

No Longer Pretenders

I John 2:1-6

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ February 9, 2020 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘

¹My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; ² and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.

³ Now by this we may be sure that we know him, if we obey his commandments. ⁴ Whoever says, “I have come to know him,” but does not obey his commandments, is a liar, and in such a person the truth does not exist; ⁵ but whoever obeys his word, truly in this person the love of God has reached perfection. By this we may be sure that we are in him: ⁶ whoever says, “I abide in him,” ought to walk just as he walked. (I John 2:1-6, NRSV)

✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘

Our family has planned a trip to Canada this summer. To go to Canada you have to go through customs. I'm counting on them letting me in, but I'm also counting on them making me leave. If I was Canadian I could stay indefinitely. That's what citizens get to do. I could pass for Canadian, don't you think? I could learn to talk like a Canadian, eh! I could learn to love hockey...maybe. I could pretend. But at the border they have ways of telling. They check your passport. They snap your picture. They can take your fingerprints. They ask you to spell Saskatchewan. I'm not sure how often non-Canadians try to pose as Canadians to gain permanent entry, but at the border they do everything they can to spot the pretenders.

Did you know that in the church there are sometimes people pretending to be Christians? In fact, the primary reason that John wrote this letter to this group of churches in Asia Minor in the latter half of the 1st century was to address this problem in his day. There were false believers running about, some who were claiming the name of Christ but who were, in essence, not his true followers. Much of this letter of 1st John is aimed at helping the church know the difference, to spot the pretenders.

In Chapter 1, which we covered the last few weeks, John focused on the essence of what it means to be a

Christian. A follower of Jesus is one who recognizes his or her sin, comes to grips with the fact that life has become unmanageable, and then turns to Christ as one who offers not only forgiveness, but life the way life was meant to be lived. Remember 1st John 1:9: **“If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”**

In chapter 2 John continues by reiterating this same message. But notice the tenderness in his words. **“My little children...”** he writes. He's writing with the heart of a parent who wants the best for his kids. And this is the best he wants: **“We have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.”** Do you understand what he is saying? If you trust Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, confess not only your sin but also confess that as the Son of God he is able, through his death and resurrection, to save you, then the righteousness of Jesus Christ becomes your righteousness. You see, apart from Christ you are judged on your own merit and goodness. But in Christ, you are judged on his merit and his goodness!

Think about it this way. You want to get into Stanford but you're that kid in high school who flunked out, straight F's. You've got nothing to put on a college application except four years of video games. But then you find out that the school valedictorian, the kid who got nothing but perfect grades and scores, and whose college application is stuffed full of stellar achievements, Stanford is going to let you use that kid's grades, test scores and application when they consider you as an applicant!

In an infinitely greater sense, when God looks to judge the life of a believer, that believer is credited with Jesus' righteousness and achievements. Romans 4:23-24 declares, **“The words “it was credited to him” were written not for [Christ] alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead.”**¹ Amazing, right? And also not fair. Of course it's not fair! Don't ever wish that God would be fair with us. Fairness is getting what you deserve, and you do not want God to give you what you deserve.

¹ NIV

Thankfully, *grace* is what God offers us in Christ, unmerited and pure grace. And John reminds us here that this grace isn't just offered to a few, but to the whole world, to all who would accept it in faith.

But that's not all. Once you are saved in this way, counted as a beloved and favored son or daughter of God himself, the Spirit of God actually comes to dwell within you to transform you. In II Peter we read that it is God's design for us to become "**participants in the divine nature.**"² Not that we become divine, but that we increasingly take on the character of God, become like the God we see revealed to us in Jesus. I recently heard Tim Keller, pastor and writer from New York City, put it this way, "Christ can make the filthiest and feeblest of us into bright, immortal creatures, pulsating all through with such radiance, and goodness, and greatness as we cannot now imagine. He can turn all of us, each one of us, into a bright stainless mirror that reflects back to him on a smaller scale his own boundlessness, goodness, wisdom, love, and delight."³ This is not only the dropout, by grace, being admitted to Stanford, but that same dropout then finding himself slowly but eventually transformed, by that same grace, into the sort of student that actually belongs at Stanford. God, you might say, desires to transform the Christian not just in status but in essence, to actually make us into people who live and love the way Jesus lived and loved.

To use another example, when my wife first married me nearly 30 years ago I was not a great husband. Who is? No man on his wedding day is a great husband. That takes time, and effort, and work. Nearly 30 years later I still have a long way to go, but I hope I've made some progress. That's how it works. My status as husband is the same today as it was on my wedding day. It's just that day, I hope, I'm better living into that status. Similarly, God's love for us is so great that he accepts us exactly as we are, mess and all, but is also so great that he does not want to leave us there. We are given the status of sons and daughters immediately, but then set on a journey to become people who actually act, and speak, and think, and live, and love like true sons and daughters of God.

In other words, God's grace is not cheap. It is free, but it costs us everything. I don't have to earn it from God, but once I accept it then I am compelled to give my whole life to God that he might have his way with me. Imagine you cheat and betray your best friend, you hurt her to the point that you deserve to have her turn her

back on you for good. Brokenhearted over what you have done, you go to her and beg for forgiveness. Amazingly, you find that she has already forgiven you completely, and has genuinely welcomed you back as her best friend. What kind of person would you then have to be to say, "This is fantastic! Apparently I can cheat my friend, betray her all I want, and she will always forgive me and take me back." God is no fool. He will not be played in this way. The person who truly comes to recognize Jesus as Savior is also the person who will come to gladly submit to Jesus as Lord.⁴

And this, to come back to where we started, is how John says we can identify the true believers from the pretenders. John is blunt, "**Now by this we may be sure that we know him, if we obey his commandments.**" True Christians obey Jesus, not as a way to earn his favor but *as a response to his favor!* This idea, of course, is not original to John. At the end of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus' essential teaching on discipleship, he ends with a parable about two builders, one who built on a foundation of sand and the other on a foundation of rock. His point is simple: You must not only listen to the things I tell you to do but you must do them, or else the life you build will have a faulty foundation and will crash to the ground in the end.⁵ Obedience is the difference.

Similarly, when he taught his disciples how to recognize false believers, Jesus declared, "**By their fruits you will know them**"⁶, by the things that they do or don't do. His brother James summed it up this way: "**Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.**"⁷ To put it simply, if you claim to be a Christian but you are not doing the things Jesus tells you to do, then you actually don't even know Jesus. You have deceived yourself. John here puts it more starkly, saying that person "**is a liar, and in such a person the truth does not exist.**"

Don't shut me down here. This is a hard word, but remember it is written with the affection of a parent who wants the best for his children. There is good news here, news of hope and joy, but we have to stay engaged. Let God's Word say to you today what God's Word needs to say to you. You see, what John is really getting at here, I think, is trust. Obedience to Jesus is not a matter of dos and don'ts (that's dead religion!), but

⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer famously wrote in *The Cost of Discipleship*, "Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate."

⁵ See Matthew 7:24-27

⁶ Matthew 7:20 (NRSV)

⁷ James 1:22 (NRSV)

² II Peter 1:4: "**Thus he has given us, through these things, his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust, and may become participants of the divine nature.**"

³ Timothy Keller, *Gospel in Life* podcast, "Active Discipline".

a matter of allegiance and trust. This is a lesson I didn't learn until I became a parent myself.

Years ago I was having one of those typical battles you have with your 15-year-old kid about boundaries and independence. I can't even remember what the particular issue was at the time, but whatever it was my teenage son absolutely hated the boundary I had set on some activity and so he had repeatedly crossed that boundary. He'd broken the rules and now he was now facing the consequences for doing so and he was furious, letting me have it. It wasn't fair. Nobody else's parents have that rule. I was totally out of touch. 15 years old is nearly an adult! I was ruining his life. All the same things I said to my parents when I was 15.

Well, right in the middle of this argument it came to me. This wasn't about the boundary or the rules. This was about trust. He didn't trust me. I was telling him what was best for him but he did not agree with my assessment. And so I just asked him straight out, "Son, do you trust me?" That wasn't what he expected to hear in that moment, but immediately he knew the answer. But he was silent. I asked again, "Do you trust me?" He remained silent so I answered for him. I told him that no, he clearly did not trust me, at least in this instance. He either believed I was misinformed or under-informed as to the matter at hand. He trusted his own assessment of the situation even though I was 30+ years older than he was with a ton more experience and had been, in fact, a fifteen-year-old kid by myself.

That day changed forever the way I understood my relationship with Christ. For the most part I know what Jesus wants me to do. He's actually quite clear about it. And yet, so much of the time I disobey. I choose to do otherwise because I think I know better. Which, when you think about it, is quite remarkable considering that Jesus is the creator, the redeemer, and the sustainer of the world and has been, himself, a human being who faced all the same struggles and temptations I face. And yet I know better than him? How about that.

What about you? Do you trust Jesus, trust him entirely? He tells you, for example, to forgive others, all others, always, no matter what. Do you? He tells you to show compassion to the poor – never scorn but only compassion. Do you? He says to save the beautiful gift of sex, both in your mind and with your body, for your marriage partner alone. Have you? He tells you not to worry, not to be anxious. Do you obey? He tells you to honor the Sabbath every week, to rest one full day in seven. Do you? He says not to gossip, to never speak unkindly about others. Do you? He says to speak the truth, even when it's inconvenient. He

commands you to love your enemies, even your political enemies. He tells you not to store up earthly treasures for yourself but instead to trust him to provide what is needed. Do you? He tells you to go out and tell others about him, about what he has done for them. Have you? Mostly he tells you to love, him first and others just like you love yourself. Do you obey and love like this?

I thought it would be immensely helpful for my son at some point to admit to himself that the reason he didn't obey me was because he didn't trust me. I thought that if we just could get to the heart of the matter, there might then be the possibility for progress. In the same way, at the many points where you and I fail to obey Jesus' clear teaching it would be immensely helpful if we would be honest and admit to ourselves that the reason we choose not to obey is because we do not trust Jesus. We think we know better. Which again, is quite a thing to say considering who Jesus is and what he has done!

I absolutely believe that Jesus does not want us to obey out of fear or duty. Fear and duty are terrible motivators in this regard. Our obedience is to be motivated by trust which is rooted in love because all things with God ultimately boil down to love. Do you believe that God is all-powerful, that everything in existence is under his sovereignty? Do you also believe that God is all-knowing, that nothing escapes his mind, that he understands every aspect of life in his creation infinitely better than we ever could? Finally, do you believe that God is all-loving, that in every instance he truly only wants what is best for all of us and would go to any lengths to sacrifice for our well-being? If we don't believe these things, okay. At least be honest about it. But if we believe these things, then how can we not obey?

Imagine you are driving one bright sunny day on a very curvy two-lane road through the mountains. Better yet, imagine you're in a Porsche Carrera GT, a car that was built to fly on this kind of road. Unfortunately, you find yourself stuck behind an 18-wheeler, a truck so big that it can barely do 20 miles per hour on this windy road. If only you could pass by, you'd be free! But you can't see through the curves to know if it's safe to pass. So unless he pulls over, you're stuck. But then a friend calls you who just so happens to be flying overhead in his private plane (I know, it's an extraordinary illustration so help me here - use your imaginations!). From his vantage point he can see your predicament, but can also see that the road ahead is empty for miles. So he tells you to go ahead and pass. Let it rip. The way ahead is clear.

Do you trust him? To do so, to pull out blindly, is to put your life in his hands. Do you trust him? It depends, right? It depends on whether you believe he truly is in a vantage point where he knows what he's talking about. It also depends on whether or not he is a friend you can trust to have your best interests in mind. If it's your mortal enemy in that airplane, or even a friend who has very, very poor eyesight, you're not going to pass.⁸

Much of what Jesus tells us to do in this life seems crazy to us from our perspective. His commandments often contradict the wisdom of this world, seem counterintuitive to what everybody else is saying. Put yourself last and you'll end up first. Die to yourself if you want to live. It's better to give than to receive. Love your enemies and you will be blessed. We can't know for certain that he's right, any more than the guy in the Porsche can know for certain that his friend is right. It's a matter of trust, trust that is rooted in love. It's why John says here, **"whoever obeys his word, truly in this person the love of God has reached perfection."** Later in the letter, John declares, **"There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear."**⁹ Once we come to know Jesus, to know both who he is and how he loves us, we will gladly obey him. To the extent that we do not obey him is the same extent to which we do not know him and his love for us and, as a result, we continue to deceive ourselves.

Does this mean that a Christian never sins, always obeys in every instance? Of course not. No person is perfectly obedient. In his commentary of this passage, the Protestant reformer, John Calvin, declared, "[John] does not mean that those who wholly satisfy the Law keep His commandments (and no such instance can be found in the world), but those who strive, according to the capacity of human infirmity, to form their life in obedience to God."¹⁰

If I'm working on my basketball game, trying to perfect my shot, and Steph Curry himself comes to coach me, I am going to readily agree to let him coach me because he's one of the greatest shooters of all time. I will trust what he tells me to do and immediately try to do what he tells me to do. As a result, is my shooting going to get markedly better immediately? Not at all. It's going to take a lot of time, a lot of effort, and a lot of help. There are some bad habits in my game that will take a while to work out. Same with the Christian life. Christ does not expect immediate perfection from us, but instead a humble and observant willingness to follow

and surrender to his grace as best we can. Being transformed into the character of Jesus is a lifetime journey. This is what Paul means in Philippians when he urges us, **"work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure."**¹¹

We've been told all our lives that true freedom is the ability to do whatever you want. But that's not quite right. I love the way Tim Keller puts it when he admits that he wants to eat ice cream every day but also wants to be a healthy person. Both are real desires within him. They also are desires that contradict one another.

I can relate. I love ice cream. I've told my kids already that if I'm fortunate enough to live to be 90, beginning on my 90th birthday I will eat a bowl of ice cream every day for the rest of my life. I'd love to do that now. But I also want to be healthy. Both desires are in me. But I can't have both. So which desire in me is the right desire? I want to be an honest person but I also want to avoid trouble and lying often gets me out of trouble. I want to be incredibly generous but I also want to accumulate things for myself. I want to be a person who lives at peace but I also want to worry about things. I want to help the poor; I also want to avoid the poor. Who can help me sort through all the competing desires that swirl around inside me?

Keller goes on to say that true freedom is becoming the person you were meant to be. If you were made to be a kite, true freedom is when you're tied to a string up in the clouds, not when you're being dragged behind a boat in the water. You can try to use a kite as a waterski but it's not going to work very well. It's not what it's made for. You might say that the kite is free when it submits to the boundaries that were set for it at its creation, when it obeys those boundaries. It was made for the clouds, to be tied to a string and subject to the wind. That's when it's free.

So who can help us understand the boundaries set for us at our creation? Who can help us sort through the competing desires within us so that we can know which desires, when we submit to them, actually lead to freedom? God created you. He knows you, inside and out, far better than you know yourself. He knows where you have been and he knows what lies ahead. All things are subject to him. And above all, he loves you, enough to die for you. Why would you not obey him, or at least seek to make every effort to, by his grace, become somebody who obeys him. The only possible reason for your disobedience is that you do not know

⁸ I've adapted this analogy from one used by Timothy Keller, *Gospel in Life* podcast, "Active Discipline".

⁹ 1 John 4:18 (NRSV)

¹⁰ Cited by John Stott, *The Letters of John* (InterVarsity Press, 1964), 95.

¹¹ Philippians 2:12-13 (NRSV)

him. You're only pretending. To know Jesus, to *really* know Jesus, is to obey him.

I love the way John ends this passage: **"By this we may be sure that we are in him: whoever says, 'I abide in him,' ought to walk just as he walked."** To abide means to stay put, to make your home in a certain place and settle down. This is what it means to be a Christian, to be one who knows and follows Jesus. To know Jesus, not just to know *about* Jesus. To seek to obey him not only on Sundays, but all days. To be people whose insides match our outsides. I've quoted Dallas Willard here before: "The disciple of Christ is one who, intent upon becoming Christ-like, systematically and progressively rearranges his or her affairs to that end." Nothing is more important to a Christian than obeying Jesus because that person trusts him and his love implicitly.

We were put together in this community to help one another in this, to encourage one another in this journey towards freedom as we, by God's grace mixed with our efforts, increasingly submit and conform our lives to Christ that we might become the people we were made to become. So in your Life Groups this week, or in your families at home, take the opportunity to honestly confess one area in your life where, at least to this point, you have refused to obey Christ. There are many, I'm sure, so just pick one. Name it. Put it out there. Be honest and also admit that the reason you haven't obeyed Jesus is because you do not trust Jesus. Then see if you can understand why that might be, why you think you know better than he knows, or why you believe he really doesn't have your best interests in mind.

If you can do this much you will be in a good place to move forward. To go forward, determine one way you are going to take a step of obedience this week. Again, be specific. I am going to forgive her. I'm going to stop worrying about that situation. I'm going to give that thing away. I'm going to stop that behavior. You have not been obeying; you are now going to obey. Ask others to pray for you as you take this step and to help you as they are able. Then go do it. Go obey. If you fail, go try again. If you fail again, try yet again. If you fail yet again, do not give up. God's grace is sufficient and his patience is other-worldly.

Remember, this is why we gather around God's Word this morning and why we will gather in Life Groups this week, not simply to be informed, to know more *about* Christ, but to be transformed because we are people who now actually *know* Christ, and know him to the extent that we are no longer pretenders, but people who love because we have been loved and trust because

we follow one who has shown himself to be trustworthy.

Amen.

✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘

The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read 1st John 2:1-6 again. What do you notice here? What stands out to you?
2. John essentially says here that Jesus is our advocate before the Father, covering our sins with his righteousness. Do you believe this assertion, that God looks at the sinner who has come to trust Jesus and sees in that person no sin but instead the very righteousness of Christ?
3. John also says here that if you say you know Jesus but don't obey his commandments you are a liar and the truth is not in you. How do you respond to this?
4. Do you ever feel like a pretender in your Christianity? Why? Why not?
5. Do you trust Jesus in all things, no matter what he tells you to do?
6. Considering the invitation Jeff made to us at the end of the sermon, what is one area of your life where you recognize that at least to this point you have refused to obey Christ? Why don't you trust Jesus in this area?
7. What is one specific step you are determined to take this week towards obedience in that area of your life? How can others in your Life Group support you in that step?

Table to Table Question

A question for kids and adults to answer together

Why do we obey God?

What is one way you want to begin to obey God?

Suggested Scriptures for the Week, as we offer God 1% of our day (15 minutes or more) focused on His Word.

Monday: I Samuel 22/Psalm 98
Tuesday: I Samuel 23/Psalm 99
Wednesday: I Samuel 24/Psalm 100
Thursday: I Samuel 25/Psalm 101
Friday: I Samuel 26/Psalm 102
Saturday: I Samuel 27/Psalm 103/I John 2:7-14
Sunday: I Samuel 28/Psalm 104