

# (1 John #10) Ring of Reality

by J. Glyn Owen

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*The sermon emphasizes the importance of fellowship with God and the objective tests of faith, particularly the moral test of obedience, to determine who has genuine knowledge of God.*

**Duration:** 40:52

**Scripture:** Jeremiah 31:33, Ezekiel 36:27, Matthew 6:33, Philippians 2:12, 1 John 2:3-6

**Topics:** "Obedience"

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## Description

In this sermon, the preacher discusses the importance of obedience to God's commandments as a test of genuine discipleship. He emphasizes that those who truly know God and abide in Christ will obey His commandments. The preacher refers to the parable of the sower to illustrate how the gospel is like a seed that falls on a prepared heart and brings forth fruit. He concludes that there are objective standards and indications of the reality of knowing God, and obedience to His commandments is a key factor in determining genuine discipleship.

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## Transcript

We return this morning to our, shall I say, our staple diet at this time in our morning worship, namely our studies in the first epistle written by John. We are going to be pursuing the path that is laid for us through this epistle. We may leave it occasionally when the church's calendar or something else requires it, but this is going to be our staple diet for some time.

And we return to it today. Now, we are going to read as the basis of our message this morning, verses 3 to 6 in chapter 2. 1 John, chapter 2, verses 3 to 6. And hereby we know that we know him, if we keep his commandments. He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him.

But whoso keepeth his word, in him verily is the love of God perfected. Hereby we know that we are in him. He that saith, he abideth in him, ought himself also so to walk, even as he walked.

Now you remember the main thread of the treatise thus far. Having affirmed the historical character of the Christian faith in the beginning of chapter 1, the Apostle John then went on a step to indicate that the Christian fellowship is dominated and governed and determined in its nature by the being and the character and the nature of God. God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.

Now this is the cardinal truth around which the Church of Jesus Christ can know fellowship with one another and then fellowship with the Father and with the Son. In all things we must learn to come to terms with the nature and the character of God as light. When we cease to recognize that God is holy, we shall cease to have fellowship with him and we shall cease to have fellowship one with another.

The holiness of God is essential. It is the antiseptic in our society against every evil thought and every evil deed. You deoxygenize the atmosphere when you think of God as other than holy.

Then in the remainder of the chapter, coming on to verse 2 of chapter 2, John has been discussing some of the things that frustrate this fellowship. He's been discussing various attitudes to sins and to sin. And he's concluded in the first two verses of chapter 2 by showing the all-sufficiency of our Lord Jesus Christ.

His words are not many, but his thoughts are deep. We are able to have fellowship with the holy God because of him who is the propitiation for our sins and who is now our advocate with the Father, who now pleads our cause, who trusts in him. There with the Father, and because he is there, the Lamb slain from before the foundations of the world, because he is there, we may come in him.

And have, let us repeat it, the old-fashioned word, but a beautiful word, we can have fellowship with God and with one another around his throne as we acknowledge him as our God and Father. Now, today, we begin another section. It may not appear so in the division of the chapters, but these chapter divisions, you remember, are not in the original scriptures.

These have been introduced by men, and men are always fallible, men at their best. Generally, they're very good, but certainly here, the chapter should never have ended where it does. It should have ended at the end of the second verse in the second chapter, not at the end of our present first chapter.

Because verse 3 introduces something quite new. How are we to know who has fellowship with God? Does it depend upon our subjective hunch, if I may use that word? Or, put it in another way, must we listen to everyone who professes and who says, I know God, and accept a confession of the lips as being infallible, undeniable, beyond criticism? And now, what John is telling us here, and what he's going to tell us for the next number of chapters in his epistle is this. We're not left at the mercy of a profession of faith, neither are we left at the mercy of our own hunch, of our own thoughts, of our own subjective reactions to people.

There are objective standards. There are objective indications of the reality of the knowledge of God. If a person is in fellowship with God, if a person is abiding in Christ, if a person knows God, to use the language of God, then there are certain objective evidences.

One writer, whose commentary on John has been exceedingly popular over the years, it's a fairly old one, has entitled his commentary, Tests of Faith. And he says that fundamentally this is what the first epistle of John is all about, tests of faith. Now, whether that is true of the whole epistle is a question, but it certainly is of the section that we are now beginning.

And this is the heart of the epistle. We may know who's who not because people are kind to us, not because we think so-and-so's a nice fellow, but there are objective criteria whereby we may assess and we may judge insofar as that is necessary. And, of course, it is necessary.

When there are men who come into the fellowship and want to join it, and who may not be Christian at all, we are living in a day and in an age when distinctions of significance are being blurred. And, therefore, we

are thrown back again upon these great objective tests of Scripture. Now, John has three of them, and he will apply the three tests three times over.

He's so sure of himself here, he's so sure-footed. He's received this from his Lord, and the Spirit is guiding him, and he was an apostle. He was duly authorized for this kind of thing.

And so he will apply the three tests three times over. Says John, there's a moral test. It's the test of obedience.

There's a doctrinal test. It's the test of what you believe about Jesus of Nazareth. And then there is a social test.

Do you love the brethren? Are you in love with the people of God? Now, one word of caution there. It must be very brief. This does not mean to say that John has no love for the outside world.

It does not mean to suggest that he doesn't want us to love the world for God. But what proves that we have passed from death unto life is this, that we love the brethren. If you find a Christian man or a Christian woman who prefers isolation to the fellowship of love with God's people, mark that man.

There's something wrong. Because love never isolates itself. It clings to the beloved.

Now, we come this morning to the first test that John applies here. And applies, you remember, in a given situation where there are heretics that are upsetting the church. I say the church at Ephesus, though as we indicated earlier on, when we speak of Ephesus, we not only speak of a city or a town, but of the entire environs surrounding it.

Because the church in those days comprised of a minority of people. And they came from all over the place to meet together. So the church at Ephesus doesn't mean to say just the church at Toronto.

They might come from distant places outside, because they were only a few in number, comparatively speaking. Now, two things appear in our text this morning of the utmost relevance and significance. The first thing I want you to notice is the continued profession of the heretics.

The continued profession of those who have broken with the Christian church, broken fellowship, and gone aside to have their own little place and to pursue their own doctrines and propagate their own ideas. We are living in a day and age when the very word heresy or heretic has been almost excised from the language. Nothing is wrong today.

Everything is right today. You can do what you please. So there is no such thing as heresy.

Well, now, that's not the ethos, that's not the atmosphere of the New Testament, nor of the Old. Some things are wrong. God says some things are wrong.

And in terms of belief as well as of behavior, some things are not in accordance with the will of God. You know, I remember passing a church, it was in the city of Belfast, and being absolutely astounded to see a wayside pulpit. Do you have wayside pulpits here? Well, I must explain.

Then it's a caption on the outside. They call it a wayside pulpit. It just tells you one little pithy message.

They call it a wayside pulpit over there. Now, this was the message outside this church. Heresy is the salt of the church.

That's exactly what it said. Heresy is the salt of the church. Heresy has a purifying effect.

Now, can you imagine, can you imagine the leaders, the ministers, the elders, the people concerned who had chosen this and they put it outside the church? How utterly outwith the spirit and the attitude of our New Testament Christianity. We are living in a day and age of syncretism and of an attempt to synthesize everything and bring together things that are wholly irreconcilable according to the word of Scripture. Heresy is poison according to Scripture, not the salt of the church.

It does not purify, it putrefies. Now, the propagators of false teaching in ancient Ephesus had severed themselves from the church. Chapter 2, verse 19, they went out from us, says John.

They went out from us and that proves that they didn't really belong to us because if they really belonged to us, they would have remained with us. But they went out from us. They didn't belong.

But now, the point is this, says John, and this is where the hurt comes in, you see. This is where the danger obtains as far as the church is concerned. Even though these clever Gnostics and professing Christians are no longer within the church, but they've gone out and they've got their own little place somewhere, they still profess and pretend to be the godliest of people.

This is what endangers the church. Now, their profession is reflected in John's language here in two statements. And you have the first in verse 4. Apparently, they still claimed to know God.

Now, listen to verse 4. He who says, says John, I know God, but disobeys his commandments is a liar. And the truth is not in him. Now, the commentators, I think, will universally agree that the reference here is to this heretical group.

You see, they've gone out, but they say, we haven't ceased to believe. We haven't ceased to know God. We've not turned our backs upon God.

We still know God. We're not with the church. We're not with the community of the believers where the word is preached, where the sacraments are administered, and where discipline is exercised.

No, no. We've turned our backs upon the institution, if we may so speak, insofar as it was an institution in those days, the emerging institution. We've turned our backs upon all that, but we still know God.

Now, by that, of course, they're professing something much more than believing that God is, that God exists. To profess to know God professes a relationship with Him. There are two words in the New Testament for knowing.

One is the intellectual process of knowing, just knowing the facts. The other is knowledge on a far deeper level. You and I get to know one another, or better still, husband and wife get to know one another, deeply, intimately, really.

And within that intimate knowledge, there is a revelation of the one given to the other. Now, that's the word here for knowledge of God. To know God is to be living with Him, is to receive His Word, is to have communion with Him, fellowship with Him.

They continue to profess that. And the second statement is this. They apparently continue to claim to abide in Christ.

Look at verse six. He who says, says John, he abides in Him, ought to walk in the same way in which he walked. Now, obviously, we have the same kind of thing.

The heretics are saying, you see, now we've left the community, we've left the church, but we still know God and we're still abiding in the Lord Jesus Christ. This shows how influenced they've been by Christian teaching, because it's all reminiscent of the allegory of John 15, the vine and the branches. Now, to abide in Christ involves two things.

First of all, it involves that a man is in Christ. You've got to be in Him before you can abide in Him. You see, by nature, we belong not to Christ's stock, but to the Adamic stock.

We're in Adam. That's the great division of the Bible. Men are either in Adam or they're in Christ.

The Bible doesn't really divide people into cultured and illiterate. It doesn't divide people into rich and poor. It doesn't divide people into black and white.

The Bible treats all these as incidental and trivial, comparatively speaking. But the great division in the Bible is this. Are you in Adam or are you in Christ? Have you been born once or have you been born again? Now, a Christian is a man who's been excised from the Adamic stock and incorporated into the stock of the second and the last Adam.

In other words, in the language of John 15, he is a man in Christ or a woman in Christ, incorporated into Christ, into life union with Him, like the branch receiving the life of the vine. That's the first thing. But now, there's more than that involved in abiding in Christ.

It not only means that I am in life union with Him, but in communion with Him. Now, communion means this. To use the, to pursue this analogy of vine and the branches, the vine and the branches may be said to have communion, the one with the other, in so far as the main stem of the vine imparts its life to the branches, and the life flows through, and the branches, as it were, receive the life of the main stem.

It's a communion life. They share the same life. The main stem sends, it gushes forth to the uttermost parts of every branch, and the branch receives it.

Now, that's communion. The main stem of the vine and the branches may be said to have communion, in so far as the branches bear the fruit of the vine. I find this, at one and the same time, one of the most sweet and one of the most challenging truths of the Bible.

The vine, the main stem, bears no fruit. And there is a sense in which our blessed Lord Jesus Christ bears no fruit today. A sense, I said.

How, then, does His work carry on? Well, His branches. The branches of the vine that bring forth fruit. Of course, it's His life in the branches, His resources in the branches, penetrating into every branch of the vine.

It is His fruit, of course. I'm not denying that glorious truth. Everything is from Him.

But He brings forth His fruit in the branches, through the branches. Now, that's communion. That's communion.

And when the branch says, it isn't mine at all. It's all His. It's not for me.

It's all Him. And He says, I'm not going to bring forth My fruit apart from the branches, but in the branches, through the branches, on the branches. He shares the glory of fruit bearing with His people.

Now, these people are professing that they're still bearing the fruit of abiding in Christ. They persist in saying that they know God and that they're abiding in Christ. Now the question comes to the church.

It's a very practical one. Is this so? Can you break away from the church and can you imbibe other beliefs which are not in the revelation of God through His Son and His apostles? Can you accept these new beliefs and continue to know God and continue to abide in Christ? Can you? John answers. And that brings us to the principles whereby the claim to know God and to be abiding in Christ must be tested.

There are three. Basically, the apostle insists that there are objective tests of genuine discipleship. And now he introduces us to the first of these, the moral test of obedience.

Now let me just, as briefly as I can, summarize these. First thing is this. It's the response of a person to God's commandments.

This is absolutely basic. No man really knows God, can claim to know God. And no man can claim to be abiding in Christ who does not obey His commandments.

Now we'll enlarge upon that in a moment, but fundamentally that is what John is saying. You may recognize those who really know God and who really abide in Christ by their attitude to the divine commandments. Look at verses three and four.

By this we may be sure that we know Him. How? If we keep His commandments. He who says, I know Him, but disobeys His commandments is a liar.

Oh my, John is blunt. He's a liar, he says, and the truth is not in him. He said that once before in chapter one, in another context.

But here it is again. If you say, he says, that you know Him and you disobey His commandments, then he says the truth is not in you, you're a liar. The apostle could hardly make it plainer.

Obedience to God's commandment confirms and authenticates the claim to a knowledge of God. Whilst disobedience to His commandments proves any such claim to be false. Now this must not be interpreted, of course, as if John were saying that we earn salvation, earn the knowledge of God by keeping commandments.

That would deny the whole doctrine of justification by faith. It would deny the whole doctrine of grace. It would deny the whole message of the gospel.

John's not saying that. He's not saying that you become a Christian by keeping the commandments. What he says is this.

If you are a Christian, you will keep the commandments. Neither is John saying that you've got to keep all the commandments all the time in order to prove that you're a Christian. That's not what he's saying.

If that were the case, then he would be withdrawing something that he's already said in chapter one. He says that there is no one anywhere who does not sin. If we say that we have not sinned, he says, we make him a liar and his truth is not in us.

In other words, all of us have failed to keep the commandments of the Lord. What then is he saying? What he's saying is this. If a man is genuinely living in the knowledge of God, then his ambition is to keep the commandments.

The sails of his life are set to know God's will and to do God's will. This is what he lives for. This is the principle of his life.

He may fall, he may flounder as all of us do at some time or another, but fundamentally this is what he's saying. John Calvin sums it up very beautifully. He says that the apostles' teaching has reference to those who, and I quote, strive according to the capacity of human infirmity to form their life in obedience to God.

As a matter of fact, the very word keep the commandments, that word keep gives us the key. The word keep the commandments suggests a carefulness, a diligence. You want to keep something.

And you take a good look at yourself every now and again to see if you're in the right road. If you're going into the country, you want to find a place, you want to keep on the right road, you look at the signpost in case you've taken the wrong turning. You look at your map, you check up because you want to go the right way to the right destination.

Here is the man of God, he's always checking up. He wants to be sure that he's keeping the commandments. Put positively, the man who knows God does not only know and believe the truth as God has revealed it, but, says John at the end of that verse, the truth is in him.

Now this to me is one of the most precious and profound doctrines of Holy Scripture. And I always find I have to come back to it to understand what's going on in my own life and in the life of the church today. It is not only that a Christian believes the truth and the truth is in his head, but the truth is in his soul, in his heart.

Let me explain. You remember, oh our Lord had a knack of putting things so simply, so simply sometimes that we don't see the truth for the simplicity of it. He said the gospel is like a seed.

A man went forth to sow the seed. You follow that parable too and what he's saying is this. The gospel is like a seed and when it is received savingly, it falls upon a human heart as a seed falls upon soil that has been prepared.

And it not only falls on the surface, but it goes right down and there it germinates and it brings forth fruit. Can you see the picture? The gospel is the truth of God, the word of God, falling into the soil of the heart and doing something there that is saving. He who said in the beginning, let there be and there was, that same word of God falls into the soil of the human soul, prepared by the Spirit in terms of penitence and receptivity and there it brings forth fruit in newness of life.

Now this is the gospel. This is what Jeremiah meant, you know. When prophesying the gospel of the new covenant, he wrote, this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after these days, saith the Lord, I will put my law within them.

Within them. And I will write it upon their hearts. Christian people, truly Christian people, do not only have the law in their heads and know what God requires because they read the book and memorize scripture and know the principles, but they have the truth, they have the law in their hearts.

It is written there by the Holy Spirit. Now Ezekiel qualifies that. In chapter 36 and verse 27.

He says, this promise relates to the new covenant. I will put my spirit within them and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances. Now you bring these two together.

Jeremiah is saying that God says, I will put my law into their hearts and I will write it upon their minds. Ezekiel says, he quotes God as saying, I will put my spirit within them and I will cause them to walk in my statutes and to keep my ordinances. Now leap the centuries and come to Philippians chapter 2. And Paul says to the Philippians, work out your own salvation, he says, with fear and trembling.

How can we do that? This reason says Paul, because it is God who worketh in you, both to will and to do of his good pleasure. God's word is in the heart of his people. God's spirit is in the heart of his people.

Therefore, what? We should desire to keep his commandment. It's inevitable. The logic is impeccable.

You can't find a flaw here. Experientially, this is what makes the church of Jesus Christ. What's the difference between a Christian and a non-Christian? All this, the miracle of regeneration has taken place.

And he wants to do the will of God. He fights with himself and he fights with the world and he fights with Satan. Why? Because he's tuned to God.

Men who have seceded from a fellowship which was with the Father and with his Son, as John puts it. And who have been sidetracked for this purpose or that, especially where heresy has been involved, still claim that they know God and they're not obeying his commandments. Says John, there's something wrong there.

Be careful. The second thing he says is this, and it's very closely related, as you notice. Response to the law of God or the word of God is all apiece with response to the love of God.

You notice how John says it. Whoso keeps his word or commandment, in him truly is love for God or the love of God perfected. By this we may be sure that we are in him.

That's verse 5. Now, did you get that? Love for God can only be perfectly expressed by obedience to his commandments. Now, we are living in a day and age when there's an unwholesome dichotomy that has been introduced between law and love. I don't need to go into all this.

You know about it. People tell you the only thing you need is love. Love God and love your neighbor and carry on.

You don't need the Bible. You don't need doctrine. All that's dry, dusty.

You know, it's very marvelous. It would save me my whole week. And it would save many of you hours upon hours of toil if you can dispense with this old book and just get on and get a little bit of love in your heart and slap everybody on the back and say, Brother, I love you.

Sister, I love you. Come on. You don't need the law.

You don't need the doctrine. You don't need this teaching of the Bible. You don't need the objective revelation.

Just love. Now, we can react to that in a bad way. We can say, No, no, no.

It's not love. It's law. That's not what the book says.

What the book says is this. You need law and love. Not love or law.

Not law or love. But obedience to the law of God requires you to express it in love for God and the love of God for others. In other words, these two are a piece.

You can't separate them. It's not a matter of law or love. It's a matter of both.

And please mark these words. Moreover, will you bear in mind that these words were written by him who has been called the apostle of love? John's emphasis upon love is second to none in the New Testament. It isn't that he minimizes love.

He's the apostle of love. But to John, such a dichotomy is groundless. And such an attempt to denigrate and dismiss the commandments out of court is utterly mischievous.

They belong to each other. John says that love for God is perfected only by keeping His commandments. Now, this is very serious.

If love for God can only come to full bloom and only be perfected by keeping His commandments, I've got to know His commandments. I've got to be sure that I'm not breaking any one of them. I don't know whether it was I myself or somebody else preaching in this pulpit, but I've heard someone.

I don't really have a very good memory. But I knew of the incident, and I could well have quoted it, referring to C.T. Stubb, staying with Dr. F.B. Meyer in England on one occasion for a long weekend. And Dr. F.B. Meyer thought he heard some commotion in the house at about four o'clock in the morning.

And he thought perhaps his guest was not well. And so he got up and he heard a rumble in C.T. Stubb's room. And he knocked at the door gently and then peeped in, and he saw C.T. Stubb, the England cricketer, the sweater around him, sitting on the ledge of the window with a little candle in his left hand.

And said, Dr. F.B. Meyer to him, C.T., he said, what on earth are you doing this time of day? Well, Sir C.T. said, I woke up. The Lord woke me up. He said, the first thought in my mind at that moment was the passage from John, If you love me, keep my commandments.

You will keep my commandments is a better translation. And he said, I do love him. So he says, I'm just checking up and finding out where I am.

Is there a commandment that I'm not keeping? Men and women, where do we stand this morning if this is the test? What John has said thus far then is this, whereas the absence of obedience to God's demands

renders our profession to know Him and to abide in Christ both null and void, the presence of obedience to the commandments not only points to a knowledge of God, but also to our abiding in Christ. And the last point is this. Will you bear with me for one moment? Abiding in Christ means walking like Him.

Oh, yes. If I'm in life union with Jesus Christ, as the branches in the vine, and if I'm abiding in communion, unbroken union with Him, and His life is shared with me, and my life is at His disposal, if I'm living in communion with Him, then I must walk as He walked. Well, how did He walk? My good people, if there is one thing that characterized the earthly life of Jesus Christ, it is this, He did His Father's commandments.

Now, I can't pursue this because the clock has run away with me. But right through the very ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ, He uses the word commandment to show how He received commandments from His Father. Concerning His laying down of His life, for example, for this reason my Father loves me, He says in John 10, because I lay down my life that I may take it again.

No one takes my life from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. This commandment I receive from my Father, oh, I'm giving it down of my own accord, He says, but at the same time it's a commandment that I receive. The Father's will and my will are one, and my will is to do His will and to accomplish His work.

You see it? But even down to lesser details, listen to this, even the content of His teaching, what He said, the words He used, I have not spoken, He says, on my own authority. The Father who sent me has Himself given me commandment, what to say and what to speak. And I know that His commandment is eternal life.

What I say, therefore, I say as the Father has bidden me, John 12, 49 and 50. And lastly, in John 15, 10, 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. Do you see the whole thing tying up? It's far too logical for my comfort.

I can't wriggle out of this, can you? Can you find a hole here? Can you go and say, Lord, I can excuse myself because of my disobedience to the commandments, because of my carelessness in knowing the commandments. Can you? Can you find a way out? I can't. If I'm abiding in Him, I'm abiding in one who kept the commandments.

And I meet men who tell me that doctrine and doctrinal preaching is not important. If you are here this morning, let me tell you, my friend, that's not the viewpoint of the revelation of God given in His Son and apostles. You need this Word to live by it, to die by it, to stand on the judgment day.

Only by this you will be judged and I will be judged. No, no. It's not enough to make one loud profession.

I know, God. I am abiding in the Lord Jesus as you are abiding in Him. It's not adequate, prove it, by keeping His commandments.

And to those who are abiding in Christ, His commandments are not grievous. My yoke is easy and my burden is light. Let us pray.

Father, Thy Word solemnizes us at all times. And particularly when we examine ourselves in this kind of situation, apply it with the gentleness of a physician's hand, nay, a father's hand. For Thou knowest those of us who need it especially today.

It may be Thy servant in the pulpit. It may be one of Thy servants in the pew. It may be all of us together.

O mighty, merciful, gracious, loving Heavenly Father, enable us to prove our pedigree with a ring of reality by the keeping of the commandments of our Lord. We ask it in His name. Amen.

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