

Prayer

So many people have misunderstood You for so long, Lord Jesus, because our witness to you is often fragile and ineffectual. Forgive our silence when we should speak about You clearly, our timidity when faced with challenges that demand courage, our hesitancy when asked to give an account of our faith. Renew us each day by the power of Your Holy Spirit, and grant us the bravery to stand out as Your people in this troubled world. AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Finance

Pray for the financial systems of the world, and pray that after recent events, higher standards of probity and integrity will prevail throughout the world, for the sake of all.

On-going prayers

- *Pray for those planning ahead for the potential flu pandemic*
- *Give thanks for the people that you meet during the day*
- *Pray for Europe as the results of its elections are declared*

Meditation

Have you noticed the enormous difference
Between the two great halves of the Word of God,
The Testaments of our Bible, Old and New?

There is no difference in the God we find in each,
No difference in His character, His love or justice, and also
No great change within the type of people, good and bad.

The one great difference there for all to see, is this;

The God who worked through ancient Kings and prophets
Never reached His goal by working down from top to bottom
Salvation never came to all despite the earth's best leaders.

Instead, with Jesus, the Lord God started from the bottom,
Reaching all through One so human that His life and death,
And life again, affected individual people, one by one:

So now,

Salvation comes because Christ's love is touchable by all,
And faith works face to face, for God is found in people.

Bible Study - 1 John 2:3-6

³ Now this is how we may be certain that we know Him; if we keep His commandments, ⁴ and whoever says, 'I have come to know Him,' but does not obey His commandments is a liar, and the truth is not to be found in him. ⁵ But whoever obeys His Word, the love of God has truly been completed in him. This is how we may be sure that we are in Him: ⁶ whoever claims to abide in Him ought to walk just as He walked.

Review

This text is powerful a piece of Scripture. It states the truth about Christian discipleship clearly, and with a minimum of words. However, it would be very easy to misunderstand, for if we read it too quickly, we will gain the wrong impression of what John says about discipleship! Hidden from us within the English text, the original Greek contains some subtleties that would have been understood in John's day, but are unavoidably lost in our translations.

If we read the passage without prior knowledge of these subtleties, then we are likely to interpret the passage like this. Verse 3 tells us that we may know God if we do what He says and keep His commandments, and verse 4 adds that those who fail to keep God's commandments are liars if they claim to know Him! This is rather blunt, but we can hardly argue with it. Verse 5 then continues by saying that those who are obedient to God's Word are 'complete' in God's 'love', which sounds like a very similar theme. Moreover, this verse talks about being 'complete' in God's love, which many Christians find challenging unless it means something basic, like 'surrendering all to God'. Lastly, we read in verses 5 and 6, 'This is how we may be sure that we are in Him; whoever claims to abide in Him ought to walk just as He walked' (2:5,6), and this is a straightforward challenge to live as Jesus lived.

We can find much in this, and this last sentence is a worthy challenge for any preacher who seeks a text that will encourage people to follow Jesus. Unfortunately, before we go any further, we must look closer at the passage, because it raises some awkward questions! Why does John say 'this is how we may be certain that we know Him ...' in verse 3, and answer by talking about God's commandments, and then say virtually the same thing in verse 5, following this with a different answer about following Jesus in verse 6? We could ask more questions, but this should alert us to explore further.

Something interesting is going on here, and although it is much clearer in Greek than in English, it is relatively easy to spot. The language of verses 3 and 4 is from the 'Old Testament', specifically about God's 'commandments', and the language of verses 5 and 6 are from the 'New Testament', specifically the 'Word' of God and His 'love' by which we are made complete in Him. The contrast between the first two verses and the second two verses is confirmed by the first words in each half, and if I expanded their meaning a little, they would read, 'Now on the one hand ...' (2:3) 'But on the other hand ...' (2:5)! It is already clear from the first chapter of his letter that the evangelist is using very condensed language, so we can be forgiven for not spotting it, but his letter presents a clear contrast between two ways of pleasing God!

In the light of what we have just discovered, the message is much clearer. Verses 3 and 4 describe the classical Old Testament faith of Israel requiring complete obedience to God's Law (His Commandments). To this day, everyone faces the challenge of living according to God's laws, however, as Jesus explained in His teaching and as Paul explained in his letters, people are not capable of doing this because of sin. Indeed, as John says here (2:4), people are liars if they claim to have a relationship with God on the basis of keeping the Commandments!

The letter then continues by giving the new Testament message, which is that the Christian lives by obedience to God's living 'Word' (2:5). The Old Testament 'Law' (commandments) gives way to Jesus, the living 'Word' of God, as John himself described Him in the first few verses of his Gospel (see John 1:1f.)! So when John says about a Christian 'the love of God has truly been completed in him', this is a way of describing what it means to be a Christian; that is, someone in whom the 'love of God' has done its full work; in other words, one who has been saved. It is then obvious that verse 6 means what we thought at the beginning; it speaks of the true disciple as one who 'walks as Jesus walked'. Today we might say that a Christian is one who 'walks the walk' of Jesus!

We have ended up where we started, with the true 'preaching point' of this passage in the last sentence (2:5,6). The main difference made by our journey of study is that we now know that John is describing true Christian faith here, not raising the spectre of obedience to the Law of God as a route to God (2:3,4). Christians live by the only practical route to the throne of God, which is by faith in Jesus Christ, the Living Word; moreover, obedience to God's law will then become a consequence of that relationship.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. In your group, read through this passage and check out whether you agree with the analysis in this study.
2. How important is it that Christians know and attempt to keep God's commandments today?
3. What does it mean for a Christian to say that the 'love of God' is 'complete' in him?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

The letter of John is full of surprises, and I have learned over the years that it is necessary to be very careful when studying it. The language is not what it seems, and it is possible to be led astray if you do not take time to read it and read it again. In my opinion, understanding John's letter does not require great scholarship, it requires spiritual discernment and great care. Too many people do not give God's Word the time it needs, and so miss out on perceiving its greater spiritual truths.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Think through your own day, and assess whether you believe that you have walked with the Lord in everything that has happened. If you come across one or two things that you do feel are right, do not despair. This shows your humanity, but these things can only be dealt with by bringing them to the Lord, in prayer.*
- *Offer prayer that God's people might be willing to 'walk with the Lord' consciously and in earnest, so that a true witness to Christ may be given within this world.*

Final Prayer

Bless us this day, Lord God, through the knowledge that we have been saved by Christ. May we know that there is nothing to fear in this life, may we feel the touch of Your hand on all we do, and may we always return in our thoughts to You who sustains us every hour of the day. Bless us we pray, Lord God, bless us. AMEN