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Grace Fellowship Church, Port Jervis, New York

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How Do We Know We Know?

John 2:3-6

Prayer: *Father, again, we just thank you for your grace, we thank you for gathering us together, we thank you for the gifts that you give. And again the gift that we are opening up this morning is once again the gift of your word. We just want to pray as we undergo that task that you would give us the presence of your Holy Spirit, yet another gift, Lord, that you would guide us into your word, give us the ability to ferret out of it what truths you would have us understand and grow in, and again that it would become of permanent value. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Well, it's been about a month since we've been in 1 John. We've had this long Christmas absence but now we're back at 1 John. And just to bring us up to speed, the last time we looked at 1 John we were looking at a series of five different theological words that all evolved from a statement made in the beginning of 1 John 2, and this is the statement. John says: *My 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. He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world. I said back then that Christ is in heaven right now and that he's advocating for us because he is the propitiation for our sins. Those were our first two theological words and an advocate is just someone who speaks on someone else's behalf. And what we're saying is we literally have someone who's in heaven right now cheering us on. He's making the argument on behalf of us.

Okay. Well, who's he making that argument to? Well, Satan is still known as the accuser of the brethren; he still acts in that role, so Jesus responds not as a lawyer for the defense would because there really is no defense that we can make. I mean we're sinners, we're all sinners saved by grace so there's no question of our guilt. What Jesus is advocating for on our behalf is the fact that he has become our propitiation. That's another theological term. A propitiation is an offering to appease wrath, and that's precisely what Jesus did. The wrath came from God himself and the payment of that wrath came also from God himself. You see, every time we sin we commit a cosmic injustice that a perfectly just God must account for. The wrath of God towards sin is the justice of God being brought to bear on an injustice that we have committed either toward God or toward our fellow man. See, God demands a payment for every sin we will ever commit and then God offers

himself on a cross as the specific payment for that sin.

Now I said last time in Christ our sins are paid for by imputation through penal substitution resulting in our justification. That's three more theological terms. But those are just descriptions of the how and the why of what Jesus did for us on the cross. And the how is by imputation. And imputation just means somebody else did it but you're going to get the credit or the blame for it. And if you really want to understand and get a sense of the power of imputation, just go to the Middle East and just approach somebody in the Taliban or in ISIS or some other organization like that and announce that you're a United States citizen. You'll quickly see that every bad thing that could be attributed to the United States will be imputed to you just because you're a citizen. I pointed out last time that the imputation goes both ways, I mean, Adam was the one who defied God and yet we bear that responsibility in the form of original sin. You know Adam did the sinning but we bear the effect of it, again, by imputation. On the other side, on the other side of that same coin we have Christ going to the cross and he does the dying, and yet we get the benefit and the effect of it, again, by imputation.

So imputation is how Christ's death on the cross accounts for the payment of our sin, and the technical term for that is penal

substitution which simply means somebody substituting themselves for a penalty that should have gone to others. And when we say of Christ, "He lived the life we were supposed to live and then he died the death we all deserved to die," we're talking about somebody specifically substituting himself for us and taking the penalty on himself.

And finally, Jesus's penal substitution resulted in our justification. And that's the why. That's the why of what Jesus did for us on the cross. I mean justification really is, it's a technical term, it's referring to a declaration that God makes to himself and to the universe that on the basis of what Christ did for us on the cross, the demands of the law have been fully met. The wages of sin was death as the scripture declares and Jesus in a very public way has embraced that very death on our behalf by paying in full our account. He has substituted his righteousness for our sin resulting in our justification. And all of that was wrapped up in that one little statement in *1 John*. Just to recapitulate, John says: *My 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. He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.*

That's where we paused one month ago and here's where we are this morning, picking up in the very next verse: *And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments. Whoever says "I know him" but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him, but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may know that we are in him: Whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked.*

You might notice that the first part of that paragraph, it's all about what Christ has done for sinners saved by grace. And the second part of that paragraph is all about knowing whether or not you can count yourself among them. I mean one thing the gospel makes clear is that there are many people who are going to be shocked and appalled to find that they were never part of God's kingdom. Jesus himself made that warning crystal clear when he said this in *Matthew 7*. He said: *"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'*

Now you might notice that the Lord Jesus and the apostle John are almost saying the same thing here. Jesus says, *"Not everyone who says to me 'Lord, Lord' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven,"* and John says, *"By this we know we have come to know him if we keep his commandments."* And so if you want to be in the kingdom of God, if you want to go to heaven, you better do the will of your Father in heaven and you better keep the commandments. Is that what Jesus is telling us? Is that what John is telling us? Well, the answer is no but there's also a lot more to that "no."

You see, the answer is a lot more subtle and a lot more nuanced than people like it to be. But Jesus and John are not listing the obedience requirements for entry into the kingdom of God, although on the surface it might look that way. After all Jesus says that only those doing the will of the Father are going to be in heaven, and John says: *Whoever says "I know him" but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him, but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected.* And what both Jesus and John are doing -- and it's very easy to miss this -- what they are doing is they are describing what a kingdom citizen is and is not. And it's easy to confuse a description with a requirement, but they're vastly different things. And this all goes back to the discussions we've had in the past about imperative

and indicative sentences and how they can define our status as kingdom citizens. I've spoken about this at length. If you go back to your elementary school days, you remember there's different kinds of sentences. There are indicative sentences, there are imperative sentences. And indicative sentences merely point things out, that is they indicate, which is why their indicative. Imperatives are commands; they tell you something you have to do. And until you understand the difference between the indicatives and the imperatives of the gospel, well, you're going to have a hard time understanding the mindset of John and Jesus.

You see, if you think in terms of imperatives, that is in terms of demands you will see both Jesus and John, well they're issuing commands, they're issuing demands necessary to enter into the kingdom. You'll also likely see your Christian life as a series of rules and regulations you are commanded to follow and you'll probably wonder if you're follow them enough to be in the sheepfold. You might also be wondering just what level is disobedience is required to push you out. But neither Jesus nor John were speaking in imperatives or commands, they were actually speaking in indicatives. What they were doing is they were indicating the way kingdom citizens live and operate.

When Jesus says, *"My sheep hear my voice, and they follow me,"* he's

not issuing a command, he's not issuing an imperative, he's stating an indicative. He's indicating what sheep do. Well it's an incredibly important distinction to understand. I mean, becoming one of Christ's sheep means I have a brand new nature that I now operate from. When Jesus speaks of his sheep, he's talking about this brand new order of creation. *2 Corinthians* says: *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.* Well, he's describing the type of person that's come through a process that we talk about all the time, the one that we see described in *Ezekiel 36*. And there God says: *I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.* So we have God telling us he's going to give us a brand new heart and put a new Spirit within us and *Ezekiel* is describing the process of God taking the old heart out and putting the new heart in, and that new heart is filled with his Holy Spirit. It's a surgical operation that results in a brand new creature who now has a very different constitution than he had only moments before. God says: *I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.* Because the Holy Spirit's now inside them, this person now finds himself wanting to walk in God's statutes when that wasn't the case at all before.

Jesus says, *"You must be born again."* That's an imperative. But it can only be done by those whom God has chosen to give the ability and the desire to, and those people Jesus calls his sheep. He says, *"My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me."* Again, that's an indicative. Jesus is indicating what his sheep are like. They follow Jesus because God has put the desire to follow and obey him into their hearts. Again, *And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.* You see, their new default drives now carefully consider God's rules when before they couldn't have cared less. These are now things that are a part of what pleases and drives this new creature internally, it's now a part of its new constituent nature.

Again, to put it in the indicative, loving God, loving his word, wanting on a gut level to be obedient to it is now an indication that you're one of these new creatures. The problem is we often frame these things not in terms of indicatives but in terms of imperatives. You want to be one of Christ's sheep? Here's what you have to do. That's an imperative. That's a command. And commands are not going to get you into the kingdom of God. You can force people on the outside to conform and obey but you can never force them on the inside to want to. Jesus was constantly confronted with people who were willing to force the outside when

the inside had no desire at all. And what you get with that is what we call "religion," outside conformity covering inside rebellion. Jesus described it this way in *Matthew 15*. He said: "*This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.*" And for sure much of the blame for that vain worship could be led to the feet of the religious leaders who drove the people in terms of imperatives. They had no shortage of religious commands, no shortage of rules you had to comply with in order to get right with God.

Not much has changed in 2,000 years, I mean, we still have religion telling us what you have to do. In fact we have the ultimate list of imperatives. We call it the Ten Commandments. "Thou shalt" and "thou shalt not." Doesn't get any more imperative than that. And there's still plenty of folks who think that the way you get to heaven is by obeying the Ten Commandments. But that list of imperatives is there to show us the absolute impossibility of obeying our way into heaven, because we can't do it. I mean the whole point of the Ten Commandments is to cause us to throw up our hands in despair knowing that the law has shown us our complete and absolute inability, turning us to Christ as the only one who perfectly met every one of those commandments and who was willing to give us his righteousness by faith. As *Galatians 3* says: *Now*

it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for "The righteous shall live by faith." You see, religion sadly embraces the imperative as if we can meet the demands of perfection as opposed to the indicative which simply indicates just what a new creature is and what they do. New creatures in Christ obey Christ because they've been empowered to. They have a new heart. They have a new heart that's been planted literally within them by God. And because of that new heart, obedience is what comes naturally to this new creature.

I mean listen to how Peter describes this in his opening chapter of his letter to the church that has now been kind of scattered due to persecution. This is *1 Peter 1*. And Peter says: *Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ: To the temporary residents dispersed in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father and set apart by the Spirit for obedience and for sprinkling with the blood of Jesus Christ. May grace and peace be multiplied to you.* Well, Peter said a lot there. I mean what he's saying is that these born again believers have been set apart by who? By the Holy Spirit. And what have they been set apart for? Well, Peter says they are set apart for obedience. Peter's saying that God places within his sheep a brand new desire to obey God and his word, and that drive, that desire to obey is now a part of the internal default mechanism of every child

of God, something that they all now possess by their very nature. And what used to be seen strictly as imperatives, you know, coming together for worship and prayer and scripture and tithing and living holy lives is now seen as part of a normal constituent drive not coming from some kind of outside moral pressure but coming inside from an internal drive that now takes pleasure in what it used to regard as pain. I've said it many, many times, if you approached me in my pre-Christian days suggesting that I would find genuine joy and satisfaction in prayer in worship and studying the scripture, I would have laughed in your face. That was before I became a new creature in Christ. *Behold, all things become new*, including the internal drives that move us.

I mean just think for a minute about the creatures that God creates and how they respond to their internal drives, and maybe you can get a picture of what I'm driving at here. Let me just take for an example a lowly goose. Okay. Geese are creatures that have built into their programming this desire to fly south in the winter. There's two different ways that you can look at how a goose thinks about this kind of a trip, there's an imperative way of thinking and this imperative way has, the goose is thinking, he's pacing back and forth and he's trying to figure out the energy and the risk and the cold of this thousand-mile journey that he's being forced to take and he's constantly fretting about whether or not

he's going to be in the front of the flock or in the back of the flock and how long it's going to take and what he's got to do to keep up with his fellow geese. Is that how you think geese think? Of course never having been a goose, I don't really know. I can only guess, but I don't think so. See, I don't think those thoughts ever enter into a goose's mind. That's the imperative way of thinking. I think a goose operates on an indicative level. I think he operates just like sheep do, they follow their instinct. When the days get shorter and the weather gets colder, there's something inside a goose that says, "Hey, let's go south." In fact I would go so far as to say God designed geese so that being obedient to the drive to fly south gives them more pleasure than not, and that's why they go. I think he's up there flying and honking because the drive that God puts in him makes it so that's what he wants to do.

You know, Jesus used sheep as his example. What he was trying to get at is basically the same thing. He says born again believers in Christ have brand new drives placed within them that makes obedience the new default drive pleasure that never existed before, so much so that God can say of us as his sheep, *"My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me."* Well, now, are the sheep following the shepherd for any other reason than they want to? I mean, isn't it because that's their pleasure, that's their

desire? Do you think there's any sheep following the shepherd saying, "Dang, I hate this. I would much rather be following wolves. I'm under this imperative and I got to follow this guy, so I have no choice, I'll just follow him, I guess." I mean, scratch a religious person and that's exactly what you're going to find, external compliance covering internal rebellion. And that's why God hates religion. I mean it's far more simple and far more reasonable to assume that sheep follow the shepherd as an indicative simply because sheep hear their master's voice and then they follow him. That's just what sheep do.

And Jesus further goes on to say that the decision to become a follower, it's not one made by the sheep, it's a decision that's made by the Shepherd. Jesus said in *John 10*, he said: *"I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand."* So understand what this means. God is saying, it's I who make the sheep, and furthermore when I make you one of my sheep, no one can unmake you or snatch you out of my hand or my Father's hand as well.

So we're looking at our text this morning and I want you to look at it as not a demand for obedience but rather of a statement of how

naturally obedience flows from this new nature that God has created. Let me just re-read what we started out with this morning. John says: *And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments. Whoever says "I know him" but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him, but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may know that we are in him: whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked.* See, when you start wondering whether or not have I, have I been obedient enough, you have to realize that's not the right question. You're confusing imperatives and indicatives. The question is not have I obeyed the commandments enough to cross the threshold of becoming a sheep, it's much more simple than that. It's simply to ask the question: Am I one of his sheep? Do I have the internal drive that his sheep have?

And Jesus does issue commands to his sheep. One of his commands is this: Jesus says, *"This is My command: Love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, that someone would lay down his life for his friends. You are My friends if you do what I command you."* All right. So now we're scratching our heads, say, okay, well, this is Jesus, he's issuing an imperative, that's a command. And not only that, this is a conditional phrase. I mean, he's saying we're friends with Christ as long as we do what

he commands? Well, if you're thinking of imperatives, then sure, this isn't just a command, when you look at it, it's an impossible command. Listen to what Jesus is saying here. Jesus says love one another just as well as you can but love one another as I have loved you. That is as Jesus can, and that is flawlessly. You and I are not capable of that. But if you look at this statement as an indicative, it fits perfectly. Jesus is simply saying that those who belong to him, to those who are one of his sheep, those who have been given a new heart and a new drive, those who have been given the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit have a relationship with Christ based not on impossible commands but on the power they receive from Christ. So calling on his sheep to love one another is no different a command than saying "follow me."

Listen to how Jesus puts it in *John 15*. He said: "*You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you.*" And we're not slaves, we're not under these imperatives, we are now friends. God is saying you have my Spirit within you now and because of that we're all on the same page, and because we're all on the same page, I can reveal to you now my Father's will. He says we are co-heirs with Christ, we are his brothers now going about the very same task that he went

about when he was on earth. And because we're now friends, God has given us everything we know about where this world came from, how it got to the state that it's in and what will happen when it gets to the end of its days. All of that Jesus has made known to us. And then finally Jesus reiterates what is at the heart of our confidence, that we're his children and it's based on the fact that he chose us and not vice versa. I mean you see, anything that I do I know I have within me the power to undo. Anything that he does has an ironclad guarantee. Jesus makes that crystally clear in the very next verse. He says: *"You did not choose Me, but I chose you. I appointed you that you should go out and produce fruit and that your fruit should remain, so that whatever you ask the Father in My name, He will give you."*

And so our question should never be have I done enough to cross the threshold of acceptance or is my performance good enough to rate being one of his own? You got to understand, there's no level of performance that could ever be acceptable to God because God's standard is absolute flawless perfection, but that comes to our relationship with Jesus Christ when he exchanges his perfect righteousness for our sin. And so the question we need to ask ourselves is not am I good enough, I mean, we should know by now the answer to that statement is *Romans 3:10: There's none good, no, not one.* Instead the question should be: Am I one of his?

When he speaks, do I hear his voice? When I hear his voice, do I want to follow him? I mean, understand nobody hears and follows perfectly, nobody ever will this side of eternity. But when God asked us to examine ourselves, he doesn't ask us if we're flawless in our behavior. He asks us instead if we can sense the presence of Christ within us. Listen to what Paul said in *2 Corinthians 13*. He said: *Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith. Examine yourselves. Or do you yourselves not recognize that Jesus Christ is in you? -- unless you fail the test.*

Do you recognize that Jesus is in you? Do you care about your relationship with him or are you convinced that you've said the sinner's prayer, that you've gone forward and you've done all the necessary things to make sure your salvation is secure? But that's exactly what those who are lost do. Those are the folks that are going to hear those terrible words that Jesus uttered at the beginning of this message: *"And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'"* You've got to understand, those words were uttered to people who were absolutely convinced they were on the inside, they had followed the imperatives, they have had done what they were commanded externally while still rebelling internally. And notice what Jesus didn't say. He did not say depart from me, you failed the test of the threshold of obedience. He didn't say, depart from

me, you flunked the behavior test. It was far more basic than that. You know what he said? He said, "*I never knew you. Depart from me.*"

So the question you have to ask yourself this morning is obviously do I know him and does he know me? Our text this morning says: *And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments.* You see where imperatives and performance really mean nothing here? I mean John says the answer to the question of whether I'm one of his sheep is indicated to me simply by the life that I live. If I'm truly born again and if I've been given this will to obey by the Holy Spirit's presence within me, then my desire, my internal drive is to keep his commandments. John puts it in unmistakable terms. He says: *Whoever says "I know him" but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him.*

So how do we know if we are truly in Christ? We keep his word. Not as an onerous obligation but as a true source of absolute joy. We talk about walkie-talkies. Our walk and our talk have got to line up. If our talk is Christian and our walk doesn't match it, then John says we're kidding ourselves. And he goes further than that. He says when all of your indicatives point in a different direction, when your life-style doesn't match your faith claim,

John says you are a liar. For those whose life-style indicates that they're living Christ-like lives, John gives this assurance. He says: *But whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may know that we are in him. If we keep his word, if we actively seek to learn more about him so that we can follow more closely in obedience, then we're actually walking as we were designed to walk. And how's that? Well, it's just as he walked. John goes on to say: Whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked.* I mean, this is an ongoing, never-ceasing process of sanctification. This is how God shapes and molds us into the very image of his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

I said at the beginning of this message that this difference between indicatives and imperatives is subtle, it's nuanced, and it most definitely is. It's hard to get it, but it's incredibly important to get it. Let me just try one more way of grappling with this idea of how people mistakenly think they have to work their way into heaven. How do we walk like Jesus walked without thinking of it as an imperative, as a set of rules and regulations, as something we have to do as opposed to something that flows effortlessly out of our constituent nature, so much so that anyone can look at us can see the indicatives that flow from that nature?

Well, let me talk about another imperative, okay. Let me talk about something else that every one of us here is under as a command, as an imperative, something that every one of us here absolutely has to do, in fact we have to do it over and over again. The penalty for not doing it over and over again is death itself. There's something we absolutely must do and yet we never ever think of this activity as something onerous because it's part of being alive, and what I'm talking about is breathing, something you have to do some 20- to 22,000 times a day. Have you ever gotten up in the morning just groaning under the task of the 22,000 breaths you're going to have to be taking this day? Have you ever longed for the day when the desire to fill your lungs would cease? Have you ever envied those who no longer have that task? I don't think so. And we all know to live is to breathe, and yet I guarantee you that none of us look on breathing as an imperative, as a demand, but it certainly is. It doesn't seem like an imperative because it so effortlessly flows from us being alive. If you're alive, you breathe. And what John is saying in so many words is if we live in Christ, we keep his commandments, we obey his word, and we walk like he walked as naturally as we breathe, because that too is what flows effortlessly from our new life. Because as Paul puts it in *Acts 17: for "'In him we live and move and have our being'".*

Now does that describe your relationship with Jesus? It should.

See, what John has given us this morning, he's blessed us not with a list of demands but with a checklist of indicatives. And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments. Whoever says "I know him" but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him, but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may know that we are in him: Whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked. Let's pray.

Father, I thank you for your word, I thank you for, again, walking us through this very, very difficult, like I said, nuanced understanding of just what it means to be your child, what it means to be a sheep, what it means to be a follower of Jesus. Is it a list of demands that we acquiesce to or is it a list of something that we love to do because God has placed his Spirit within us. Lord, give us the grace, the strength, the insight, and the wisdom to truly appreciate what you've done here and to act on it, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.