*“A CALL TO OBEDIENCE”*

1 John 2:3-11

April 18, 2021

It is by this that we know that we have

come to know Him—if we keep His commandments.

This passage of John’s letter deals in phrases and thoughts which were very familiar to the ancient world. The ancient world talked a lot about knowing God, and about being in God. So it’s important that we see the difference between the pagan world in all its greatness and Judaism and Christianity. To know God, to abide in God, to have fellowship with God has always been the quest of the human spirit. And we might say that in the ancient world there were three lines of thought in regard to knowing God.

In the great classical age of Greek thought and literature, in the sixth and fifth centuries before Christ, the Greeks were convinced that they could arrive at God by the sheer process of intellectual reasoning and argument and thought. In those days Greeks glorified the intellect.

Xenophon tells how Socrates had a conversation with a young man. “How do you know that?” asked Socrates. “Do you know it, or are you guessing?” The young man had to say, “I’m guessing.” “Very well,” answered Socrates, “When we are done with guessing and when we know, shall we talk about it then?” Guesses were not good enough for the Greek.

Now, it has to be noted that an intellectual approach to religion is not necessarily ethical at all. If religion is a series of mental problems, if God is the goal at the end of intense mental activity, then religion becomes something like the higher mathematics. It becomes intellectual satisfaction, and not moral action. And the plain fact is that many of the great Greek thinkers were not especially good men. A person could know God in the intellectual sense – still can -- but that doesn’t mean that they are necessarily good persons.

The later Greeks, in the immediate background time of the New Testament, sought to find God in emotional experience. The characteristic religious phenomenon of those days was the Mystery Religions. And their aim was union with the divine. They were all in the form of passion plays. They were all founded on the story of some god who lived, and suffered terribly, and died a cruel death, and rose again. The initiate was given a long course of instruction; they were made to practice fasting and ascetic discipline. They were worked up to an intense pitch of expectation. Everything was designed to heighten the emotional atmosphere. There was calculated lighting; sensuous music; perfumed incense; a moving liturgy. In this atmosphere the story was played out, and worshippers identified themselves with the experience of the god until they could cry out, “I am thou, and thou art I”; until they shared the god’s suffering and also shared its victory and immortality.

But you see what’s wrong here: this was not so much *knowing* God as *feeling* God. It was a highly emotional experience, and, as such, it was necessarily transient. It was a kind of religious drug.

And then there was the Jewish way of knowing God, which is closely allied with the Christian way. To the Jew, knowledge of God came by revelation from God. The knowledge of God came, not by human speculation, not by an exotic experience of emotion; but by God’s own revealing of God’s self to men and women.

Do you know how scholars of world religions describe the Jewish faith? They declare that is ethical monotheism. A.E. Brooke says, “John can conceive of no real knowledge of God which does not issue in obedience.” Knowledge of God can only be proven by obedience to God; and knowledge of God can only be gained by obedience to God.

Here was John’s problem. In the Greek world he was faced with people who saw God as an intellectual exercise, and who could say, “I know God,” without being conscious of any ethical obligation whatsoever. In the Greek world he was also faced with people who had had an emotional experience and who could say, “I am in God and God is in me,” and who just did not see God in terms of commandments at all.

John is determined to lay it down unmistakably and without compromise, that the only way in which we can show that we know God is by obedience to God, and the only way we can show that we have union with Christ is to do what Christ tells us. Christianity is the religion which offers the greatest privilege, and which brings with it the greatest obligation. In Christianity intellectual effort and emotional experiences really are embraced, but they have to result in moral action.

Beloved, it is not a new commandment which I am writing to you, but an old commandment, which you had from the beginning.

John speaks here about a commandment which is at one and the same time an old commandment and a new one. So what is the commandment of which John speaks? There are some who take it as referring to the commandment in v. 6 “The ones who abide in Him ought to walk in the same way He walked.” Those who want to live in Christ ought to act the same way Christ acted. But almost certainly John was re-emphasizing His words in the Gospel: “A new commandment I give unto you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, you also love one another” (Jn. 13:34). In what sense is this old and new?

It was old in the sense that it is already there in the Old Testament. Part of the Great Commandment Jesus remembers and tells the lawyer was from Leviticus: “(and a second is like it:) ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’ (Lev. 19:18).” It is an old commandment in the sense that it already stands there in the ancient scriptures, and it was old in the sense that this was not the first time John’s hearers had heard it. From the very first day of their entry into the Christian life they had been taught that this law of love ought to be the law of their life. Love the Lord your God, and love your neighbor as strongly and completely as you love yourself.

But this commandment was new in that it had been raised to a completely new standard in the life of Jesus. It could well be said that folks did not really know what love was until they saw it in Jesus Christ. His caring for the poor, his taking care of the sick His raising of the dead, his dying so you and I might live.

William Barklay points out that it is possible for a thing to be old, that it has existed for a long time, and yet it might reach a completely new standard in someone’s performance of it. A game may be a new game to one who has just seen a master play it. I took a PE class in tennis at college, and the teacher said that the pros play a completely different game than we do. He’s right. I watch the Master’s Golf Championship on TV, and know that those pros are playing a completely different game than I play. So different it’s new, huh? Even a seemingly familiar dish of food would be new if you taste it when a master has prepared it.

Love became new in Jesus Christ, and in Christ love became new in two directions. In Jesus love became new in *the extent to which it reached*. In Christ, love extended to the sinner. To the orthodox Rabbi the sinner was a person whom God wished to destroy. “There is joy in heaven,” they said, “when one sinner is obliterated from the earth.”

But Jesus was the friend of outcast persons, and of sinners, and He was sure that there was joy in heaven when one sinner comes home. (remember the story of Zaccheus.)

And in Jesus love became new *in the lengths to which it would go*. No lack of response, nothing that people could ever do to Him, could turn Jesus’ love to hate. He could even pray for the mercy of God on those who were nailing Him to the Cross.

The commandment to love was old in the sense that people had known of it for a long time; but the commandment to love was new, because in Jesus Christ love reached a standard which it had never reached before, and it was by that standard that you and are to measure our obedience . . . the standard of Jesus’ own love.

John goes on to say that this commandment, the commandment of love, is true in Jesus Christ, and true in the people to whom he writes. To John,

truth was not something to be grasped only with the mind; truth was something to be done . . . the obedience of love, huh? “And by this we may be sure that we know him, if we keep his commandments” (2:3). Truth was not only a mental exercise; it is also a visible, practicing way of life. The commandment to love one another is the highest truth; in Jesus Christ we can see that commandment in all the glory of its fullness. In Him that commandment is true; and in the Christian, too, we should see that commandment, not in the fullness of its entirety, no, but we can see it coming true. Here, then, we have this nice, developing notion that you and I are persons in whom Christ’s commandment of love is daily becoming more and more true.

We exist, you and I, in a process of living in the Holy Spirit. And any process has a fulfillment. A process involves and implies a goal (that we’re in process towards.) For John the end of the process is a world in which the darkness is defeated and the light is triumphant.

So notice what the light and darkness are identified with. The light is identified with love, and the darkness is identified with hate. That is to say, the end of this process is a world where love reigns supreme, and where hate is banished for ever. Christ has come in the individual heart and willing and intention to obedience, to a working out of love. But Christ will come, and all will kneel and bow down to their Lord, who will reign completely in the love that you and I are giving ourselves to now.

Amen.