

Walking *in the Light*: Keeping His Commandments



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Lev. 19:18; Luke 14:26; John 3:20; 13; 1 Tim. 2:4; 2 Pet. 3:18; 1 John 2:3–11.*

Memory Text: “Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments” (*1 John 2:3, NKJV*).

A pastor had been counseling a husband and wife. The problem? The husband had been having extramarital affairs. That’s not an extramarital affair but, in fact, many of them. The husband tried to calm the situation by telling the wife that although he had been with other women, it didn’t mean that he didn’t love her. In fact, he said, he loved her more than any of the others.

As could be expected, his words—far from solving the problem—only made it worse. Why? Because if you love someone, you show it by your actions, by your deeds, *not* just by what you say.

This week, John talks about what it means to know and to love God. Anyone can say that he or she loves the Lord. The question is, According to the Bible, how are we to reveal that love?

The Week at a Glance: What does it mean to know God, as opposed to just knowing *about* Him? What role does obedience to God’s law have in our relationship with God? What does John say about Jesus as a role model for behavior? What is the “new commandment” that John gives, and how “new” is it really?

**Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, July 25.*

What Do We Know? (1 John 2:3–5)

The phrase “by this we know” (*NKJV*) appears twice in the above passages. Just what is it, according to John, that Christians know?

First, that they have come to know God (*vs. 3*) and, second, that they “are in Him” (*vs. 5, NKJV*). Considering what’s at stake—our eternal life or our eternal destruction (*see John 5:29*)—these are important things to know, are they not?

At the same time, we have to be careful that we don’t turn knowledge itself into the means of salvation. In fact, that’s the exact kind of heresy John was dealing with here and in other places, the idea that knowledge alone brings redemption.

Knowledge (gnosis) was a crucial term in ancient religion, and it was an important concept in the religious world of the first centuries after Christ. Probably by the second century it had developed into a full-fledged heresy among Christians called Gnosticism. In Gnosticism, there was little concern for moral behavior. The emphasis was on mystical experience and fancy myths about God and the nature of humanity. Salvation was gained through this secret knowledge rather than through a faith relationship with the Lord.

What do the following texts tell us about how the New Testament uses the idea of knowledge? *Matt. 13:11; Luke 1:34, 77; John 17:3; Rom. 3:20; 1 Cor. 8:1; 1 Tim. 2:4; 2 Pet. 3:18; 1 John 4:8.*

In the New Testament *to know/knowledge* has a theoretical and theological meaning. However, it also describes relationships. To know God means to have an intimate relationship with Him. Obedience, love, and staying away from sin all point to the existence of such a relationship. The theoretical and the experiential side of knowledge must go together.

Although the verb *to know* is used frequently by John, he stays away from the noun *knowledge*. He may have decided to avoid the more technical term so that confusion with Gnosticism could be avoided.

Do you know the Lord, or do you just *know about* Him? What’s the crucial difference between these two concepts? Most important, if it’s only the latter, how can you change, and why is it important to do so?

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *1 John 2:1–6*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Realize a true knowledge of God results in obedience.

Feel: Embrace a desire to follow Jesus' example.

Do: Respond by keeping God's commandments.

► **Lesson Outline:**

I. Know: True Knowledge

A Why does John call an “old” commandment a “new” commandment? What is the difference between neighborly love in the Old Testament and the continuous revelation in the life of Jesus and His followers?

B Seventh-day Adventists are sometimes called legalists. Reflect on the truth or error of this claim in the light of John's statement that we should obey God's commandments.

C How do some try to turn knowledge into their means of salvation? Why isn't knowledge enough to bring about redemption?

II. Feel: Following Jesus' Example

A Love and obedience are inseparable. Discuss how we can nurture both and maintain the right balance.

B Gnosticism in the early church emphasized mystical experience rather than a relationship with God. Postmodernism emphasizes experience rather than knowledge. Why are feelings and experience not enough?

III. Do: Living in the Light

A John calls those who profess to know God but fail to keep His commandments liars. “Liar” has strong negative connotations. Determine what concrete steps we need to take to avoid this label.

B Brainstorm about reasons why we do not always follow Jesus' example. Share ways that we can avoid these pitfalls.

► **Summary:** A true knowledge of God results in a living relationship with God and loving relationships within the framework of God's commandments.

Keeping the Commandments *(1 John 2:3–5)*

Anyone can say that they know God. In fact, a lot of people have done that, even people in John’s day. Many do today, as well. Talk, though, is cheap.

For John, what was the outward evidence, the outward proof, that a person knows God? What else does John say about this topic? *John 14:15, 21; John 15:10; 1 John 3:22, 24; 5:3; Rev. 12:17; 14:12.* How do these verses tie in with each other? How do they affirm us, as Adventists, in our position about the law?

Keeping the commandments is very important to John and to Jesus. The phrase occurs quite often in John’s writings. Keeping the commandments is a sign that we know God/Jesus and love Him. Love and obedience are connected here. The term *Him* can refer to either God the Father or Jesus and is somewhat ambiguous—probably on purpose too. First John 2:4 states the same truth in negative terms and may refer to a false claim made by those who say that you can come to know God and yet neglect keeping the commandments. John attacks this idea in very strong language, calling anyone who teaches it a liar.

Why would keeping the law reveal our knowledge of God? How does our *act* of keeping the law reveal the reality of our *knowledge* of God? How is one related to the other?

The kind of knowledge of God that the Bible talks about isn’t merely a cognizance of facts. It’s a knowledge that forms the basis of a love relationship. You can’t truly love someone you don’t know. And if you love someone, you are going to act a certain way. A man who truly loves his wife isn’t going to cheat on her. He can profess his love day and night, and yet if his actions don’t reveal that love, then he is, to use John’s term, “a liar.”

What other analogies can you think of that are helpful in understanding why our obedience, our deeds, form an inseparable part of what it means to know God?

Learning Cycle

► STEP 1—Motivate

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: Love and obedience to God compel us to reach out to those in need.

Just for Teachers: How does one define who is a Christian? What are the marks of a genuine Christian? Lead your class to find biblical answers to these vital questions.

The world has many types of Christians. Among them are the “loaves-and-fishes” Christians, those who see an economic advantage in being a Christian. Then there are the social Christians, those to whom church is a prestigious club to belong to. And, finally, there are the ceremonial Christians, to whom the forms of the church are needed when members are born, married, or buried.

Discuss: Perhaps, as you read the “taxonomy” of Christian groups, you found yourself affixing these labels to others, or even to yourself. But what is the New Testament concept of a Christian? (*See Luke 9:23.*)

► STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: Jesus said and John recorded, “ ‘This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent’ ” (*John 17:3, NKJV*). What constitutes this knowledge? The answer reveals a fundamental difference between the pagan and Christian understanding of God. Gnostics held that rational knowledge was enough to gain acceptance with God and that conduct was of no consequence. But the apostle points to a higher standard: knowledge of God must lead to obedience to His law and love toward Him and toward one another. Lead your class to discover the importance of obedience and love in learning who God is.

Bible Commentary

Overview: Someone may say “I know God” without feeling any moral or ethical compulsions to enact this knowledge. Another may say “I do not know God” but be a highly ethical person. Christians have no such option.

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What Would Jesus Do? *(1 John 2:6–8)*

Awhile back there was a fad during which young Christian people would wear bracelets with the English letters WWJD inscribed on them, standing for “What would Jesus do?” Though some derided the whole idea as childish, at least the idea behind it was good, and the idea was that when confronted with a situation, we should think about what Jesus would do and try to do likewise.

This fits in nicely with what John has been saying here. The first part of our passage has stressed that walking in the light and knowing God means to be obedient. The second part now calls Christians who want to abide in Him and walk in the light to follow Christ’s example in living their lives. How can they do this? They have to find out how Jesus lived, and on a daily basis they must compare their conduct to His.

In other words, “What would Jesus do?”

Skim through the Gospels. What are some of your favorite stories of Jesus; that is, what stories really speak to your heart about the kind of person Jesus was? How similar are you to Him in these areas?

Although the death of Jesus and His resurrection are the climax of the Gospels, sufficient information on Jesus’ teachings and His life are recorded so that we can understand how a human being, ideally, should live.

This is important to remember, because sometimes people want to focus only on Jesus as Savior, Jesus as their Substitute, and not on Jesus as their Lord and Example. John accepted Jesus both as Savior and as an Example. In 1 John 1:7 he had mentioned the cleansing blood of Christ, which points to His death on the cross in our place. According to 1 John 2:2, Jesus is the atoning sacrifice for our sins. He was our Substitute. But in our verses this week the other aspect shows up. Jesus lived an exemplary life. We should follow His footsteps.

Most of us, no matter who we are, are facing some sort of difficulties in life. Think about your greatest challenge, your greatest struggle. Then ask yourself the question, “What would Jesus do?” After you have what you deem your best answer, ask yourself, “What’s stopping me from doing the same?”

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

We must know God, but it does not end there. Our belief must govern our conduct and relationships. In essence, beyond knowing God intellectually, we must obey Him, love Him, and love our neighbors.

I. To Know God Is to Obey Him *(Review 1 John 2:3–5 with the class.)*

How can we be sure that we know God? John’s answer is clear: “By this we may be sure that we know him, if we keep his commandments” (*1 John 2:3, RSV*). Knowing God is not an intellectual exercise, a logical drill, or emotional ecstasy; it is the submission of life in all its dimensions to God’s demands. To affirm the knowledge of God but refuse to obey Him makes one a liar. “The truth is not in” such a person (*1 John 2:4*).

Through obedience, we are asked to abide in Him and walk the way that Jesus walked (*vs. 6*). “True religion is the imitation of Christ. Those who follow Christ will deny self, take up the cross, and walk in His footsteps.” —Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 7, p. 949.

Consider This: What is the connection between the law and love? Why must the life reveal living truth?

II. To Obey God Is to Love Him *(Review 1 John 2:5, 6 with the class.)*

If obedience is one test, love is another. By love that is “perfected” in us, “we know that we are in Him” (*1 John 2:5, NKJV*). “God is love” (*1 John 4:8*), and therefore, those who say that they know God must love Him, abide in Him, and obey Him. God is not satisfied with selective love and obedience. He expects a “perfected” love—that is, a growing and maturing love. Lest someone fail to understand what this means, John points to the Jesus model: “Walk just as He walked” (*1 John 2:6, NKJV*).

Think on This: Christian love and obedience must be a reflection of the Jesus walk—a walk through the wilderness, through Gethsemane, to the foot of the cross—wherever God leads. Why is there no room for compromise here?

III. To Love God Is to Love One Another *(Review 1 John 2:7–11 with the class.)*

John wastes no time on theories or speculations about what it means to love God. He positions love in the laboratory of living. The acid test of

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The New Commandment *(1 John 2:7, 8)*

After stressing the importance of obeying the commandments (*1 John 2:3, 4*), John in verses 7 and 8 introduces the idea of a “new commandment.” What is this “new commandment”? The answer is found in John 13:34, where the same expression, “new commandment,” appears.

Read John 13. What is the context that helps us understand what this “new commandment” is?

After having shown His disciples what it means to serve—namely, even to step down and perform the lowly task of washing someone’s feet—Jesus issued His “new commandment.” His disciples should love each other just as Jesus loved them.

A similar situation occurs in 1 John 2:6–8. After having talked about walking as Jesus did, John pointed to Jesus’ commandment in John 13. It is this literary connection with John 13:34, 35 that helps us unlock the meaning of 1 John 2:7, 8. The commandment John is talking about is the commandment about brotherly and sisterly love.

But why does he state that he is writing not a new commandment but an old one? That’s because the commandment of neighborly love was already present in the Old Testament (*Lev. 19:18*). When John wrote his letter, Jesus’ “new commandment” of John 13:34 had already been a commandment for many years.

Yet in a sense, this commandment was new in that it was continuously realized in the life of Jesus (“in Him” [*1 John 2:6, NKJV*]) and was to be seen in His followers (“and in you” [*vs. 8, NKJV*]) in an unprecedented way because of the new age inaugurated with Jesus’ first advent (“the darkness is passing away, and the true light is already shining” [*vs. 8, NKJV*]).

Finally, the concept of God’s law connects the first part of our passage (*1 John 2:3–6*) with the second (*1 John 2:7, 8*). The commandments are summarized in the commandment to love each other. To walk in the Light and to walk as Jesus did means to keep the commandments and love each other.

When was the last time you “washed someone’s feet,” figuratively speaking? If it has been a long time, what does that tell you about yourself and about how you relate to others? Why is the kind of death to self that leads to the service of others so hard to realize in our own lives?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

loving God is loving one's neighbors. Anyone who claims to love God but does not love his or her neighbor "is in darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes" (*1 John 2:11, NKJV*). That thought has sobering implications: a lack of love toward our neighbors makes us children of darkness. As such, we have no direction, no destination, and no vision.

By contrast, the children of light abide in love for God and love for their neighbors. The apostle calls this love for others a new commandment (*1 John 2:8*); and yet, not new only, but old (*vs. 7*). How can this commandment be old and new at the same time?

It is old because it has always been there. The commandment to love was there when the voice of the eternal Word called Cain to accountability: "Where is Abel your brother?" (*Gen. 4:9, NKJV*). It was there when the law demanded, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord" (*Lev. 19:18, RSV*). It was there when Micah thundered, "He has shown you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?" (*Micah 6:8, NKJV*).

Yet, it is new because Jesus took it to new heights. Jesus appointed love as a test of discipleship. He expected that we should love our neighbors even as He loved us (*John 13:34, 35*), and, as the Cross shows, He loved us to the point of death. Further, in demanding that we love our "neighbors," Jesus introduced into history a new definition of the word: neighbors are not those who are tied to us by blood or creed or community but everyone who is in need. As in the parable of the good Samaritan, "Our neighbor is every soul who is wounded and bruised by the adversary. Our neighbor is everyone who is the property of God."—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 503.

This new definition implies love without frontiers. Add to this understanding another dimension: Jesus empowers us to love one another. Through Jesus, the God incarnate, "the darkness is passing away, and the true light is already shining" (*1 John 2:8, NKJV*). Jesus the Light empowers us to walk in the light. When we walk in the light, we cannot hate those around us. Love becomes the natural flow of the heart, and the fruitage of obedience overflows the cup of discipleship (*John 15:8*).

Discuss: Love does not recognize any frontiers. What kind of frontiers do you see around you that inhibit the Christian concept of love? (*See Eph. 2:14.*)

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Loving Others *(1 John 2:9–11)*

Summarize what John is saying to us in the above verses.

Love was mentioned briefly in 1 John 2:5. Obviously that love refers to our love toward God, which is manifested when we keep His commandments. Love was indirectly dealt with in the second part of our passage, the new commandment (*vss. 6–9*). Love toward fellow Christians is, however, clearly spelled out in the last section of our paragraph (*vss. 9–11*). It also begins with the phrase “he who says” (*see vss. 4, 6, 9, NKJV*).

Verse 9 makes a statement about the church member who hates his brother. This person is in darkness. Verse 10 shows the positive side—a person who loves his brother. Verse 11 returns to hating one’s brother. Not only is such a person in darkness, but his or her eyes have been blinded.

In his letter John is interested primarily in the Christian community. That does not mean he would deny the fact that Christians are called to love their neighbors and even their enemies, but this is not his concern here. He has other problems at hand.

Hating one’s brother is a strong statement, and we may not like applying it to us and our behavior. We may prefer to say that we are irritated or offended, but Scripture oftentimes uses the term *hate* in ways that we don’t commonly use today. How is the term *hate* used, and how is it to be understood in the following texts? *Matt. 6:24; 24:9, 10; Luke 14:26; John 3:20.*

In Scripture *hate* stands not only for what we may call hate today but also for preferring one person over another or neglecting somebody. In other words, you don’t have to despise someone to reveal “hate” as it’s sometimes understood in the Bible.

Is there someone you hate, and maybe with good reason, too? If so, ask yourself the question, What would Jesus do?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED► **STEP 3—Apply****Thought Questions:**

- 1 The gospel introduced a new yardstick for relationships—love: loving the unlovable and loving without reservations. What makes such a love possible?
- 2 First John 2:9–11 charges that if we do not love our neighbors, we harbor hatred and are blind. Why are such charges justifiable?

Application Questions:

- 1 Imagine a neighbor in need. But he is somewhat obnoxious and unlikable. How would you show love toward such a person?
- 2 Read Paul’s Epistle to Philemon. Review how Paul relates love, obedience, and forgiveness to a real-life situation as it affected Onesimus, the runaway slave. It was Paul’s wish that Philemon walk as Christ walked. How can we ensure that we do the same?

► **STEP 4—Create**

Just for Teachers: Encourage students to engage in the following activities as a way of making head knowledge also hand and heart knowledge.

- 1 Hold a food drive in your church. Encourage members to donate a canned food or nonperishable food item. Collect these items over the next four weeks. Take the box of donated items to a local shelter in your area for distribution to those who need it.
- 2 Write a skit based on the scenario described in Step 3 between the church member and the neighbor in need who is unlikable and obnoxious. Or have two class members assume the roles and present a short dramatic improvisation, showcasing how such an encounter between the two characters would play out. What helpful strategies or insights about approaching and effectively ministering to the needs of challenging neighbors can we learn from this improvisation or skit?

Further Study: Read Genesis 39:7–12, Daniel 3:8–18, Revelation 13:16, 14:5.

Walking in the light, which includes keeping the commandments, living like Jesus, and exercising love, is especially important at the end of the world’s history. God’s law is being challenged, and the issue of true worship and obedience to the Creator will come even more to the front. In Scripture, examples are mentioned, people who remained faithful even under the most challenging circumstances: Joseph, Daniel’s friends, Daniel, and many others. The prime example is Jesus. We must make the decision to follow His lead, no matter what.

“John tells us that true love for God will be revealed in obedience to all His commandments. It is not enough to believe the theory of truth, to make a profession of faith in Christ, to believe that Jesus is no impostor, and that the religion of the Bible is no cunningly devised fable. . . . John did not teach that salvation was to be earned by obedience; but that obedience was the fruit of faith and love.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 563.

Discussion Questions:

- 1** It’s one thing to keep the Ten Commandments; it’s another thing to love other people. What’s the difference? Which is easier to do, and why?
- 2** French philosopher Michael Foucault once differentiated between two kinds of knowledge: the kind that changed the one who acquired that knowledge and the kind of knowledge that brought no change at all. What could be some examples of these two types of knowledge? More important, what kind of knowledge is the knowledge of God, and what kind of changes should it bring to the ones knowing it?
- 3** How can we avoid falling into the trap of trying to earn our salvation by keeping the commandments, while at the same time avoiding the trap of believing that we can be saved in disobedience to the law?
- 4** What can you, as a class, do to help your local church as a whole better understand what it means to manifest love? Is there even such a thing as corporate love? Picture what the ideal and perfectly loving local church would be like. How well does your local church match up?