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**Grace Fellowship Church, Port Jervis, New York**

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**Let us Love, Pray and Obey**

**1 John 3:18-24**

**Prayer:** *Father, I just continue to thank you for your grace, I thank you for your goodness. Lord, I thank you that you are the God who we worship, the God who gives us over and over again. We just again thank you for the freedom that we have, the ability to gather still that we have and I just praise you and thank you for that. And this morning, Lord, as we again are in your book 1 John, I just pray that your spirit would guide us, that you would give us the gift of the presence of your Holy Spirit and that you would give us the ability to make this of permanent value. And I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Well, our text this morning actually brings us to the end of chapter three of John's first letter. And we find there John is exhorting us in three different areas. He says to us, number one, let us love; number two, let us pray; and number three, let us obey. He starts off the paragraph where we left off last week, and that's the subject of love for the brethren. This is 1 John 3:18-24. He says: *Little children, let us not love in word or*

*talk but in deed and in truth. By this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our heart before him; for whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything. Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God; and whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him. And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. Whoever keeps his commandments abides in God, and God in him. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit whom he has given us.*

Well John makes it crystal clear that if you don't have love for your brothers and sisters in Christ, the chances are very good that you're not a born again believer in Jesus Christ. Last week I pointed out that there are markers that demonstrate whether or not you are members of the kingdom, and those markers might not be what you think they are. John said this in 1 John 3:14, he said: *We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death. Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.* So I can't emphasize too highly the fact that God says if we lack love for the brethren we are not saved.

And moving from spiritual death to spiritual life is exactly what it means to be born again, but there's something else that John insists must accompany our understanding, and that is the love that we have for our brothers and sisters in Christ. I pointed out that there's two different levels of love that John is describing in verses 14 and 15. He says: *Whoever does not love abides in death.* And then he says: *Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer.* And what I said last week is what John is doing here, he's removing any middle ground. And what he's saying is if you don't love your brother in Christ, then actually you hate him. And if you hate him, essentially you're a murderer. And here he's echoing Jesus' own words from the Sermon on the Mount. This is what Jesus said in *Matthew 5*. He said: *"You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire."*

And so between the words of Jesus and John we understand what God means when he talks about loving the brethren. I gave a teaching a few years back on just what that means practically speaking, and again, it's probably not what you think it is. This is what Jesus said in *John 13:34*. He says: *"A new commandment I give to you,*

*that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."*

And so the first thing that we notice here is that Jesus is not making this love optional. This is a command. I mean we are under orders to love one another. And this whole idea of love being a command, it strikes us as strange because we tend to think of love strictly as an emotion. I mean who can demand, who can command that we feel a certain way? And because we thoroughly identify with love only as an emotion, we think we have the option of loving those that we find loveable and avoiding those that we don't, you know, people who frighten us, people who anger and annoy us, people who frankly we just can't stand. I mean, surely we don't have to love those people. We have to really love them? Well, Jesus says they are precisely who he is referring to. Jesus said this in *Luke 6*, he said: *"If you love those who love you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners do the same."*

See, the true mark of a loving church is not how well she loves the lovely and the loveable, I mean, Jesus is absolutely unimpressed with that. It's how well she loves those who cannot or will not

love her back. And that applies to those outside the church but it especially applies to those who are inside. Love the brethren is not an option, and one of the most important functions of the local body of Christ is to move folks to learn how to make every effort to love. I mean God does that by taking people with nothing in common but Jesus and then gathering them together to show that Jesus Christ and the power of his Holy Spirit can conquer their differences and demonstrate the true power of God, and that power is the love of God. A local body is supposed to showcase that love by demonstrating a supernatural ability to love folks who don't love them back. And again, the part that we have a hard time grappling with is that this love is an imperative; it's not optional; Christ said you must love one another. And we're very confused as to what that love is all about. We think of love as a feeling, as an emotion, as something that comes up from our gut. Again, we struggle with this idea of God commanding of gut reaction. What if I can't muster it?

Well, the fact is a gut reaction is not what God demands of us in the first place. I've said it before, love is not something you feel; it's something you do. It's not a matter of emotion so much as it is a matter of obedience. And we think of love as the end product of a process that starts with acquaintance and then it kind of moves onward to friendship and then it ends in love.

And we wonder how in the world am I supposed to love somebody I don't even like? Well, nothing could be further from God's idea. You see, when John says, *we know that we have passed out of death into life because we love the brothers*, he's expecting us to love people we don't necessarily like. The greatest example of that kind of love in the New Testament obviously is the good Samaritan. You know, it's easy to miss the sting of God choosing as his model of what love is a Samaritan, because in so doing he picked one of Israel's most despised enemies, and at the time that Jesus gave his parable, the Jews had elevated hatred for enemies basically to an art form. They detested the Samaritans as it group of half breeds who had intermarried out of the Jewish faith, polluted the worship of God and installed a false form of worship. I mean, Jewish travelers would go routinely miles and miles out of their way to avoid stepping even one foot into Samaritan territory, and they considered detesting them to be a matter of honor. So Jesus selecting a Samaritan as an example was no mere coincidence. The story itself occurs in *Luke 10*.

This is the story. It says: *And behold, a certain lawyer stood up and tested Him, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the law? What is your reading of it?" So he answered and said, "'YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, WITH ALL*

YOUR STRENGTH, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND,' and 'YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.'" And He said to him, "You have answered rightly; do this and you will live." But he, wanting to justify himself, said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Then Jesus answered and said: "A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves, who stripped him of his clothing, wounded him, and departed, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a certain priest came down that road. And when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. Likewise a Levite, when he arrived at the place, came and looked, and passed by on the other side. But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was. And when he saw him, he had compassion. So he went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine; and he set him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. On the next day, when he departed, he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said to him, 'Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, when I come again, I will repay you.' So which of these three do you think was neighbor to him who fell among the thieves?" And he said, "He who showed mercy on him." Then Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

What I love about this passage also is that Jesus' brilliance is really on display here. I mean, if you recall this lawyer, it says this lawyer tested Jesus by asking him how to obtain eternal life,

and when Jesus commends him for stating correctly that he has to above all love God and love his neighbor, he asked Jesus, "Who's my neighbor," but he asks him in a snide, snarky kind of way. I mean the scripture says, *"seeking to justify himself."* And of course Jesus knowing that these folks detested saying even the word Samaritan, as he's answering to this guy he's boxing him into a corner. And at the end he asks him, *"Which of these three was his neighbor?"* The man is stuck. He can't even bring himself to say the word "the Samaritan" by giving him that little honor. So he's stuck and he looks at him, and he says, *"He who showed mercy on him."* Don't mess with Jesus. He'll put you in a place where you don't want to be. Jesus is defining two very important things here. First he defines love not as what you feel but as what you do. And secondly, he's defining what a neighbor is. He points out that a neighbor is not somebody who just lives close to you. He's pointing out that a neighbor is someone who's identified to you as someone in need. And Jesus said to the lawyer in verse 36, *"So which of these three do you think was neighbor to him who fell among the thieves?"*

So your neighbor can live down the street or he can live on the other side of the world. What makes him a neighbor is not his location, it's his need. And when God places someone with a need on your heart or into your life, he's asking if you are willing to



become his neighbor. I mean in other words Mr. Rogers was on to something when he said, "Won't you be my neighbor." I mean he knew that once you've acknowledged someone as your neighbor, you therefore have an obligation to love him as a neighbor. And Jesus just happens to select for his story a neighbor who happens to be physically unconscious. This is a person who can contribute absolutely nothing by way of personal response other than the fact that he's needy.

And notice the way the Samaritan loves this neighbor. It's not with what he feels; it's with what he does. There's absolutely no place in this story for love to have anything to do with feeling or emotion. In fact, how the Samaritan or how the victim felt was completely immaterial. Now a modern equivalent might be a volunteer emergency medical technician treating an accident victim with a head injury who's incredibly belligerent. I mean does he like the person who is cursing and screaming at him? No. Is he loving the person he's caring for? Absolutely. And how does he love him? Does he love him by trying to drum up some warm fuzzies for the guy or by binding his wounds in spite of the abuse? See, love is not what you feel, it's what you do. And when Jesus demands of us to love one another, he is demanding action, not feeling.

And furthermore, God says when feelings cause us to confine our love to those people that we find lovely, we're no different than pagans. He says: *"If you love those who love you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them."* I mean, God says, hey, big deal. I can't overemphasize how important this is to God and how much of it is presented to us as a non optional commandment. This is Jesus in *John 15*. He says: *"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. 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. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. These things I command you, so that you will love one another."*

Love is not Christ's suggestion to his people, it's an absolutely non-negotiable demand. God has given us a place where people themselves become God's primary resource for developing our ability to love people we might not like. That place is right here. The place is the church. And that ability usually grows through conflict and through struggle. After all, if you only love the

people who love you, what credit is that to you? If you only pursue those relationships that are safe and mutually protective, well, don't expect to grow. Even pagans do that. If you're willing to let God grow your capacity to love, then the church is the perfect place for that to happen. And you know, for many today that model is the megachurch , but for me it's really it's just the opposite.

I know it's a fact that there are large churches that can do lots of things that small churches can't do and I thank God for the blessings that they have been, but there's also some things that small churches can do that big churches can't do as well. I mean I had a friend awhile back, I hadn't seen him for a long time and I asked him how things were going. And I said, "How are you doing church wise?" And he told me that he had recently left a church that he had been attending for two years and it was a megachurch. And I said, "Well, what was their response to your leaving?" He just chuckled and he said, "They had no idea I was there in the first place." If you walk into this building, I can tell you something, you will be noticed. That's one of the blessings of a small church. I know some large churches make it mandatory for you to belong to a small group, and I think that's helpful. But here's the point, if you go to a church on a regular basis and you don't have a relationship with anyone who has any spiritual authority in

that church and if you're not in a position to get to know some of those people and for them to get to know you, you're not really getting the point of going to church; you're just attending a service. Rosario Butterfield said it well in an Alisa Childers podcast on biblical sexuality. This is what she said, she said -- quote -- "...if you're part of a megachurch and your pastor has no idea who you are and your small group is made up of people who are sinning in the same way you are, flee, okay? Run. In fact, nobody's going to notice you're missing, so don't worry about it."

Well the test of whether your church is real for you is actually, it's very simple. The test is if you left would anybody notice? I mean, COVID did an absolute number on all churches, big and little, by encouraging everyone to retreat to the safety of their own living rooms to watch it on television, and we were no exception. I mean it surely was understandable, given the dangers there, but there's a danger of isolating yourself into a self-protective family unit that's just as real and present today.

You got to understand, God knew exactly what he was doing when he organized the body of Christ. He knows what happens when people come together. The very first church that was organized, it had the very first big church fight. It was a fight over whether or not two different groups of Jews were being treated equally. But

out of that fight came the office of deacon. God understood exactly that it's conflict and stress and difficulty that produces the growth that lets God's glory and love shine. That's why God designed the body of Christ to be a group of people related only by the fact that they love Jesus.

I mean bring any group together, there's bound to be conflict and that's really by design. I mean, God did say in *Proverbs 27: Iron sharpens iron as one man sharpens another*. And when you add racial and cultural and ethnic and just plain human friction to it, you have a recipe for conflict. And you'll find that God will be right there at the center of those conflicts if you let him, because that's where the real growth takes place. I mean, the worst, the worst reason to leave a church is that you are engaged in a conflict with a fellow believer, yet that's one of the main reasons why people leave churches. I mean, God knows that sometimes conflicts within a church are unavoidable, but God causes all things -- even conflicts -- to work together for good to those who love him. And *Romans 12* tells us: *If possible, so far as depends on you, live peaceably with all*.

And someone pointed out that living peaceably with all is not an easy task and God recognizes that because this command is not one but two different qualifiers. Paul says, *"First of all, if it's at*

*all possible,"* meaning that sometimes it will be impossible. And that means sometimes there are and will be legitimate conflicts: Conflicts over doctrine, conflicts over truth, conflicts over character where people are going to take sides. And the command then lists a second qualifier, it says, *"so far as it depends on you."* What God is saying here is that he's only going to hold you responsible for your side of the street, your side of the argument. What takes place on the other side is someone else's responsibility. God clearly recognizes that human beings are messy and that relationships are messy and that churches can be messy as well. And more often than not people leave churches because they have the wrong idea that the church is supposed to be a place where no conflict ever takes place. Well the fact is, church should be the place where no conflict goes unresolved, because our love for Jesus must be bigger than any potential conflict we might be involved in. Our desire to honor him by removing the conflict should outweigh any desire to win at any cost. If God has taught us anything, it's that winning isn't everything; a servant attitude is. I mean, if Jesus could leave heaven itself and live out his life perfectly and then take that life to the cross as a sacrifice so that we by faith could exchange his perfection for our sin and stand before a holy God now worthy of heaven, if he could give up everything for us, we certainly should give up our desire to win at all costs. And that's why God says: *By this we know love, that he*

*laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth. By this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our heart before him.*

What John is saying is let your love be marked not by what you say but by what you do and the truth that you embrace while you are doing it and then he writes this in verse 20, he says: *for whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything.* I tell you I probably read 15 or 20 different commentators, nobody gets this verse. This is a very difficult verse. They're trying to figure out what exactly John is saying here? It seems to me that John says when we ask ourselves if we're really loving the brethren, it's reassuring to be able to point to a practical reality of me actually doing something to love my brothers and sisters rather than some theoretical talking point. It's a lot easier to recognize my love as real when it consists of actual doing instead of some theoretical posturing. But even so John recognizes that a heart that's tuned in to deeds and truth is still subject to the whims of broken consciences such as we all have. And he suggests that even at those times when our heart condemns us, we are to take solace in the fact that God is far

bigger than the petty battles that take place between the healthy and the unhealthy parts of our conscience. And he knows us better than we know ourselves.

Then John goes on to address part number two, which is let us pray. He says: *Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God; and whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him.* Now, does that mean as long as we obey his commandments and do what pleases him we're going to get whatever we ask for? Well, that all depends on what we ask for. See, it's important to realize here that when John speaks of receiving whatever we ask from God, he's relying on a whole history of statements that he's made in the gospels and the other letters that he's written that qualify exactly what it is he's saying. He's made this statement before. In *John 14*, John says -- this is quoting Jesus -- he says: *"Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son."* And in *John 15* Jesus says: *"You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you."*

So what is God actually saying here? I mean is this truly what the name it and claim it prosperity preaching suggests, that you have



not just 'cause you just haven't asked in the right way? Well no, neither James nor John nor anywhere else in scripture are you going to find an appeal to your flesh that's going to be answered by prayer. And probably the easiest way to understand what Jesus is saying here when he tells us that anything we ask for in his name, he will give us, is to put it in the context that he originally intended it to mean. And to ask for something in someone's name is to speak for that person as if you were them. So Jesus is promising us that anything that we ask for as if we were him, with his heart and his passion and his desire and his kingdom insight, any prayer that we ask with those qualifiers is going to be answered yes. That doesn't include Cadillacs, winning lottery tickets and trips to Disney World. James does state quite clearly the obvious reason why we don't see answered prayer. He says: *You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures.*

Have you ever asked amiss? I'm sure every one of us has been guilty of that. But what if you feel you've met all of the qualifications, what if you're asking for good solid kingdom priorities and still the answer's no? What then? Well, just the other day, two or three days ago I was watching a sports series. It was about Tom Brady, the quarterback for the Buccaneers, considered the best quarterback of all time. There's a show about

him and he was quoting in that show a Chinese proverb that hit me about how we react to circumstances, and it made perfect sense listening to him repeat this proverb about how we treat answered prayer.

The proverb goes like this. It says: There was an ancient Chinese farmer who had one of his horses run away and his friends all came around him, surrounded him and said, "You lost your horse! What a tragedy!" And he responded simply with one word. He said, "Maybe." A few days later, he says, the horse returned, this time with ten other horses with it. Farmers there said, "What a great event! This is a time to celebrate!" And the farmer simply said, "Maybe." So the farmer began to enjoy his many horses but then one day his son fell off one of the horses while he was riding and broke his leg. Well, the farmers, the friends and neighbors, they saw it as a catastrophe. And they asked him if he thought so as well, and he simply said, "maybe." But then the Chinese ruler started drafting young boys to go after war and they found out he wasn't able to serve because his leg was broken. The neighbors once more said to the farmer, "Isn't this a blessing" to which he said, "Maybe."

How many times have you and I seen things as either blessings or curses that turned out to be exactly the opposite of what we

thought they might be? Only God knows the future, only God is omniscient, only God knows the full implications of all the things that we're asking of him. So we can ask God for good, solid biblical kingdom things and maybe it will turn out that way and maybe it won't. God alone knows. And he still has the right to say yes or no based on our good and his glory. John says:

*Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God; and whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him.* Well, what John is taking about here is the confidence that comes from an ongoing relationship with the living God. I mean we have confidence that yes or no, with regard to prayer still comes from the same place of God's deep love for us and his desire for his own glory; and because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him, we can say, just like Paul said when God said no to one of his requests. This is what Paul said. He said: *So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults,*

*hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*

So Paul comes up with some amazing insights about his own character through this lengthy process of being denied his requests by God. I just want you to think for a second. Do you think that Paul actually sat down with God and had a conversation where God said, Paul, I think you're getting conceited and because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations that I've given you, I'm going to give you this thorn in the flesh. I rather doubt that that's the way it happened. You see, God reveals bits and pieces of who he is to us progressively within the context of our relationship with him. At least that's the way it's occurred in my own personal journey. My own personal journey has been a piece of information here, piece of information there, an intuition here, intuition there, a connection here, a connection there and then I start to see what I could not see before, particularly with regard to prayer that God has chosen to answer no.

People complain that God doesn't answer prayer but I think a lot of times they just misinterpret any of the three answers that God always gives to prayer, and that is, yes, no, and wait. The one answer from God that no one ever complains about is the yes. We don't complain about it, we just often forget it. I mean, I truly

do wish that I had kept a journal of answered prayer in my years as a Christian because I know I've gotten hundreds of yesses and I also know that I've forgotten almost all of them.

The two issues of prayer that people take issue with is "wait" and "no," and the huge one is "wait." I mean I've done whole messages on our Western way of the way we receive God's responses to prayer. And you know, we Westerners, we want it and we want it now; we want it yesterday. God's ways always not been Western, it's been Eastern. It's been a matter of slowness then suddenness, God reacting not at all the way Westerners expect; it's never been based on speed. We have ample examples of God clearly answering prayer but in time spans that we would interpret as a no or as an abandonment instead of as "wait." God took 25 years to answer Abraham's prayer for a son and he never once apologized for being tardy. He took forty years to answer Moses's prayer to free Israel from Egypt. He's taken over 2,000 years to answer the prayers for his return and that still hasn't happened yet, and it won't happen until the very last sheep enters into the sheepfold. And yet we still pray because -- quote -- *we have confidence before God; and whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him.*

You know, we also develop confidence before God when he says "no"

to our prayers. I mean, I know now that some of God's no answers to my prayers had to do with my immaturity and some of them had to do with my ego. There are times when I've asked God for something exactly the way James say we shouldn't. He says, *You have not, because you ask amiss, to spend it on yourself.* And learning how not to ask amiss is a process that takes time. It's incredibly easy to mix up motives and think you're asking for something of great kingdom value when in reality that's not true at all. I've said it many times, the two things that I ask for on a daily basis and have done so for many, many years is not just wisdom, which God promises to give if you just ask for it, but also for the ability to see my own sin and folly when God is presenting it right before my eyes. It's not pleasant but it's a genuine blessing to be able to hear God when he's saying something that you don't want to hear. When he says I'm not granting you that prayer because you're not -- because you're asking for it to feed your own ego and not my kingdom; and then when he adds, you're so self-protective that somehow or other you can't seem to hear it or see it. I mean I've told people this before. The very first time that God told me that I really want to preach in order to feed my own ego in order to make people think that I'm smart. God is saying this. I said, that's not me. That couldn't possibly be. Who would have such a base motive to want to do that? That couldn't possibly be. God says, "It's you." That's not an easy thing to hear. I mean it's

jarring to finally realize that God sees all of you and yet for some reason has still decided to love you. God very slowly, very kindly and very lovingly assured me that, yes, he still loved me and the reason why his answer to prayer was no is because I was pursuing my own agenda and not the kingdom's far more than I ever realized. Now when God points that out to me I'm not shocked any more. I say, "Yeah, that's me again," but let me tell you the very first time that was a struggle, that was a battle between God and me.

Some no answers also have to do with God's own timing and logistic and a whole host of other reasons. But all of the ability to grapple with and understand why God would say no comes about through having a relationship with him. And that's clearly what Paul had and that's clearly what enabled him to say to God's answer of no, this is what Paul said, he said: *Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.* Now, I have no idea how long it took Paul to arrive at that conclusion that he did, but I suspect it wasn't instantaneous. And that's precisely what John is getting at as he concludes this third chapter of his letter. I mean, John says, let us love like the good Samaritan love. Let us pray like

we had the heart and mind and will of Jesus. And finally, he says, let us obey as the measure of the reality of our faith.

John speaks of how critical it is to do these two things, he says in verse 23, he says: *And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us.* You know, you can't really say you're doing the one without actually doing the other. You can't believe in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ without understanding the critical importance there is of loving one another. And so he says: *Whoever keeps his commandments abides in God, and God in him. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit whom he has given us.* What John is saying, it's incredibly basic. Faith is not something that you can see. I mean, it's not something that you wear on your sleeve like a tattoo, although some people do just that. He says, faith can only be seen by what you do. James says: *Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.* And keeping God's commandments is not some rote obligatory technique for getting what you want. It's the culmination of trust that produces obedience that Paul was referring to and what James and John refer to as well. It's a relationship in which you place your trust in God by obeying his commandments and loving the brethren even when it hurts, even when it makes little sense.



In my 49 years as a Christian, I've never met anyone who's ever expressed a regret about giving God too much trust, too much obedience. You see, the more of that you give, the more you recognize you made the best investment you could have ever made. That life and truth and beauty are found in Christ and Christ alone and the Spirit of Christ who now lives inside you. And as you work through understanding who God is and what his affect on your life is, you realize *whoever keeps his commandments abides in God, and God in him. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit whom he has given us.* Let's pray.

*Father, I just thank you for the proof that you've given to us of your love for us, of who you are, of the power that you've given us to live our lives. And Lord, we know there's two different aspects of it, there's the obedience aspect and there's the love for the brethren aspect. And Father, I just accept that it's hard work, loving each other, especially loving those whom we'd choose not to love under any other circumstance. And Lord, this is the place, this is the grid where it all takes place, the church. I pray, Lord, that you would give us an understanding of what it is that you are doing by creating this body of Christ that exists in local expressions in hundreds of thousands of areas around the world, all of which are designed, Lord, to grow us in our ability to do just that, to obey your commands and to love each other. Give us the*

*grace, the strength, the power and the wisdom to do just that, we  
pray in Jesus' name. Amen.*