

A Test to Take 1 John 2:3-12

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When you were in school, did you like to take tests? “Yes,” is not the answer most people give to that question. Test taking is not usually a fun part of education. I still remember setting my alarm for 3:00 AM one day when I was in college—I didn’t usually get up at the same time as Pastor Ron—but I needed to study for an economics test I had at 8:00. Of course, it would have helped if I had studied before that morning, but I ended up doing okay on that test. Friends, though tests are not usually fun, they can sometimes be very beneficial. For example, when your doctor gives you a physical he or she will almost always do a blood test. That can be helpful in two ways.

1. It can identify a problem. From it you might learn your cholesterol is high, maybe very high. Knowing you have that problem is better than not knowing, because you can then take corrective action, such as cutting out high-cholesterol foods, eating more oatmeal or taking medication.
2. A test can relieve anxiety. When you learn your blood sugar level is fine, you maybe feel relief, and may even celebrate with an ice cream cone.

Friends, as we continue our journey through 1 John, we come to 2:3-11. This passage provides what I think is a very important test. It is very beneficial to us because it can either alert us to a serious spiritual problem, or, if we pass, it will give us great confidence and assurance. So, let’s get ready to take the test. The good thing is this test is physically painless. You won’t feel a thing. The bad news is it may make your soul feel very uncomfortable. If that happens, my hope is that the Lord will use the discomfort to bring grace and healing to your life. Friends, let’s pause and pray this will happen.

In our culture, the label “Christian” is sometimes attached to things which have nothing to do with Jesus Christ. For example, we have the “Y.M.C.A.,” “Young Men’s Christian Association.” At one time this was a Christian organization, but it is far from that today. Or there is “Christian Brothers,” the name of monastic order best known for their brandy. And then there is Christian Brothers Hockey Sticks, from Warroad, Minnesota, who don’t have anything to do with Jesus. Even

though over 70% of the people in our society call themselves Christians, the number of genuine believers in Jesus Christ is considerably smaller. Some folks think not being a Jew, Muslim or Atheist automatically makes one a Christian, but that is not the case.

Our passage today provides a test which helps us discern if we are genuine believers in Jesus. The first part of the test is found in the following verse. **1 John 2:3** *This is how we are sure that we have come to know Him: by keeping His commands.* Friends, the phrase “know Him,” means to have a relationship with God. This happens when we are born again, become a child of God, or become a Christian. John has probably borrowed this phrase from Jesus who said (John 17) “To know God is eternal life.” In other words, John says, our willingness to keep or obey God’s commands indicates whether or not we are really a Christian. He continues this thought in **2:4** *The one who says, “I have come to know Him,” yet doesn’t keep His commands, is a liar, and the truth is not in him.* John is pretty blunt. Someone who claims to be a Christian, but doesn’t obey God, is a liar. Some folks think John is describing Christians who have backslidden and are thus not enjoying close fellowship with God, even though they may claim they are. Maybe, but I don’t think so. He implies here, and in other parts of the letter, that such an individual is likely not and has never been a real believer in Jesus.

Last week we noted that in John’s day some claimed that if a person was spiritual and in touch with God, it didn’t matter if he or she lived an immoral life. This group was called the Gnostics. If one of their leaders was caught with a prostitute, or had an extra-marital affair, they would say, “So what, that is no big deal.” Today we debate whether or not a politician can lead an immoral lifestyle and still be a good political leader. The Gnostics said someone can lead an immoral lifestyle and still be a good Christian. John says, wrong. An immoral lifestyle and following Jesus just don’t match. George Will, the political commentator has said, “To their credit, the Evangelical Christian community is the only place where adultery is still a big deal.” Friends, that is good. How we live does matter. John says, it is also part of how someone knows whether he or she is a genuine Christian.

**2:6** *The one who says he remains in Him should walk just as He walked.* The one who claims to know God, to be a Christian, should walk like Jesus. That doesn't mean we put on sandals and go down dirt paths. It means we seek to follow His example of obeying the Father. If I claim to be a Christian, but have no desire to live in a way which pleases the Lord, my claim to be a Christian may not mean a whole lot. Let's say that next fall I go down to U. S. Bank Stadium in Minneapolis when the Vikings are hosting the Packers. I dress up in purple, have a Viking banner to wave, but the only times I cheer are when Aaron Rodgers throws a touchdown pass, or when the Packers sack Sam Bradford. My actions will be speaking louder than my words. Though I might claim to be a Viking fan, my actions will demonstrate that deep down inside I am a Packer fan. John says, the same thing is true in our spiritual lives. Our actions demonstrate what our heart is really like, no matter what verbal claims we may make.

Now, obeying Jesus' commands involves more than avoiding sexual immorality. That is part of it, but there are many aspects of obeying the Lord. The Bible tells us that God expects us to tell the truth, control our temper, avoid profanity, be generous with our money, read the Bible and respect our parents. There are many other commands we could add to this list, or we could do what Jesus does in Matthew 22, summarize all of God's commands in two. Love God and love your neighbor, other people. Our love for God should be the motivation for obeying all of His commandments. My motive for choosing to tell the truth when I report income on my tax forms should be a desire to honor the Lord, rather than simply a desire to not pay a fine from the IRS. The second command, "Love your neighbor as yourself" is what John makes the second part of his test. The first question was, "Do you obey God's commandments?" The second question is "Do you love your fellow believers, your Christian brothers and sisters?"

**2:7a** *Dear friends, I am not writing you a new command but an old command that you have had from the beginning.* **2:8a** *Yet I am writing you a new command.* This maybe seems a little confusing. John says the command to love others is nothing new. Way back in the Old Testament book of Leviticus we are told to "love your neighbor as yourself." Yes, Jesus Christ has brought a new dimension to loving others. When we experience His love and grace, things are different. **2:8b** ...a

*new command, which is true in Him and in you, because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining.* Through Jesus we are able to love others in a way which was never before possible. Thus, **2:9, 10a** *The one who says he is in the light but hates his brother is in the darkness until now. The one who loves his brother remains in the light.* He continues in **2:11** *But the one who hates his brother is in the darkness, walks in the darkness, and doesn't know where he's going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes.* Folks, I think to "be in the light" is to have a relationship with God. "The be in the darkness" means one does not know God. Could this describe a Christian who is out of fellowship with God? Maybe, but it is much more likely John is talking about someone who professes to be a Christian, but really is not. This person is blinded by the power of sin and is unable to love the way we ought to love.

I read an article a few years ago on this historical question: Could the Jews have prevented the Nazi Holocaust if they would have had guns and used them? The author's conclusion was, "No, they would not have been able to match the firepower of the Nazis." But, then he made this statement. "The only way to prevent such cruelty is for people to love and understand each other." Oh folks, that sounds great, but it is just wishful thinking. It is not our nature as human beings to love and understand each other. Events in places like Syria and Nigeria today illustrate that in a clear way. The conflicts and tensions between different groups in our country, even within our community, show how hatred and misunderstanding dominate our society. Sure, one can always point to individual cases of unexpected love and devotion between people of different backgrounds. Yet, a white teen, shoveling the sidewalk of his elderly black neighbor for free, catches our attention because it is something that doesn't usually happen.

I would maintain the only hope for developing a broad based genuine love between people of different backgrounds, is Jesus Christ. For there to be any significant racial reconciliation in our country, the Christian church will need to play a major role. And that is no surprise. It is God who enables us to love those whom we may not naturally love. In fact, it is our love for those who are different from us, but share our faith in Jesus, which is an indication that our faith is real. In John 13:35, Jesus says, others will know we are His disciples if we love one another. Here John says, we will know whether or not we are Jesus' disciples, genuine

Christians, by our love for each other. So folks, that is the test. Do you obey God's commands, especially His command to love other believers? If you do, you pass the test. It indicates you are a genuine Christian. If you don't obey God, if you don't love other believers in Jesus, you don't pass. This is an indication, that despite what you might say, you may not really be a Christian, a genuine believer in Jesus Christ. Keep in mind that obeying the Lord and loving does not make someone a Christian. It is only faith in Jesus Christ, trusting in Him as Savior, which does that. What John tells us is that obedience and love indicate whether or not we are really doing that, trusting in Jesus.

So, take a moment and complete John's test by answering those two questions:

1. Do you obey God's commands?
2. Do you love other believers in Jesus?

Okay, now it is time to grade the test. As we do so, there are some things to remember.

Number one, this test is best for self-evaluation. In John's day, he wanted his readers to use this test to identify false teachers. A Gnostic teacher who didn't obey God's commands, and didn't love other Christians, was not really a believer in Jesus. Though we sometimes can use this test to evaluate someone else, it is best to focus on grading ourselves, not the person sitting two rows in front of us. "I wonder if he is actually a Christian?" "Is she obeying God's commands?" "Does he really love other Christians?" These are questions which usually get us in trouble. Instead, we should ask ourselves, do I obey God's commands? Do I love other believers in Jesus?

Number two, none of us gets a perfect score of 100%. Would anyone here say, "Yes, I always obey every one of God's commands, including the command to always love every other Christian as I love myself?" John says (1:10) if you make that claim you are a liar and are calling God a liar. This is a test which you automatically flunk if you claim to score 100%. If we are honest, all of us will say, "Yes, I sometimes obey God, and sometimes I don't. Sometimes I love other Christians, and sometimes I don't." so where does that leave us? Well, when I say, "I obey God's commands," it does not mean I never disobey. 1 John 1:8-10 makes it clear that perfect obedience is not the mark of a Christian. In his commentary, John Stott says the Apostle John is referring "to lives generally characterized by obedience to God's commands." We use the same standard for math tests at school. 95 out of 100 on

a test means someone knows math well. He or she had five wrong, but still gets an "A."

Number three, we become Christians, are saved, not because of our obedience to God, but because of Jesus' perfect obedience. God is not satisfied with 95% obedience, or even 99.9% obedience. God is holy and requires perfection. In fact, the Bible says if we break one commandment we are guilty of breaking the whole law. This is why none of us can earn God's salvation by trying to obey God's law or by loving other people. Salvation is only experienced through trusting in Jesus Christ. I am going to say this again, because it is so important. John does not say that obedience and love make someone a Christian. If the purpose of this test was to see if we are qualified to be a Christian, any score less than a perfect 100% would be failing. The only way anyone can become a Christian, be saved, is by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. Only by trusting solely in what Christ has accomplished on the cross does one become a Christian. No one can ever become a Christian, any other way. ***Ephesians 2:8, 9*** *For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.*

Number four, a true Christian has a desire to obey God and love other Christians. I think John would agree that is really the bottom line. Having been regenerated and indwelt by the Holy Spirit, which happens every time someone becomes a Christian, we now have a natural desire to do what is pleasing to the Lord. A desire to obey and love becomes a part of a Christian's spiritual genetic makeup. When a child is born and has absolutely no physical resemblance or similarities to the supposed father, questions arise. Is this man really the dad? Likewise, from a spiritual standpoint, we expect a person who claims to have been born of God to reflect some evidence of that. If God is really my Father I ought to have a desire to obey Him and to love other Christians. If that desire is not there, it raises serious questions about whether that person's professed faith is genuine.

So, I think the key to the test is that word "desire." We need to have a desire to obey and love. Our personal score is not what matters. Those who obey God 60% of the time don't pass the test, while those obeying 59% fail. Nor does God grade on a curve. The fact we are in the 85<sup>th</sup> percentile, better than 85% of other people, means nothing. In Noah's day, people in the 99<sup>th</sup> percentile, were considered wicked and were destroyed. What really

matters is if we have the imputed righteousness of Jesus Christ and His perfect score written beside our name. If we do, however, the Holy Spirit who indwells us will give us a desire to obey and love. When we have that desire in our souls, it is an indication our faith in Jesus is genuine and that we truly have the perfect score of Jesus as our own.

Friends, I am convinced that whether you have been a Christian for 80 years or 8 days, you should still have some kind of desire to obey the Lord and love other believers. No matter how mature or immature of a Christian you are, you still have the Holy Spirit indwelling you. That means, when we fail to obey God or refuse to love another Christian, it should bother us. The pain of guilt should be felt in our souls. Friend, if you never feel that pain, it is not a good sign. It may even be an indication you are spiritually dead. To pass John's test, you must be honestly able to say "Yes, I have a desire to obey the Lord, and I have a desire to show love to my fellow believers in Jesus."

Okay, now we need to consider the results of the test. Friend, if you failed, if you have no desire to obey God or love other Christians, that is something which should concern you greatly. Now, only God is the judge of whether or not you are truly a Christian. Yet, I think John makes it pretty clear you have no way of knowing you are, no assurance of that fact. You have no reason to feel confident you have been truly born again, or that you are really saved or that you are going to heaven. "But, Pastor Dan, I do feel confident. I have a certificate which says I was baptized when I was a month old." Or, "I have a piece of paper which says on September 23, 1985, I prayed to accept Christ as my savior." Friend, that is great. Yet, I suspect the Apostle John would say, if you have no desire to obey God, no desire to love the other people in this room, those pieces of paper really mean nothing. It is like having a birth certificate which says both of your natural parents are Chinese, though you are

white, with blond hair and blue eyes. Either you are a freak of nature, or that paper is wrong.

Folks, I never want to cause those who are believers in Jesus to doubt their salvation. Yet, one of my great fears is that there may be people sitting in this room many Sundays who have a false sense of security. These are people who think they are Christians, they are confident they will go to heaven, but in reality they are not truly believers in Jesus Christ. Maybe they believe about Jesus, but they don't believe in Him. Maybe they went forward in a meeting or repeated a prayer, but they have never genuinely trusted in Jesus Christ. Friend, if you have failed John's test the good news is that it is not too late. As God's Spirit enables, you need to turn to Jesus Christ and by faith receive Him as your Savior and Lord. If you are not sure you have done that, or are not sure what that means, or are not sure why you should do that, please give me a call.

Now, a word for those of you who passed the test, who have a desire to obey the Lord and love fellow believers in Jesus. Praise God. Praise God! Remember you could not do it without Him. John has reminded us of how important obedience and love are. These are the marks of a genuine Christian. When we realize we are failing to obey and love as we ought, it should motivate us to strive to change through the grace and strength God provides. Yes, most important, if we have a desire to obey God and love other Christians, John says we can rejoice in the assurance of our salvation God has given us. John's purpose, and my purpose, and I believe God's purpose, is to break down false assurance and build up true assurance. Every one of us who is truly a Christian, who is trusting in Jesus Christ, should know we are saved, should know God is our Father, and know we will spend eternity in heaven. If we passed the test, if we honestly desire to obey God and love others, that is an indication the Holy Spirit is at work in our lives, and thus we can honestly say, "I know I am a child of God." Let's praise God for that.