

1st JOHN BIBLE STUDY

1 John 5:1-3

Lesson #18

Introduction

We're moving now into the last chapter of this marvelous epistle of the Apostle John. When we began, we said that John was going to be very clear and concise. That he was going to be very black and white in his statements, with very little room for debates or subjective interpretations, and so far that's proven to be an accurate analysis. This last chapter is not going to deviate from that same emphasis, in fact, it might be argued that it tightens it up even more.

When John wrote this epistle he was the last of the living disciples that had known Jesus personally, and had listened to Him speak and teach, and knew first hand what Jesus said, and, what He meant by what He said. When he was gone, the saints, from that time forward until the Lord's return, would have only the information that he and the other Apostles had left behind in written form. John could not afford to be wishy washy, he could not afford to be vague and interpretative in his writings, and he seemed to understand this very well. His intent was to be very clear and specific concerning the vital tenets of the Christian faith. He saw that even in his own lifetime, virtually every vital truth of the gospel had already been challenged by liberal thinkers, secular scholars, and false imposters. Unless he and his fellow Apostles, who were now deceased, left behind some writings that were absolutely clear and beyond debate, the Christian faith would quickly mutate into something totally different, and all the vital truths that composed the gospel would be hopelessly lost among the vast heap of endless religious rubble. Which incidently, is precisely what happened under the reign of Roman Catholicism, but it was the recovery of the Apostle's writings, that they had left after them, that fueled the Protestant Reformation that reclaimed the vital truths of the gospel after a thousand years of spiritual darkness.

His Commandments are not Burdensome

1 Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and whoever loves the Father loves the child born of Him. 2 By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and observe His commandments. 3 For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments; and His commandments are not burdensome. 1 John 5:1-3 (NASB)

Let's look at the first verse:

Verse 1:

1 Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and whoever loves the Father loves the child born of Him.

This first verse is a sort of closing out of the theme of chapter four. John says that whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and adds that whoever loves the Father, loves the child also. John says that believing the truth about Jesus is the result of being born of God. I'll bet that the majority of Christians would say it's the other way around. The present day popularity of Arminian thinking perceives that if we can determine, by our own free will, that Jesus is the Christ, then we are born of God. But that's not how John perceives it, and this statement makes that obvious.

John makes our believing that Jesus is the Christ the result, the effect, of our being born of God. Those who know the gospel understand this to be the truth, because believing in Jesus is effectuated, that is empowered, not first by and act of human will, but first by the gift of saving faith bestowed by the grace of God, which empowers that resultant act of the human will which follows. (Eph 2:8-9) You all know the reformed view, which is our view on this issue, so let's leave it at that and move on.

The last part of this sentence says that whoever loves the Father, also loves the child that's born of that Father. Now if you're anything like me, your mind immediately raises the question about those situations where we have good friends that we very much like, but who have children who are totally obnoxious. And we don't love them one bit. Maybe you don't think this way, but my mind almost always challenges everything it hears. While this is annoying sometimes, it nevertheless requires me to take a little time and analyze the statement, and dig into its meaning, so that I understand it correctly. We must keep in mind that this statement is a direct reference to Jesus Christ, and it says that if we love God who is the Father, then we will love Jesus who is the Son of God. And why is this so? Why would we love Jesus just for being the Son of God?

Well, there's many reasons, but the first, and most obvious is that Jesus is the exact image of God His Father. He said that He only does the things that were taught to Him by His Father, and that please His Father, and by reasonable implication, nothing else. (Jn 5:19, 8:28) Therefore, when the Son is the exact image and likeness, in every way, as the Father, then it logically follows that loving the Father will also mean loving the Son, who is His exact duplicate. And conversely, a love for the Son can be seen as a love for the Father, but, rejection of the Son can only imply the rejection of the Father as well, this can't be denied. And John is going to build on this premise in subsequent verses shortly forthcoming. But first, he's going to go back for one more dip from that familiar well from which he's already drawn repeatedly in this epistle.

Verses 2-3:

2 By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and observe His commandments. 3 For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments; and His commandments are not burdensome.

It is beyond question that it's of the greatest importance to John that he communicates this truth to the church and to us, his posterity. For many reasons, keeping God's commandments is essential for the believers in Jesus Christ, and essential for the church. And John has already told us some of them. In chapter 2, verse 3 he wrote:

3 By this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments.

And immediately following that in verse 4 he wrote:

4 The one who says, "I have come to know Him," and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him;

And again in chapter 3, verse 24 he wrote:

24 The one who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in them. We know by this that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us.

First and foremost, is John telling us that keeping the commandments is our means of obtaining our salvation? Or that keeping the commandments is a requirement to maintain our salvation, lest we lose it? Before I answer this, let's establish that the answer isn't insignificant, no matter whether it's yes or it's no. The first thing we hear is that if the answer is no, then keeping the commandments isn't really all that important, because in the final analysis, our salvation doesn't really hinge on it one way or the other. But this idea involves a very serious, and even fatal flaw in its logic. The real question that keeping the commandments of God answers is - whether God is truly resident within our spirit. So the real question is not - do I really have to keep the commandments for salvation, but rather - Have I really been born again of the Spirit of God? And keeping His commandments supplies the true and honest answer to **that** vital question, which is of the utmost significance and importance.

We don't keep the commandments to earn our salvation, and we don't keep the commandments to keep our salvation, we keep the commandments because the Holy Spirit abides in our spirit and we're driven by a new heart and mind that earnestly desires to keep His commandments, both because we agree with them, and it honors God when we live in obedience to Him.

So now, I will answer those questions. The answer to both is an emphatic "no" we do not secure, or maintain our salvation by keeping the commandments, **but**, we do authenticate or refute **our claim of faith in Christ** by whether we do or don't keep His commandments. If you're not too concerned with keeping His commandments because you don't think they affect your salvation, then you are **not** indwelt with His abiding Spirit, period, end of discussion. (Ch 2, verse 4, quoted above.)

If you think John doesn't mean exactly what he says in these verses, then you are tragically mistaken. So mistaken that your eternal salvation is at stake. Not because you break His commandments, but because you are devoid (absent) of that abiding Spirit dwelling within you, that absolutely negates the possibility that you can feel the way you do about those commandments. If you feel perfectly secure while intentionally disobeying God's commandments, then you cannot be a regenerated child of God, in whom His Spirit resides. But, unfortunately this condition describes the vast majority of those people who consider themselves Christians, because they walked an isle, or repeated a prayer at an alter call. And because so many fit this description, they are comforted by the fact that so many others feel exactly the same way. But the scriptures absolutely refute any such notion, and that's what John is hammering on, over and over again in this epistle.

When whole churches, even denominations, engage in public lawsuits against other Christian organizations and then call it “good stewardship” instead of flagrant disobedience to God over filthy lucre, (1Co 6:1-8) then we see the truth begin to emerge. Like the Pharisees used the term “corban” to avoid taking care of their own families, and called it honorable. When big bucks are on the line, the true condition of the heart is revealed, and it’s not what we say with our words, but what we do by our actions in these situations, that reveal the truth about the condition of our heart, and what it is that we perceive to be our treasure. Talk is cheap, but what we do when the cost is great, that’s what reveals the metal of a man, or a woman. If you need further help understanding this, ask brother Job to explain it to you.

And again, we establish churches, and then install female pastors over them, in direct and flagrant disobedience to the word of God. (1Co 14:34; 1Ti 2:12) Or, we have church members, even leaders and teachers, that are practicing fornication, or adultery, or homosexuality, or drunkenness, or drug abuse, or lying. (1Co 6:9-10, Rev 21:8) And like the Pharisees, we rename our acceptance of these things as “loving tolerance,” instead of flagrant sinful disobedience to God. These things, in varying degrees, are going on right now throughout almost all of what calls itself evangelical Christianity. And all these things had already started before John passed away, and this is precisely what he was writing to expose, and put to a stop, in the genuine Christian churches.

When seeing these things, I’ve repeatedly asked myself, without ever securing an answer, Just what is the intended purpose of starting, or attending a “so called” church, that does not feel that keeping the instructions and commandments of God are a binding foundational principle for it to even be called a church in the first place? If it doesn’t feel the need to obey God, then why does it meet together and pretend to worship God? Why bother, what’s the point of such an endeavor? Why not go to a movie, or go to the beach, or go fishing, at least then you’re not being a hypocrite. Or do people really think that they can worship God while simultaneously and flagrantly disobeying His commandments? To think that, you would have to be brain dead; criminally, and terminally ignorant of the holiness, and majesty, and sovereignty of the true and living God of the Bible.

John says that disobeying God’s commandments means that you do not know God at all. (Chapter 2, verses 4 and 5) Churches that practice disobedience to God’s declared commandments prove by their actions that they are not churches at all, and they do not even know the true and living God. They have an idol that they’re set up as god, and they worship that idol that they call God, but it bears little or no resemblance whatever to the God described in scriptures. Knowing and loving the true God, literally means obeying His commandments. These are inseparable characteristics. (Jn 14:15)

Saints, if your church isn’t eager and willing to obey the commandments of God, all the commandments of God, as they are declared in the scriptures, then there is no acceptable worship being produced there, period. It doesn’t matter how big it is, it doesn’t matter how pretty it sings, and it doesn’t matter how many nice acts of charity and benevolence it does, because intentional and persistent disobedience to God disqualifies any activities as acceptable worship. We can’t buy God off with acts of charity. He isn’t for sale, and He doesn’t take bribes to overlook sin. Worship is not a trade-off of a little bit of disobedience, which is sinful lawlessness, with some offsetting acts of piety. Who do we think God is, and what has happened to our perception of His absolute perfect holiness and righteousness?

If we aren’t both willing and eager to obey His every command and instruction, whether perceived as small or great, to the very best of our comprehension and understanding, then our claim to be His church, the bride and body of Jesus Christ, is exposed as fraudulent, so says the Apostle John in this epistle. A little sin, selective obedience, which is nothing other than selective disobedience, is the order of the day, and accepted as perfectly normal and acceptable. But acceptable to whom? Acceptable to most of us perhaps, but certainly not acceptable to God, nor to the Apostle John, as attested in all his writings, as well as the totality of the holy scriptures.

When Jesus was preaching He often used various examples, metaphors, analogies, and parables to illustrate various divine truths. On one occasion He spoke of a sower who sowed seeds, and these seeds fell upon several types of ground. One was described as not producing any kind of response and the seed, which Jesus described as the word of God, had no effect. We call these affirmed atheists today. They’ve heard the gospel, but it makes no sense to them whatsoever, and they’ve rejected it out of hand. But the other three are described as showing some kind of response that looks like

it's genuine. Of these remaining three, the first is said to produce an immediate and visible response of joy and acceptance, but alas, when faced with trials and testing proves not to be genuine. Then the second of these three is said to fall on one's who appear to be receptive, but never escape the cares of the world, and never bring forth any fruits (visible evidences) of genuine belief. Finally, the last of the three, received the word and brought forth evidences of it in their life and behaviors.

The final conclusion of this parable, as it was explained by Jesus, was that there are various responses to the gospel, but only those who produce fruits, meaning bring forth appropriate evidences of obedience and righteousness, were really authentic, and the others were just spurious and temporary emotional reactions. But time and experience show us that there's even more that can be learned from this parable. For instance, three of the four examples apparently made claims of believing the word that was preached. And, while Jesus said that two of those three were fraudulent, they themselves never apparently acknowledged this. If you ask them, they'll say they're just like the last group, that they're really Christians also, and they do believe the word, but their responses are just a little different.

One will say he had a temporary lapse of faith under persecution, and the other will claim that he really believes, but he's just a slightly more carnal kind of Christian. Now I'm not suggesting any specific intent, but by simple application of this parable, two-thirds of those who claimed to be Christians, in this example, were fraudulent. And irrespective of the actual percentage, the principle is undeniable. There are tares among the wheat, and they comprise the overwhelming majority.

So how do we recognize the difference? The truth is we can't always tell with absolute certainty, but we are given the means to make the distinction, and commanded to use those means with vigor and discernment. (1Ths 5:21-22) In this epistle of John, and in his gospel as well, he repeatedly declares that genuine belief can be attested to by either the presence or absence of obedience to the commandments of God. In his gospel, John wrote an interesting verse that applies perfectly to this issue. He wrote:

36 "He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him."
John 3:36 (NASB)

When I was a young Christian I remember reading this verse and asking myself, well, what about the person who believes, and whom John says has eternal life, but then doesn't necessarily choose to always obey Jesus? How can that person have eternal life, and at the same time have the wrath of God abiding on them? Finally I came to understand that the problem I had wasn't that I didn't have a good answer, but that I was asking an impossible question? To John, believing and obeying are synonymous, as this verse intentionally makes clear. There is no such thing as disobediently believing the word of God. If it's from God, and it's His commandment, then disobedience is not an option. And if disobedience persists, then the claim of belief is bogus, and the wrath of God will reside on those who choose to disobey His commands. It doesn't appear that more than 1 in 10 of those who call themselves Christians actually believe this, even though the scriptures make it absolutely irrefutable. (Mat 7:21-23)

What routinely goes on in the name of Christianity today is a travesty. Do we remember what the prophet Malachi told the nation of Israel at the close of the Old Testament? At that time they had a Temple, and priests, and a high priest, and they were going through the motions of religious worship as they had for centuries, but their morality, and ethics, and compassion, and kindness were at an all time low. They offered sickly and blemished sacrifices, and whined and complained at the monotony of the services and the futility of their worship. Men were routinely divorcing their long time faithful wives for younger prettier ones, and sending the old ones out to fend for themselves in poverty. But the religious services were still going on every sabbath, and the Jews felt very righteous and secure as God's chosen people.

But what did God say about this situation? Malachi quotes from God saying:

10 "Oh that there were one among you who would shut the gates, [to the Temple] that you might not uselessly kindle fire on My altar! I am not pleased with you," says the Lord of hosts, "nor will I accept an offering from you. Mal 1:10 (NASB)

Do we understand what was going on here? There was religious activity, but it was not even close to what God desires, or would even tolerate. God said He wished that someone would go and put a lock on the front door of the Temple to keep out those fraudulent worshipers, and put a stop to the painful defilement of His holy name by their obnoxious behaviors.

How sadly, and pitifully, and painfully similar is that condition of Israel, with the situation of professing Christianity today? What we think we are offering as worship, and expect God to be pleased with, is in fact all too often, an abomination in His sight. And just as God said that He would not accept an offering from Israel that was rendered while they were living a lifestyle of flagrant disobedience to God's commandments, likewise He will not accept an offering of worship by a professing Christian church that is living in similar flagrant disobedience to His commandments. I do not doubt that it would please God if someone went around and padlocked the doors of about 90 percent of the churches that are meeting today. Because not more than 10 percent appear to be actually keeping **all** His commandments to the best of their abilities.

John is pouring out his heart to the saints, and telling us that there's only one kind of Christian, and only one kind of Christian church, and that is one that stringently keeps all of His commandments. John knows, and can already see what happens when the truth is selectively applied, and God's clear instructions are cleverly redefined to mean something lesser, or even opposite to what they actually mean. Did God not say that you could eat of every fruit of the Garden, asks Satan to Adam and Eve? Well, yes He did say that, but then He further qualified it with a very specific exception. And ignoring that exception was a sin for which all mankind has been paying dearly for from that time forth.

In the introduction to an earlier lesson, I opened by saying something to the effect that when a church ceases to rely on the word of God, taken literally, as it's only source of authority on matters of faith and practice, then it has ceased to function as a Christian church, and all is lost for that assembly. When clever spin doctors working from within the church membership itself, begin to use secular trends and opinions as their source of reference, then godliness is compromised, and a progressively escalating descent has begun unto certain destruction. John and his contemporaries saw this happening in their own lifetimes, and they were very concerned, so they wrote epistles to the churches to be used as permanent anchors of the faith, and firmly establish every matter of faith and practice for the church until the Lord's bodily return. It is absolutely essential that we know these truths, and follow them to the letter, lest we start a trend of what seems to be at the outset only minor discrepancies, that look insignificant in the beginning, but cannot help but escalate with time into massive disobedience and eventual apostasy.

It's so easy to start sinning. We can rationalize about it, and often even justify ourselves in doing so, but who among us doesn't know, by first hand experience, that it will always escalate beyond our original intention, and then it is very much more difficult to stop than it was to start. It's very easy to start a snowball rolling down a hill, but ask the guy at the bottom how hard it was to stop it, if it didn't run over him and crush him completely. And sin is just the same. Like the fictional computer in the movie "War Games" we must learn by experience that the only way to win at certain endeavors is not to play in the first place. And such is sin. The only way to win, is not to play.

If there is to be even one genuinely acceptable and recognized Christian church on earth at the Lord's return, then we must recognize and accept that it can only be so if it vigorously adheres to God's commandments. Letting up on even one commandment, regardless of our perception of the justification, will inevitably start a snowball effect that will grow bigger than we can control. So, the only way to prevent that, is to never start it in the first place. Period.

Verse 3 starts with the declaration that *For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments;* which we've just discussed at length, but then it ends up with the short statement *and His commandments are not burdensome.* The original Greek word that is translated as "burdensome" in English is literally "heavy" in the original Greek. John is saying that keeping God's commandments isn't a heavy burden for those who have been regenerated and sanctified by His indwelling Spirit. Now here we go with the critics who immediately bark "so keeping God's commandments is easy and anybody can do it, right?" We've probably all heard something like this expressed, but is that what John says in this verse? Does John say that keeping God's commandments is easy, that it's a piece of cake, as we say today? No place in scripture of which I'm aware, so perhaps the real question is, do we recognize that there is a very real difference between something that is easy, and something that is burdensome?

Let me give an example. All of us who are parents know the cost and effort and vast difficulties of raising children in today's world. Keeping a safe and loving home, keeping them clothed with the latest fashions, keeping food on the table, and then putting them through school, and all this without major tragedies along the way, if possible. Now, who among

all those who know this responsibility first hand, would say that it was easy? I doubt that you'll find a single one who would say that. But now, how many will say it was burdensome, and they wish they had never undertaken it? Few, if any, would ever say that. While the rigors of parenting are never easy, they are at the very same time, probably the most rewarding thing we have ever done in our lifetimes. We all understand this, and we don't consider it to be a contradiction.

When we say that something is not a burden, we don't by any means imply that it isn't difficult. We mean that it isn't something that we dislike doing, like taking out the trash. We might call that a burden, but we still do it anyway, at least most of us. We go to work and spend 8 or 10 or even 12 hours a day working to earn a living, and come home and gladly spend it all on our families. And we don't call this a burden but a blessing, at least most of us, and we wouldn't have it any other way. Oh I suppose we'd all rather be rich and not need to work, but you know what I mean. Spending the proceeds of our efforts on those whom we love is never a burden, even when it requires substantial amounts of work. Now let's apply this principle to John's statement in this verse.

Keeping God's commandments is not a burden, notwithstanding the undeniable fact that it is very difficult, even impossible so far as perfection. But the point is, ***that it is not contrary to our own desires to do so***. The Apostle Paul perfectly captures the essence of this concept where he wrote to the Romans:

17 But thanks be to God that though you were slaves of sin, you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were committed, 18 and having been freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness. Rom 6:17-18 Paul rightly identifies this as a condition of the heart. Before salvation, we were all in a kind of bondage to the natural desires of our heart, which were at odds with the commandments of God, so keeping those commandments while in that condition is most certainly a burden, because it's contrary to the natural desires of fallen human nature.

But this verse says that something happened to change the condition of our heart, and that change broke our natural desires to sin, and instilled a genuine desire to pursue righteousness from within our own heart's. And now, with this change of heart, that lifestyle that would have previously been a burden, has now become, to us, like raising a family, it is the most precious and valuable aspect of our lives. And not being able to do it with perfection, just like not being able to raise a family with perfection, in no way diminishes the desire and joy in the effort. Neither raising a family, or keeping God's commandments, will ever be easy to do, and neither will ever be done to perfection, but irregardless of our capabilities, neither will ever be thought of as a burden. Now, you see how logical and easy this is to understand?

Either we have had a miraculous and supernatural change of heart, or we have not. And the true desires of our heart will manifest themselves by our routine responses to righteousness of lifestyle. By our keeping, or not keeping, God's commandments, in totality, and doing so joyfully, like raising our family, and never perceiving them as a heavy burden that we must painfully bear to earn our way to heaven. Either you really want to keep God's commandments, or you don't really want to, but you feel obligated. And make no mistake, we are all obligated without question, but it is the condition of our heart that really determines whether it is a joy or a burden. John says that for true Christians, who know God, and have Him abiding within them; keeping His commandments, all of them, is not a burden, but a wonderful and life fulfilling demonstration of our love for God. We consider it to be our joy and purpose for living, and the essential foundation for acceptable worship.

Now I suppose it wouldn't be fitting to close this point without also referring to the words of Jesus himself when He said: *28 "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. 29 "Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and You will find rest for your souls. 30 "For My yoke is easy and My burden is light."* Matt 11:28-30 (NASB)

It's likely that John had these words of Jesus in his mind when he wrote this epistle and said that keeping His commandments was not a burden. Jesus was speaking to a world that only had the Old Testament, the old covenant. Which called for men to keep the Laws of God with only their own natural capabilities, because the indwelling Spirit had not yet been given, because Jesus had not yet been glorified. (Jn 7:39) So, for all who lived prior to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, keeping the commandments of God were indeed perceived as a huge, heavy, and impossible burden on the backs of humankind.

Righteousness by works of the Law was for sure a discouraging burden, an impossibly heavy load, and this is what Jesus was telling them, that His burden, was light and easy indeed, because He himself would carry all the weight alone.

He would remove the burden of perfect righteousness from the backs of mankind and shoulder that load all by Himself, thus freeing mankind of the impossible burden of righteousness by works of the Law. (Rom 3:20) He would establish the sinless perfection that God His Father requires for heaven, and apply that righteousness to the account of all who would repent, and believe in Him as their Lord and Savior. And what they didn't yet comprehend, at that time, was that the ability to actually and savingly believe this, that they didn't have within themselves, would be granted by the Grace of God, through the free gift of saving faith. (Eph 2:8-9) And then empowered to sanctify and transform the heart's and mind's of those elect individuals by His own indwelling Spirit. Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift.

Conclusion:

Now, by way of conclusion, please allow me to ask, Does all this that we've just discussed describe you? Has the desire to practice sin been changed by God, into a desire to live sensibly, righteously and godly in this present age? (Tit 2:11-12) Is it your desire, in earnest truth, to keep all of His commandments, even though you're incapable of actually doing it? Or, do the commandments of God weigh like a heavy stone on your shoulders, causing you anguish of soul, and trouble of spirit? Has the love of God been perfected in you by removing any and all vestiges of fear of punishment, or do you still have nagging doubts?

If this is the case, then the Lord Jesus has called you to take His yoke of faith upon yourself, and let Him bear that load that you know you can't carry. This is a gift of God beloved, and it can only be obtained by His grace, that gift of saving faith. If you're feeling that weight, and suffering those fears, then confess your inability to God to meet His demands, and ask Him, even plead with Him, for that repentance that leads to life, and that precious gift of saving faith in Christ Jesus.

To Him be the glory forever. Amen.

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