifies the character of abiding with God.
 - Which human in all of history serves as our best example of a life that abides with God? Is it Abraham? David? Solomon? Peter? Paul? John
 - No, they would all say to us, look to Jesus; he has shown us what it looks like for a human to walk in the light, to flourish in fellowship, obedience, and abide in God.

Transition: The four kinds of (spiritual) people – the Mature, the Natural, the Infant, and the Carnal

Exposition of the Key Commandment for Fellowship (2:7–8)

- It is not **new**.
- It is **old**.
- It is from the **beginning**.
- It is the new old commandment in the sense of what is **happening** with darkness and light. For Jesus and his followers, the darkness is disappearing, and the light is already shining. This is a reference, I believe, to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ in his first coming. The light is now shining and will continue to shine to his second coming and into the eternal state.

Transition: Marshall wrote, “The God who is light is also love. To live in love is the way to have confidence before God. To fail to love one’s Christian brothers and sisters is an indication of an imperfect love for God, since loving God entails keeping his command(s) to love his children. His commands are in principle fulfillable because we have been born of God and have faith in him.”⁸

Examples Regarding the Commandment in Fellowship (2:9–11)

- The Fellowship in the Light - "Whoever says, 'I am in the light'" (v. 9).
 - **Duplicity** about loving your brother or sister is characteristic of the darkness that is disappearing.
 - **Consistency** about loving your brother or sister is characteristic of the light that is shining.

⁷BDAG, s.v. “τελειόω,” 996.

⁸ Marshall, *New Testament Theology*, 536.

- Disobedience about loving your brother or sister is characteristic of the blinding darkness that is disappearing.

Theological Tension: The relationship between assurance and obedience makes us uncomfortable.

Theological Truth: Obedience characteristically (not conditionally) completes assurance.

- Knowledge of God finds completion in obedience.
- Love of God finds completion in obedience.
- Abiding in God finds completion in obedience.

Theological Purpose: To demonstrate the timeless relationship between assurance and obedience.

Make It Personal: Trade plateaued living for the pathway of obedience.

Need: Obedience

Subject: Assurance in our fellowship with God

Purpose: To experience a quality of assurance consistent with Christ's pathway of obedience

- Trade plateaued practices of confession for the pathway of Christ's advocacy (1:6–2:2).
- Trade plateaued learning for the pathway of keeping God's commandments (cf. Matt. 5–7; the Great Commandment; the Great Commission; the Filling of the Spirit in Gal. 5).
- Trade plateaued love for the pathway of keeping God's word (John 14:23–24; 1 Jn. 3:23; 5:1).
- Trade plateaued living for the pathway of behavior like that of Jesus (Jn. 8:12, 11:9; 12:35; 1:7).

Closing: "The true summit" of Christological witness and Spirit-led obedience