

Active Fellowship (Part 2)

1 John 2:1-11

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So far in the book of 1 John we learned that for our spiritual lives, fellowship with God and with each other through Jesus, and the resulting joy, are crucial. We also saw that in order to keep in fellowship we must walk in the light as God is in the light and confess our sins, trusting in God to forgive. In today's passage, John assures us that Jesus' death on the cross is enough to cleanse us of our sins in the past, present, and future. But first he stresses that we must have the intention not to sin (2:1). After reading 1:9, it is tempting to think that since God will always forgive us and we are free from the Law, we don't have to hold ourselves back from sinning. Such were the teachings of the notorious charlatan Grigori Rasputin, who used Romans 5:20 to justify a hedonistic lifestyle. But John warns us not to regard sin as inevitable. Sin is still a big deal. We were saved from sin, not to sin. But it's hard not to sin. John knows we all stumble, so in 2:1 he says that we have an advocate in Jesus (see also Hebrews 7:25). Though we can't be perfect, we should seek and ask for righteousness. We should be constantly transformed, on a trajectory towards holiness. There should be less sin in our lives than before we came to Christ, yet we should at the same time be ever more aware of the sin that remains. And when we stumble we should confess and trust God to forgive.

John goes on to present two tests for believers to tell if they are maintaining active fellowship with God. The first is the test of obedience (vv. 3-6). If you are genuinely converted, you will keep God's commands. Jesus obeyed God fully, unto death. We should likewise follow Jesus in obedience. John says that true believers keep God's commands, but he just said that true believers are fully aware that they still sin. These seemingly paradoxical statements are resolved in John Calvin's commentary of this passage, which is summarized in four points. First is that keeping God's commands doesn't mean sinless perfection. God accepts us imperfect as we are, and works on us continually. Second, repentance is a significant aspect of holy living. Be honest about sin and turn to Jesus continually for forgiveness. Third, we should try hard to be holy. Until Jesus returns we will never reach God's standard of righteousness, but we must keep walking in that direction. We must not give up or justify our sin. The Holy Spirit pushes us and strengthens us. Don't resist Him. Fourth, our striving is marked by weakness. We strive according to the capacity of human infirmity, and according to the grace given to us. Recognize

your weakness and depend on God's grace. Strive to forgive the unforgivable, to be generous when you think you have nothing to spare, to love the unlovable enemy. It's hard, but if you don't strive, nothing will happen. So live based on this balanced biblical approach. Strive, aspire, struggle, and obey, but also repent, confess, and trust.

The second test John provides is the test of love (vv. 7-11). In 1 John the word "love" appears 24 times. In the New Testament, love can be described as the circulatory system of the church. When there is no love, the church experiences spiritual heart attacks, which are strife, division, and dysfunction. John calls the command both old and new (vv. 7-8), because although it was given in Leviticus 19:18, it was made new in John 13:34-35. The word "new" does not refer to temporal newness, but rather newness with respect to quality. In the old command, Jesus invested new meaning through His death and resurrection. He provided a new example of love through His life and sacrifice. He applied a new emphasis and experience to this command. But we know even in church it's hard to love the way Jesus loves. He gave up Himself even unto death for those who rejected Him. Can we likewise give without expecting anything in return, putting others before ourselves? The Gnostics, whose false teaching John addresses in in this letter, believed that knowledge was the most important. But we know from 1 Corinthians 8 that knowledge puffs up, whereas love builds up. Disciples are recognized for their love, not knowledge. Love is the evidence of a believer. John says that those who hate their brother cannot be in the light (v. 9). Such hatred is not a mere matter of preference but a settled disposition and conduct of hatred towards someone. Be careful not to let anger become resentment, for that turns into hate, which is equivalent to murder in the Sermon on the Mount. So instead let us seek forgiveness and reconciliation. We often dislike people for some reason or no reason at all. But let us be reminded of Jesus' unconditional love and not disregard others as nuisances or treat them with contempt. Let us walk in the light of the gospel, obeying God and loving each other, so that we may not stumble or cause others to stumble. Let us love those who don't love us back. Let us love them enough to worship with them, pray for them, serve them, share their burdens, forgive them, and accept them.