

1 John – A Series Written and Presented by Arthur Howe

Fellowship - The First Letter of John

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The theme for these studies will be "Fellowship" and we will be discovering together what John has to teach us about this important subject. This time we are looking at 1st. John chapter 1 and the first four verses.

It is in verse three that the apostle gives us the purpose of his writing. Here it is: "that which we have seen and heard we declare to you that you also may have fellowship with us." And he goes on to add that, "our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ."

For John, fellowship with other Christians was important because together they were joined to God the Eternal Father and his beloved Son, the Lord Jesus. It was important to John, but how important is it to you? Is it possible that you enjoy attending various church services and meetings and yet you are not bothered whether or not you experience true fellowship with the people who are there, or even with God Himself?

The truth is that it is perfectly possible to come together with others to chat, share refreshments and to be in a friendly mood and to say that you had good fellowship together, when in fact it was nothing more than being sociable in a pleasant atmosphere.

On the other hand, it can happen that you are in a strange place with people who are unknown to you and yet you share a spiritual closeness or oneness in the things of the Lord. What makes the difference? Just this: in this second situation you are sharing in fellowship, the same spiritual life and the same spiritual experience, even though coming from different backgrounds or even different nationalities. It is the fellowship that is enjoyed between those who have known the reality of being born again by the Spirit of God having turned from their sins and put their faith in Christ as their personal Saviour. It is the fellowship that comes from the indwelling of God's Holy Spirit.

This is the experience of God's people all over the world, wherever they live. It is this spiritual life that all true Christians possess that results in true fellowship. We feel that we know one another when we meet because we are in the same saving relationship with God our heavenly Father through the Lord Jesus Christ.

When John speaks, in verse three of 1 John 1, about fellowship with the Father and with his Son he means a personal and real friendship. It is to really know God. This is a recurring thought of John's in this letter. In chapter two verse three he says, "We know that we have come to know Him if we obey his commands." And in verse thirteen of chapter two he writes to people who from the beginning "have known the Father." And then, in chapter five verse twenty he assures his readers that they have a spiritual understanding which enables them to "know Him who is true" - in other words God Himself.

So this true fellowship between Christian believers is the result of a personal knowledge of God Himself through his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. In his Gospel, at chapter seventeen, verse

three, John records these words in the prayer of the Lord Jesus: "And this is eternal life that they may know you, the only true God and Jesus Christ whom you have sent."

We see, then, that the really important thing is knowing God personally through Jesus Christ who reveals Him to us. Anything else apart from this is just empty religion, lacking spiritual life and reality.

It is important to stress again that this fellowship is for all of God's people wherever they are. It crosses all boundaries of age, gender, nationality, education, social standing or even Christian denomination, or whatever other barriers men may erect. We are all one in Christ Jesus our Lord so these things should make no difference. Fellowship with God the Father and his Son establishes fellowship between believers by the indwelling Holy Spirit.

But how important to you, personally, is this fellowship that John writes about? Are you happy to go to a meeting or service and then once it is over to quickly leave, hardly taking time to speak with anyone? Was that true fellowship? In some places there are Christians who just long for fellowship with others of a like mind, but who cannot find it. Perhaps they have had to move to a new town and have been unable to find a church that is spiritually alive and where the gospel is faithfully preached. For others it is the loneliness and isolation of old age or illness that cuts them off from fellowship with other believers.

True fellowship ought to be important to you if you are a genuine Christian. It certainly was for the apostle John. He says in chapter 1 and verse 3 of this letter that he was declaring to his readers all that he had personally experienced concerning the Lord Jesus for a very good reason. It was this, "in order that you may have fellowship with us." True fellowship between believers is not something to be taken for granted or merely supposed to exist. John wanted to make sure that such fellowship did exist between them, based on their personal relationship with their loving heavenly Father through the saving work of his eternal Son.

And more than this, John knew that such genuine fellowship would bring real joy and spiritual gladness to his readers. He explains this in verse four, "We write to you that your joy may be full." Where there is little true fellowship in a church, there will be little true joy.

There is a further practical lesson about fellowship to be learned from verse 3. It concerns the question of who is entitled to belong to the fellowship of the Christian church? John has been writing about our having fellowship with one another. We also use the expression 'coming into fellowship' or 'joining the fellowship' when someone is added to the community of believers on being baptised. Remember that this community, this fellowship, is made up of those who by faith in Christ have experienced the saving grace of God. It is only such who can truly belong to the fellowship of the church.

How do we know, then, if someone is ready to be accepted into the fellowship of the church? Mistakes are sometimes made over this, possibly harming the individual concerned and the company of believers involved.

How can such things happen? Sadly, all too easily. It may be because of over-enthusiasm in wanting numbers to increase. There may be church leaders who are not mature or discerning enough to look for the signs of a true conversion. Tragically, there can be very wrong motives

in bringing some into the fellowship. A person's social standing or material wealth may be seen as being of benefit to the church, regardless of their spiritual standing.

How can we avoid such mistakes and such shallow judgements about people? This is where this first Letter of John is so helpful. It marks out for us the characteristics, the evidences, of those who fellowship, first of all and essentially, is with the Father and with his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

More than this, it helps you to test yourself also. You can see by the evidences of the Christian life whether you rightly belong in the fellowship of believers or whether you still need to get right with God.

By looking at these things together, I don't want you to fall back in despair, but to discover the message of this letter of John and gain assurance of salvation. Remember that John says in chapter 5 verse 13 that this letter was written to people so that they might know that they have eternal life. That is what I want for you from these studies together - the assurance and conviction that your sins are forgiven and that you are reconciled to God through your personal faith in his son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

On this programme I am going to look at the subject of fellowship as it relates to believing in the Son of God - our Lord Jesus Christ. For this we shall look at John's First Letter chapter four and verses nine to fifteen.

Last time we tried to understand the reason for John's emphasis on fellowship and what it means in our daily experience as Christian believers. This time we will look at these things a little more closely.

One thing we must do is distinguish between the personal, private aspects of our fellowship with God, those things that are between you and the Lord and so no one can judge you over them, and the open, clear evidences of this fellowship which should be quite obvious to fellow believers. They are the things that show you have a genuine, saving faith.

The apostle James, in his very practical letter, makes clear his concern over such matters. This is what he writes in James chapter two verses seventeen and eighteen: "...faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. But someone will say, 'You have faith, I have deeds.' Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do." James is saying that if faith is genuine it will produce good works, otherwise it is a dead faith. He emphasises this point in verse twenty-six where he says: "As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead." So you see there has to be firm evidence of the faith we profess to have. That evidence is seen in the good works that we do, but always keep in mind that we are not saved by our good works. Salvation is by faith in Christ alone. As Paul reminded the Christians in Ephesians chapter two verses eight and nine: "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God - not by works so that no one can boast."

Good works are to be an evidence of salvation, not the means of salvation.

Much earlier in the New Testament, even before the Lord Jesus began his public ministry, John the Baptist made exactly the same point. In Matthew chapter three and verse eight we find him telling the proud, hypocritical Pharisees and Sadducees who came to him to be baptised in the River Jordan, that they had to show evidence of repentance - of their genuine desire to turn from their sinful ways - if they were to be baptised as those who desired to obey God. He said to them: "Produce fruit in keeping with repentance."

Such a requirement is still necessary today, to test the genuineness of those seeking baptism.

So, let us consider two inward evidences or personal experiences that stand at the very gateway of this 'fellowship' of which John writes in this letter. The first is that saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ which we have already touched on. The second is the reality of the indwelling Holy Spirit.

First of all then: What does it mean to "believe in the Son of God"? Sadly, there are many who would claim to believe in the Son of God but whose Christianity is based on the observance of rituals and church attendance rather than a personal experience of and trust in

Christ as their Saviour and Lord. They think that all this will help them to gain eternal life and a place in heaven. John says in chapter five and verses eleven and twelve: "God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He who has the Son has life, he who does not have the Son of God does not have life." All other hope is built on a false foundation which will crumble to dust when the final judgement takes place.

True fellowship with God the Father only comes through a genuine belief in the Son of God. So verses nine and ten say: "This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him. This is love; not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins." This glorious fellowship with the Father through the Son begins with God Himself and it all began because of his love for us. It was that love that sent his son into the world to die for our sins. God loved us long before we ever loved Him.

Christ's death was no ordinary death. It was "an atoning sacrifice" that blots out our guilt and makes it possible for those who believe to be "at one" with God, to know fellowship with Him because in Christ his righteous demands have been met and He can look on us in mercy.

There is something else to be discovered in these verses. In both of them it states that God sent his Son. This shows us that the One who was sent existed before He appeared in human form. In John's Gospel chapter one verse one and verse fourteen we read these words concerning this event:

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning ... The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the only begotten who came from the Father, full of grace and truth." This is why we speak of his 'incarnation' or appearing in the flesh as a man. The eternal Word became the eternal Son - God manifest in flesh, born of the virgin Mary.

Incidentally, the Lord Jesus Himself, on a number of occasions, spoke about his coming from the Father and going back to Him again. Read through John's Gospel and you will discover this for yourself. The apostle Paul sums this up concisely in his letter to the Galatians chapter four verses four and five: "But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full right of sons." This shows that Jesus' birth was natural and that he was born into a home and family that honoured God's Law as we find it in the Old Testament of the Bible.

There is something else of great importance to be noticed in verse 9. The Lord Jesus is described as God's "only begotten Son." Although Jesus' birth was natural, by his human mother Mary, his conception was supernatural, by the Holy Spirit. So He has both divine and human natures. The fact that He is God's "only begotten Son" brings home to us how immense was the sacrifice involved in God giving up his beloved Son to die for our sins on the cross. Not only John, but the apostle Paul also writes, in Romans chapter 8 verse 32, about God not sparing his own Son but giving him up for us all.

There is another vital truth to be discovered in this ninth verse of 1 John chapter 4 and it should cause every one of us concern. Here is the verse again: "This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through

Him.” This makes it alarmingly clear that if we do not know Christ as Saviour then we do not live. We are, spiritually speaking, dead, just existing and having no fellowship with God. The Bible makes this quite plain in Ephesians chapter 2 verse 1 where it describes the natural state of mankind as being “dead in trespasses and sins”. It was to put this right that Christ came into the world so that those who place their faith in Him might have spiritual, abundant, eternal life. Saving faith in Christ, then, is one of the inward evidences or experiences of true fellowship with God Himself.

Now we need to move on to look at verse 14 which says: “And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Saviour of the world.” This statement lies at the heart of Christianity and therefore needs to be clearly understood. Being “Saviour of the world” does not mean that Christ has or will save everyone in the world. What it does mean is that He is the Saviour of the world in the sense that wherever you are in the world, whatever your nationality or background, He is the only one to whom you must look for the forgiveness of your sins and being put right with God. It is made very clear in Acts chapter 4 verse 12 that Jesus is the only Saviour where it says: “Salvation is found in no-one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.”

Paul helps us in our understanding of this when he writes in 1 Timothy 4 verses 9 and 10: “This is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance, that we have put our hope in the living God, who is the Saviour of all men, and especially of those who believe.” It is belief in, trust in, Christ that makes salvation effective in each individual person who believes.

Matthew’s Gospel chapter 1 verse 21 tells us that the Son of God would be called ‘Jesus’, which means God is saviour or deliverer, because He would save his people from their sins. Every mistaken idea about him that makes him simply the greatest example of upright manhood, or a great moral philosopher or teacher and nothing more, must be set against the Bible’s definition of Him as the Son of God, the Saviour of lost men and women.

Belief in such a Saviour is the first evidence of sharing in the fellowship of which John writes in this First Letter of his. Do you share in it? Is such a belief in Christ your experience? I pray that it may be so for on it depends your eternal security and happiness.

In this series looking at John's First Letter we have been discovering the true meaning of Christian fellowship and how it is bound up with believing in Jesus as the Son of God. This time we will look at how the apostle John relates fellowship to the indwelling of every believer by the Holy Spirit. He it is who comes into the believer at the time of conversion bringing spiritual new birth. We are looking this time at 1 John chapter 2 verses 18 to 29.

Did you notice that I used the word 'He' in referring to God's Spirit. This is because the Holy Spirit is

God Himself, who is revealed to us in the Scriptures as 'The Father', 'The Son' and 'The Holy Spirit', but as one God. This means that the Father is God, and so also are the Son - our Lord Jesus Christ - and the Holy Spirit. A trinity and yet a mysterious unity. Whenever we speak of God and eternal things our human understanding has its severe limitations, but the Bible teaches this truth throughout its pages, although the word 'Trinity' does not occur in the Scriptures. So, to be indwelt by the Holy Spirit is to be indwelt by God Himself.

As we come now to look at John's emphasis on fellowship through a real experience of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer, we will be made aware that, sadly, the Spirit's ministry is often neglected or even unknown among many Christians. With John's help we want to correct that. It is not as if John is bringing us some new teaching here. After all, our Lord Himself promised the sending of the Holy Spirit to live with God's people. You can read about that in John's Gospel chapter 7 and verses 38 and 39, and in Acts chapter 1 verse 8 where we have the promise of the Holy Spirit coming upon the disciples to empower them for witness.

So, when John starts to teach about the Holy Spirit and His indwelling of the believer as a further basis of fellowship, he is dealing with something with which his readers are familiar. We, too, need to be familiar with this teaching. Here is what he writes in chapter 2 verse 20, "But you have received an anointing from the Holy One, and all of you know the truth." And in verse 27, "As for you, the anointing you received from him remains in you..."

In the Old Testament we read that kings and high priests were anointed with holy oil to symbolise the power of God's Spirit being given to them, marking them out for their particular office and duties. In these verses John is teaching that the Christian believer has also received an anointing, something special from God that marks him out as belonging to God and having a particular purpose. That anointing is the Holy Spirit Himself. John, in the preceding verses of this chapter, has been warning his readers about false teachers, antichrists he calls them, they were counterfeits seeking to lead them astray. Now, says John, the Holy Spirit, whom you have been given, is the One who enables you to understand that Christian teaching is the truth. He also helps you to recognise what is false teaching and a lie. That is a great spiritual blessing in our day when there is so much false doctrine around for it means that a prayerful, Bible-reading, child of God will not be led astray as they seek the Spirit's guidance and understanding. It also serves to strengthen fellowship between believers as they hold on to and honour the same biblical truths.

Do you have this anointing, this indwelling of the Holy Spirit? For every true believer there is no need to be uncertain about these things. In 1 John 3 and verse twenty-four John writes this: "Those who obey his commands live in Him, and He in them. And this is how we know He lives in us: We know it by the Spirit He gave us." There may be times when you wonder if you are a true Christian and if you are really experiencing true fellowship with other believers. Such feelings often come to Christians in times of testing, failure or disappointment. If this is your experience just now, go back to this verse and ask God to re-assure you by his Spirit who lives in you and who has anointed you as his child.

In his teaching John is only reinforcing something taught earlier by the apostle Paul in Romans 8 verse 9. Here he points out that if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, that is the Holy Spirit, he does not belong to Christ. That being so, the opposite is true: if you DO have the Spirit within you then you DO belong to Him. Paul goes on to encourage us in verse 16 of Romans 8 where he writes that the Holy Spirit bears witness with our spirit that we are the children of God. The Holy Spirit Himself gives us the assurance that we belong to God and that He lives within us. So we do not need to doubt if we continue in fellowship with the Lord and allow his Spirit to confirm our relationship with Him through prayer and the reading of his Word, the Bible. Take heart from this if you are struggling as a Christian and be confident of your safekeeping in God's fatherly care.

This fellowship that is enjoyed through the indwelling of God's Holy Spirit will always show itself in a love of the truth and rejection of error. John has been speaking about the true Christian who believes that Jesus is the Son of God. Such a belief is only possible by the powerful work of the Holy Spirit impressing this truth on the heart and mind of an individual person. John puts it this way in chapter 5 verse 6, "And it is the Spirit who testifies because the Spirit is truth."

This truth that Jesus is the Son of God who has come into the world as God in human form to be our Saviour is foolishness to the unbeliever. He rejects and ridicules such teaching. He may find it offensive to his mental pride. But the believer, says John, recognises, embraces and loves this as truth because the Holy Spirit within bears witness to it and fixes it in the his understanding and affection. This ministry and work of the Holy Spirit should come as no surprise to us. After all, our Lord Jesus told his disciples that this is what the Spirit would do when He was sent to them from the Father. We read his words in John's Gospel chapter 15 verse 26: "When the Counsellor comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father, He will testify about me." In chapter 16 of John's Gospel and verse 13, Jesus describes the Holy Spirit as 'The Spirit of Truth' who would lead or guide the disciples into all truth.

So we have discovered that the Holy Spirit is the great teacher and revealer of truth for those who are Christ's followers. That is why we must always pray that we may be enlightened by the Spirit as we seek to understand God's word and be kept from false teaching. We have learned that John's message to us is that as believers we have true fellowship with one another through the Spirit who lives in us and identifies us as God's children.

This same Spirit is the One who empowers us as God's children to bear witness to the Lord Jesus and to the truth. May we in our churches allow Him to fill us and to awaken us to this great responsibility.

Last time we were thinking about fellowship in the deepest sense and how it relates to our possessing the Holy Spirit or being indwelt by Him as Christians. This time I want to give some thought to the matter of our demonstrating our fellowship with God and with our fellow believers. In other words, I want us to think about how we show that we are one with God and his people.

Do you remember John's stated purpose in the writing of this letter that we call "First John"? In the first chapter and verse three he makes clear his desire for his readers in this way: " We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ." There was a longing on the part of the apostle for those Christians to share in spiritual unity with himself. This unity was bound up in being in fellowship with God the Father and his son through the indwelling Holy Spirit. Nothing else could make this possible. But the question arises: 'how do you show this unity?' How do you demonstrate this fellowship in practical, everyday Christian living? We are going to look at some verses in this letter which will help us.

We look first at 1 John chapter 1 verse 7 where we read, "But if we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from every sin." John here points out for us that true fellowship only exists between us as believers if we first of all have fellowship with God. He describes this as "walking in the light as He is in the light." This thought of the light has already been introduced to us in verse 5 where we learn that "God is light; in Him there is no darkness at all."

God is holy and pure, therefore nothing of darkness, or sinfulness, can remain in his presence. Light reveals, light exposes and it leaves no dark corners untouched. Our Lord Himself brought this light into the world since He is God revealed in human form as we read in the first chapter of John's Gospel. Jesus called Himself "The light of the world", promising that whoever followed Him would not walk in darkness but have the light of life. That's John chapter 8 verse 12.

What this means is that if you are a true believer in Christ and are following Him faithfully, you are no longer in the darkness of sin and unbelief. You are now walking in the light of God's presence and because other Christians are in that same light you are able to have fellowship with each other, sharing in the experience of God's light flooding the heart and knowing the daily comfort of the blood of the Son of God cleansing you from all sin.

This walking in the light of God's presence will mean a fellowship with others that is honest, open and humble because your own sin has been faced up to, confessed and forgiven. You will not be in a hurry to point out the sins of others, nor will you be inclined to cover up your own failings or have an endless supply of excuses for them. Neither will you be ready to shift the blame from yourself and pin it onto others.

The reason for all this is found in verses 8 to 10 of this first chapter: "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and

just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make God out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives." Honest fellowship is found among people who do not attempt to deceive themselves by saying they have no sin. Sadly there are some who appear to give the impression to others that they no longer sin, claiming a sinless perfection. But God is not deceived for He knows the hearts of each one of us. If we claim this, John says, the truth is not in us. Certainly, Christians should "sin less" and seek to live pure and holy lives before God and man in the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit.

For those who readily own up to their sins before God there is the assurance of forgiveness and cleansing. No pretence or play-acting before Him will do. Remember, God is light and He sees and knows everything. And so people who know the truth of this and walk humbly in fellowship with God are those who can share in fellowship with those who likewise have sought and found forgiveness. Among people like this there is no hypocrisy, only sincerity and genuineness. This is how their fellowship together is demonstrated in simple, day to day, relationships.

Now sometimes a problem arises in the fellowship of the local church. What if someone claims to be a believer yet is openly living in sinful ways, or in a wrong relationship, or whose life is taken up with the pleasures of this world? There can be no true fellowship in these circumstances because that person is not walking in the light of God's presence. They have no true fellowship with God and therefore no true fellowship with his people. It may be that the person concerned has not been truly converted but has just learned to copy the words and worship of the church. They have not been born again by the Spirit of God. It may be that that person is a backslider who has drifted away from a close walk with the Lord. It is only when such things are dealt with that fellowship in the real sense can be enjoyed. It is the responsibility of the church elders to address such situations in love so that the whole fellowship of the local church is not spoiled.

Sometimes fellowship is not possible for another reason and this is what we will look at now. You will find this dealt with in 1 John chapter 2 verses 18 and 19 where we read: "Dear children, this is the last hour; and as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come. This is how we know it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us." John writes about some who used to belong to the fellowship of believers but who had walked out. They were people who felt unable to continue in the company of those who believed the same things that John believed concerning the person of the Lord Jesus Christ, that He is the Son of God, the promised Saviour - the Messiah. These people had been among the Christian believers, meeting with them, and yet deep in their hearts they did not believe the same things as those around them. No true fellowship was possible with them since it all depends on a deep heart conviction of the truths concerning Christ and the present reality of a personal, spiritual experience of Him. How could these people share meaningfully in the spiritual life of the fellowship when they could not own the Lord Jesus as their personal Saviour from their sins? John says that the very act of their going out from us shows that they never belonged to us. They never believed that Jesus is the Christ and so they never received the Holy Spirit as you have received Him and know the truth. That is verses 19 and 20.

In such a situation you can imagine the tensions. It became clear that they were not all of one mind on the most fundamental things of Christian truth and there had to be a parting of the ways. There simply was no true fellowship between them and there had to be separation. It is exactly the same where the church is concerned today. There has to be agreement over basic teaching, especially where the person and work of Christ is concerned, otherwise there can be no true fellowship within a local church or between groups of professing Christians. Note that I referred to 'basic teaching', not the issues of church government or organisation or other secondary things which should never be a ground for breaking fellowship.

So let us demonstrate true fellowship by upholding the truth of the Gospel concerning the Lord Jesus and let us stand by the fundamental truths of the Christian faith as set out by John in this letter. Let us be bold and clear in this age of religious confusion and shine as lights in a sinful world.

Last time we considered how we demonstrate our fellowship with God and other believers in simple, everyday experience. This time we will take it a little further and give some thought to the matter of living lives that please God, or living righteously. In other words, how does John connect the practice of righteousness with the state of righteousness before God that is the position of all those who are justified by faith in Christ. In this letter the apostle John makes it clear that true godliness is seen in a life of obedience to the Lord.

John opens up this subject in chapter 2 verses 3 to 5: "We know that we have come to know Him if we obey his commands. The man who says, 'I know Him', but does not do what He commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But if anyone obeys his word, God's love is truly made complete in him. This is how we know we are in Him: Whoever claims to live in Him must walk as Jesus did."

The evidence of knowing the Lord and being in fellowship with Him is to keep his commandments. In his ministry our Saviour upheld God's law and warned against ignoring or downgrading it. He says, in Matthew's Gospel chapter 5 verse 19, "Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called the least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practises and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven,"

A lesson to learn here is that a growing obedience leads to a growing assurance. John emphasises it twice in these verses when he says that keeping God's word and his commands is the way to know that we know Him and are in Him. People may make all sorts of high-sounding claims about their spirituality but without the evidence of obedience, it has a hollow ring about it.

This matter of living righteously touches every part of our lives and how we interact with all that is around us. In chapter 2 verse 15 John says this: "Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him." Here is a clear warning about becoming ensnared by the things of this world to the exclusion of God. John cautions us against loving the world and everything in it, otherwise we will love these rather than God. In other words, the love of the Father will not be in us. He then sets out, in verse 16, the things of the world, the dangers, that he has in mind. Dangers to be on our guard against at all times. They are: the strong desire to please the sinful nature and to have all that the eyes see (we could call this materialism), and a proud spirit that thinks it can get along without God. These things, he says, are not of the Father, but of the world which is passing away along with all its desires. By contrast, he who does the will of God will live for ever.

At the end of chapter 2 in verse 29, John draws an interesting comparison with the family likeness that is seen in children. It is a further illustration of the need for right living to be seen as an evidence of our being in fellowship with our heavenly Father. John writes: "If you know that He is righteous, you know that everyone who practices righteousness is born of Him." You know how children can strongly resemble a parent either in looks or temperament. So it is in spiritual things. We are born of God by his Holy Spirit so that gradually and increasingly we

come to resemble his nature and his ways. The more we become like Him, the more we please Him and the closer we come to Him in fellowship. So our love for God and our obedience to his commands and the way we live brings us into close fellowship with Him.

But what of our fellowship with other Christians? This too is bound up with the keeping of God's commandments. This may sound strange, but John clarifies it for us in chapter 5 verses 2 and 3: "By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and keep his commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome." Being in a loving relationship with God shows itself in love for his children also. This is in keeping with the Lord Jesus' teaching on the commandments of God. In Matthew chapter 22 verses 37 to 39, in answer to the question, 'Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?' He replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment." Now note what He goes on to say: "And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbour as yourself'". The keeping of all the commandments is summed up in these two great principles: "Love God" and "Love your neighbour." The apostle Paul makes the same point in Romans chapter 13 verse 10 where he says, "Love does no harm to its neighbour. Therefore love is the fulfilment of the law." Also in Galatians chapter 6 verse 2: "Carry each others burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ." Genuine love for God's children is evidence of our true fellowship with them.

So, to come back to 1 John chapter 5, you can see how true fellowship is worked out in our lives. The Christian believer loves God. He keeps in close communion with God through Christ. He seeks to keep the commandments and in doing so he will seek only good for his neighbour, not harm. He will, above all, be loving and supportive of all the Lord's people. Can you see fellowship like this being worked out when you meet with other believers? But first, is it being worked out in your life? If not, it will need to be put right so that you can enjoy the true fellowship that we are discovering together in John's letter.

The Lord's commandments are not burdensome, says John in verse 3. What he means is that the Christian is more than happy to keep them. They are not wearying. They do not spoil his happiness. Indeed, they are a blessing and they bring peace and joy into his life as he keeps them. So do not be put off in thinking that it is unrealistic and expecting too much of one another. This is part of the practice of living righteously as a demonstration of fellowship with God and his people.

Remember, too, that not only is such honouring of God's commandments beneficial in the outworking of Christian fellowship within the church. It has wider implications. The believer who lives righteously is a blessing in his own home, even if family member are not believers. Godly living will have an impact for good and show that what is believed translates into upright behaviour. To live by God's standards is the best way to set out your testimony as a Christian in the place where you work. Honesty, diligence and truthfulness together with an unwillingness to speak badly about fellow workers will go a long way in securing a hearing for your Christian testimony. People will respect you and what you stand for, even though they may ridicule what you believe.

So be challenged by what we have discovered about working out in our lives what it means to be in fellowship with God and with his children. Are you living this life of obedience that keeps you close to God and that enables you to have true fellowship with other Christians? May the Lord help you to do so and give you the joy and peace this brings.

Hello. In our consideration of fellowship in John's First Letter, we saw last time that the evidence of our being in true fellowship with God is seen in the way we live. Godly living will also have its effect on our fellowship with other Christians and on our testimony before those who are not believers. We discovered that for the true believer obeying the Lord's commands is not a burden, but rather a joy.

So now we will look at 1 John chapter 3 and verses 1 to 10. In the first three verses we are shown just what it is that motivates the Christian to live a godly life, to delight in God's commandments. John writes these wonderful words: "How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know Him. Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when He appears, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as He is pure." This delight in God's commandments arises, first of all, out of gratitude for God's matchless love in making us his children. We want to please Him by obeying Him because He is our heavenly Father who has given us eternal life and brought us into his family.

Secondly, we are motivated to godly living because the day is coming when our Saviour will return and we do not want to be ashamed before Him at his appearing. John goes on to remind us that the Lord Jesus has died to pay for our sins, the One who had no sins of his own. If we truly love Him and are seeking to serve Him, we will not continue in sin as if we were still unconverted. To do that, John says, is to show that we have not seen Christ or known Him as Saviour.

Verses 9 and 10 teach us how to recognise those who truly do know Christ and are children of God, and they spur us on to godly living: "No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God. This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God; nor is anyone who does not love his brother." What this means is this: Whoever is born of God does not go on habitually committing sin. The true child of God cannot practise sin as a lifestyle. Oh, a true believer may still fall into sin, but he cannot live comfortably with it or leave it unconfessed and unforgiven. The true child of God will live righteously because that is the new nature that God has planted within him and he will also love his fellow Christians. These are the evidences of the fellowship with God and Christ that John is teaching us in this letter.

So the Christian is someone who loves God for who He is as the great Creator, Ruler and Heavenly Father who has loved us enough to send his only begotten Son into the world to be our Saviour. The Christian is also someone who loves his fellow Christians because they too are loved by God. In addition to this, the true Christian will love all those whom God has loved and for whom He has also given his Son. The great love that God has lavished on us should be the motivating factor of our love for others.

In 1 John chapter 4 verses 7 to 11 John develops this theme. The very foundation for loving each other in Christian fellowship is found in the very nature of God. We read: "Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love." If we are God's children we should show that nature just as earthly children show the nature of a parent. This means that the very disposition or temperament of a child can reveal who is the parent. So it is in the spiritual realm. When we love we are showing the family likeness, that we are born of God.

In verse 10 John draws our attention to the wonder of God's love: "This is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins." This is love unlike any other. Human love may find something attractive or desirable or pleasant in the one who is loved, but this love of God reaches out to the unlovely and to those who do not love Him. God loved us even when we were rebels, ungodly and his enemies. It was this love that sent his Son into the world to be the final, perfect sacrifice for sin. The only sacrifice that blots out transgressions and makes it possible for sinners to be brought into living fellowship with God through the Lord Jesus.

The conclusion that John draws from all this is that since God loved us in such an amazing way, then we ought to love one another. This is how true fellowship shows itself among people who have seen the wonderful love of God and know the debt of love they owe to their heavenly Father and so to other members of his family.

In the light of such wonderful love, John says in chapter 4 verses 10 and 11: "We love because He first loved us. If anyone says 'I love God', yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen." Note that God loved us long before we loved Him. It was his love that sought us out and saved us. Here is the test of true love for God: it is that we also love our brothers. It is not possible to hate our brothers and to truly love God. To live like that is to live a lie.

Such a person needs to remember the commandment given in our Lord's teaching that we are to love God and our brother also. This is how true fellowship is worked out.

Our final passage sums up John's teaching on this subject of loving one another and so experiencing true Christian fellowship. It is found in chapter 5 verses 1 and 2: "Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who loves the Father loves his child as well. This is how we know that we love the children of God: by loving God and carrying out his commands." Again, we see that the secret is the linking of belief and behaviour. The one whose saving faith is in Jesus Christ will evidence that he has been born again of God by the way he lives his life in obedience to God's commands and by the way he loves his fellow believers. One of the last commands of the Lord Jesus to his disciples was that they should love one another. He said to them that all men would know that they were his disciples if they had love one to another. Our loving fellowship together with our fellow Christians is a powerful witness to the power of God's love to change lives.

So we have discovered in the First Letter of John that loving God, loving the children of God and keeping his commandments are all tied up together in this whole matter of true fellowship. Have you begun to live this new life of love and obedience in fellowship with God and his

people? If not, respond today to the love of God and turn to Him in repentance for your sin, accept Christ as your Saviour and experience for yourself the joy and peace that this brings.