

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	1 John		Pastor/Teacher
Number:	4		Gary L.W. Johnson
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THE TESTS OF TRUE LIFE

One of the finest treatments of 1 John was written back at the turn of the last century by Robert Law, a Canadian New Testament scholar who taught for many years at Knox College in Toronto. “The Epistle,” he writes, “works with a comparatively small number of themes, which are introduced many times, and are brought into every possible relation to one another. As some master-builder of music takes two or three melodious phrases and, introducing them in due order, repeating them, inverting them, skillfully interlacing them in diverse modes and keys, rears up from them an edifice of stately harmonies; so the Apostle weaves together a few leading ideas into a majestic fugue in which unity of material and variety of tone and effect are wonderfully blended. And the clue to the structure of the Epistle will be found by tracing the introduction and reappearances of these leading themes. These are Righteousness, Love, and Belief. For here let me say at once that, in my view, the key to the interpretation of the Epistle is the fact that it is an apparatus of *tests*; that its definite object is to furnish its readers with an adequate set of criteria by which they may satisfy themselves of their being ‘begotten of God.’ ‘These things write I unto you, that ye may know that ye have eternal life’ (5:18). And throughout the Epistle these tests are definitely, inevitably, and inseparably – doing righteousness; loving one another; and believing that Jesus is the Christ, come in the flesh, sent by the Father to be the Saviour of the world. These are the connecting themes that bind together the whole structure of the Epistle. After the prologue, in fact, it consists of a threefold repetition and application of these three fundamental tests of the Christian life. In proof of this statement let us, in the first instance, examine those sections of the Epistle in which the sequence of thought is most clearly exhibited.”¹

- I. **THE TRUE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD.** John repeatedly uses a formula to stress the validity of what is claimed *en toutō ginōskomen hoti* “by this we know that.” Notice that this knowledge is *not* simply theoretical. Calvin, with his usual precision, writes: “After he has treated the doctrine of the free remission of sins, he comes to the exhortations joined to it and depending on it. And first, he tells us that the knowledge of God conceived from the Gospel is not idle but that obedience proceeds from it. He then shows what God especially requires from us – the chief thing in life, that we should love God. The Scripture has good reason to repeat everywhere what we read here about the living knowledge of God. For nothing is commoner in the world than to draw the teaching of godliness into frigid speculations. This is how theology has been adulterated by the sophists of the Sorbonne, so that from all their knowledge not the slightest spark of godliness shines forth. And everywhere inquisitive men learn enough from God’s Word to let them prattle for display. In short, the commonest evil in all ages has been an empty profession of God’s name. John therefore assumes this principle, that the knowledge of God is efficacious. From it he concludes that they by no means know

God who do not keep His commandments. Granted that Plato was groping in the darkness; but he denied that the beautiful which he imagined could be known without ravishing a man with the admiration of itself – this in *Phaedrus* and elsewhere. How then is it possible for you to know God and yet be touched by no feeling? Nor indeed does it proceed only from God's nature that, if we know Him, we immediately love Him. For the same Spirit who enlightens our minds also inspires our hearts with an affection corresponding to our knowledge. And the knowledge of God leads us to fear and love Him. For we cannot know our Lord and Father as He shows Himself without on our side showing ourselves dutiful children and obedient servants. In short, the teaching of the Gospel is a living mirror in which we contemplate God's image and are transformed to it, as Paul teaches us in II Cor. 3:18. Where the conscience is not clear, there can be only the empty ghost of knowledge. We must notice the order when he says, *know we that we know him*. He means that obedience is joined to knowledge, so that the latter in fact comes first in order, as the cause necessarily precedes the effect."²

II. KNOWLEDGE OF GOD MANIFESTED IN LOVE. To claim to *know* God strictly as an intellectual exercise is what John is combating. Barclay notes that people, "professed to know God without being conscious of any ethical obligation to him whatever. In the Greek world he was faced with people who had had an emotional experience and who could say 'I am in God and God is in me,' and who yet did not see God in terms of commandments at all."³ We are told "that love is the greatest commandment, and that without love we are nothing (1 Cor. 13:1-13), neither of these truths means that we can envision love *apart from* the commandments. Love itself is a commandment (Matt. 22:37-40); John 13:34), and occasionally love is listed alongside other commands (or virtues), as in 1 Timothy 4:12 ('Let no one despise your youth, but be an example to the believers in word, in conduct, in love, in spirit, in faith, in purity") and in 1 Timothy 6:11 ('But you, O man of God, flee these things and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, gentleness'). Love nowhere stands in opposition to the commandment. In fact, Jesus says, 'If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love' (John 15:10). Whoever keeps God's commandments or keeps His Word (which means the same thing), God's love is perfected in him (1 John 2:3-5). On one occasion, Paul can write that faith works through love (Gal. 5:6), and on another that love comes down to keeping God's commandments (1 Cor. 7:19). Loving God consists in keeping His commands (1 John 5:3), or walking according to His commands (2 John 6). We may summarize it concisely this way: love is indeed the *realization* of the law, but not the *replacement* of the law (Schrage 1961, 255-56). But now let's turn the matter around. If love is not the only command, and if love cannot function well, apart from the other commands, then neither can those other commands function well, apart from love. Love surpasses all those other commands. How can we describe the exceptional character of love? Love is the fulfillment of the law (Rom. 13:10). This must surely mean that without love, there can be no genuine, full obedience. Anyone who supposes that he can satisfy any of God's commandments without love falls into legalism, nomianism, or formalism. Whoever loves, writes Paul, does his neighbor no harm (Rom. 13:9-10), which seems to indicate that we do injure our neighbor whenever we try to obey the commandment of God without love. For our geographical orientation, we need a map and a compass. If we liken the commandments to a map, then love is the compass. Or to use another figure, love and law are related like yeast and dough. The first must permeate the second if you want good bread. Jesus called love the great commandment, as well as a new commandment (John 13:34). That does not mean that love replaces the commandments. The command to love is very old. We have already

seen that we cannot speak about the commands of God apart from Christ. The very same thing applies to love. To see a picture of genuine love, look to Christ.”⁴

CONCLUSION: As Law pointed out, John cycles a select number of themes throughout the epistle. The emphasis on true sonship is addressed again in 1 John 2:28-3:3. Warfield, in his handling of the text, helpfully sums up the matter as follows: “It is clear as day, then, that this childship to God, of which John teaches us, is not a product of our own endeavours; it is a gift, a free favour from God; and it has its root in the ineffable and indescribable and sovereign love of God. ‘Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed upon us that we should be called the sons of God.’ We have not earned it; the Father has given it; not paid it to us as our just due for effort made, labour performed, righteousness practiced; but given it to us out of His free and inexplicable love; not out of His justice but out of His incomprehensible love. It is a sovereign gift. So the New Testament everywhere and under all its figures represents it; so John always represents it. And it is therefore that he sings paeans to God’s love on account of it. ‘Behold!’ ‘What manner of love is this!’ ‘To seek us out and make us the sons of God!’ Language could not convey more clearly, more powerfully, the conception of the absolute sovereignty of the gift of childship to God. Elsewhere it is conveyed more didactically, more analytically; here it is conveyed emotionally. Elsewhere we are told that it came not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God; here we have the answering thrill of gratitude of the human heart at this unexpected, undeserved gift. Elsewhere the sovereignty is asserted, explained; here it is acknowledged, honoured. Elsewhere it is claimed, here it is yielded, admired, glorified . . . it points out to us the evidence of its reality. Though we cannot purchase it by our righteousness, it is freely bestowed, it yet evidences itself through righteousness. It is not by righteousness that we obtain it; but only the righteous have it. As it is sonship to the righteous God that is conferred; as sonship implies likeness; it follows that the test of such a sonship having been conferred is the presence of the likeness, the presence of the righteousness. Accordingly we read: ‘If ye know that He is righteous, ye know that every one also that doeth righteousness is born of Him.’ This is the test. None but the righteous are sons of God. The Apostle does not say, None but the righteous can become the sons of God. Then it would not be true that the sonship is a free gift of ineffable, sovereign love. But he does say that none but the righteous are the sons of God. This is, indeed, essential to his point of view, that sonship hangs on an inward fact. Paul, too, teaches the same doctrine even though he is looking upon sonship as a juridical fact. For God leaves none of those whom He constitutes His sons by adoption without the Spirit of sonship in their hearts, crying Abba, Father; and only those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. But much more will John, who is thinking of regeneration rather than justification, under the figure of sonship teach the same. Only he who doeth righteousness can really be begotten of the Righteous One. That we do righteousness becomes thus the test and evidence of our sonship. Begetting is the implanting of a seed of life, and it is the very nature of life to live, that is, to manifest its essential nature in outward activities. But the seed implanted in this begetting is the seed of holy living; how can it be said to be there if it is not manifested in holy living? It is of the very nature of the thing that only those who do righteousness can have been begotten by the Righteous God unto newness of life. But is not John then blending regeneration with sanctification? If none is born of God – regenerated – unless he doeth righteousness, is not this to say that by the mystical act of being begotten of God – regeneration – a man must be made holy, and unless he has been made holy, he is not born of God? Yes, and no. For John, while insisting that no one is born of God who does not do righteousness, does not represent him as having already in his new birth attained his goal. An infant is not a full-grown man. Nor is he who is born of God already perfected in likeness to God. John, too, represents this as a growth. He asserts that only those who do righteousness are the children of God; but he claims to be himself – he claims that his readers are – already children of God. ‘And such we are.’ ‘Are’ – already. ‘Beloved, *now* we are children of God.’”⁵

ENDNOTES

¹ Robert Law, *The Tests of Life: A Study of the First Epistle of St. John* (T&T Clark, 1909), pp. 5-6.

² *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries V* (Eerdmans, 1961), p. 245.

³ Wm. Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible: The Letters of John and Jude* (The Saint Andrew Press, 1976), p. 43.

⁴ This section is adapted from J. Douma, *Responsible Conduct: Principles of Christian Ethics* (P&R, 2003), pp. 131-133.

⁵ B. B. Warfield, *Faith and Life* (rpt. Banner of Truth, 1974), pp. 452-454.