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TRUE FELLOWSHIP

1 John 1:3-4

By

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1 John Lesson 3

True Fellowship
1 John 1:3-4

Imagine that you have come on hard times. You're homeless, penniless, and sleeping on the sidewalk. Your tattered clothes and an old, dirty blanket are barely enough to keep you from freezing at night. Your meals consist of whatever you can find in the dumpsters. You have lost contact with all family and friends.

As you sit on the sidewalk, suddenly the presidential limousine pulls up to the curb. The President gets out and invites you to join him. You get in and are whisked to the airport, where Air Force One is waiting. You fly to Washington, are driven in the presidential motorcade to the White House, where your own room is ready. There are new, clean clothes, all the food you can eat, and servants to meet your every need or whim. But, more than that, to your astonishment, the President treats you as his friend. He shares his heart with you and wants you to share your heart with him.

At first, you're so dazzled with this incredible change of events that you're only aware of the President himself. But after a while, you realize that you're not there alone. There are many others who have experienced the same thing. You suddenly have a large family of brothers and sisters that care for you. As you exchange your stories and talk of how the President has helped each of you, your relationships deepen.

This is an unbelievable fable, right? No, if you've come to know Jesus Christ, it's a true allegory. He found you in the gutter and brought you to His heavenly palace to live with Him and to get to know Him as a friend. You discover brothers and sisters all over the world who have had the same experience. You're accepted in a huge, loving family where every member has a variation of the same story: "I was lost in sin when Jesus found me and rescued me." All of the family spends its time enjoying the bounty of the King, and best of all, getting to know Him better and better.

That is the glorious theme that John presents in our text—the joy of fellowship with God and with one another. The greatest joys

in life come from loving relationships. We all want such relationships. A credit card ad pictures a family gathered around the Thanksgiving table, with the word, "Priceless!" It's true!

And yet as we all know, relationships may also be the source of much grief and pain. We've all experienced disappointing relationships. Some of you had abusive parents who did not love you. You may have had—or still have—an abusive mate. Perhaps your children have gone astray and are a source of heartache. At the root of all such disappointments is sin, which causes alienation from God and from one another. But in spite of the reality of such painful relationships, we all still know that true joy does not consist in the accumulation of wealth or fame. True joy consists in the experience of true fellowship.

Picture a man on his deathbed, all alone, except for the nurse. He says, "Bring me today's *Wall Street Journal* so that I can see how my investments are doing. Get me a phone so that I can call my attorney to see how my lawsuit is going." There is a poor man! Picture another man on his deathbed, who doesn't own much. But he's surrounded by caring family members, who are telling him how much they love him. He is a man who knows God and knows that soon the Savior who loved him and died for him will welcome him into heaven. There is a rich man! He is a man who enjoys fellowship with God and with others. John is telling us that...

True fellowship with one another and with God
is the basis for true joy.

"Fellowship" means sharing in common, or sharing together. The idea that we, who were so defiled by sin, could have fellowship—could share together—with the holy God, not just for the few years on this earth, but forever, should overwhelm us! John Calvin captures this (*Calvin's Commentaries* [Baker], on 1 John 1:4, p. 162):

True is that saying, "Where your treasure is, there will be your heart also." (Matt. 6:21.) Whosoever, then, really perceives what fellowship with God is, will be satisfied with it alone, and will no more burn with desires for other things. "The Lord is my cup," says David, "and my heritage; the lines have fallen for me on an excellent lot." (Ps. 16:5, 6.) In the same

manner does Paul declare that all things were deemed by him as dung, in comparison with Christ alone. (Phil. 3:8.) He, therefore, has at length made a proficiency in the Gospel, who esteems himself happy in having communion with God, and acquiesces in that alone; and thus he prefers it to the whole world, so that he is ready for its sake to relinquish all other things.

John begins with fellowship with one another:

1. True fellowship with one another is based on true fellowship with God.

Why does John begin with our fellowship with one another before he proceeds to fellowship with God? I would have thought that first he would lay the foundation, then show the effect. My guess is that he begins with where most people begin. The thought of fellowship with the holy God is a bit more than we can fathom. But we do feel the love of others in the church, perhaps even before we come to know God personally. This is especially true of those who have suffered broken relationships all their lives. They meet a Christian or come to church, and they feel love and acceptance. It's the first thing that they notice. It's such a new experience that they are overwhelmed. Then they learn that the source of this love is not in the people, but in the fact that these people have come to know the love of God in Christ.

Note three things about this fellowship with one another:

- A. Fellowship with one another not based on fellowship with God is not true Christian fellowship.

Although unbelievers who come in among us should be able to sense the love, they cannot know true fellowship with other believers until they personally come to faith in Jesus Christ and begin to walk with Him on a daily basis. In other words, knowing Christ personally and growing in that relationship is the basis for any true fellowship with others that know Christ. It is *Christ Himself* that we share in common. True Christian fellowship is when we share together about the riches of Christ and the treasures of His Word. Anything less is not genuine fellowship.

Sometimes we chat with one another about the weather, sports, or the news. While there's nothing wrong with talking about

such things, that *isn't* true fellowship. J. Vernon McGee once spoke at a Rotary Club meeting, where a banner read, "Food, Fun, Fellowship." He said that the food was nothing to brag about—embalmed chicken and peas. The fun was a few corny jokes. The fellowship consisted of one man patting the other on the back and saying, "Hi, Bill, how's business?" Or, "how's the wife?" That was their idea of fellowship (*First John* [Thomas Nelson], p. 21).

McGee goes on to say that what is called "Christian" fellowship often isn't much different. We get together for a potluck supper and talk about everything under the sun, except that which would provide true fellowship, namely, all that we share together in Christ. True Christian fellowship centers on fellowship with God.

- B. Fellowship with one another based on true fellowship with God is the core of true Christian unity.

John did not advocate "fellowship" with the heretics. These men, no doubt, still claimed to believe in Jesus, but just not in the same way that the apostles understood things. Even though John emphasizes love, he never encourages love and fellowship with these heretics. Quite the opposite, he makes it clear that we should not welcome them even with a warm greeting. To do so would be to participate in their evil deeds (2 John 10-11).

There is a lot of sloppy thinking in Christian circles about the subject of unity in Christ. Clearly, it is an important topic. Jesus prayed that His followers would be one, so that the world would know that the Father sent Him (John 17:23). Those trying to promote unity often say, "The world will know that we follow Jesus by our love, not by our doctrine." So they say, "Let's come together in areas where we agree, and set aside the matters where we disagree." Such thinking leads men like Charles Colson and Max Lucado to urge Protestants to accept Roman Catholics as brothers in Christ.

I dare to say that John would be aghast! True Christian unity must be based on true fellowship with God, which must be based on faith in the gospel of salvation by grace alone through faith alone. I know that there are some Roman Catholics who believe the true gospel, but they believe it *in spite of* what their church teaches, not because of it. The official teaching of the Roman Catholic Church denies that we are saved by God's grace alone

through faith alone in Christ alone. (See The Councils of Trent, Session 6, Canons 9, 12, 24, 30, cited in my sermon, "Justification by Faith Alone" [8/11/96].) They are committing the Galatian heresy, which added our works to faith in what Christ did on the cross. Paul bluntly says, "Let them be accursed" (see Gal. 1:8, 9).

In Ephesians 4, Paul mentions two kinds of unity. He says (4:3) that we should be "diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." The unity of the Spirit already exists; it must be *preserved*. But he goes on to say (4:12) that the pastor-teachers are to equip the saints, "until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God..." (4:13). The unity of the faith does not yet exist. We *attain* to it as we grow to know Jesus Christ better through the study and teaching of the Word.

When you know Christ, you experience genuine unity and fellowship with other Christians, even though there may be significant differences in background, personality, social status, or race. Among the apostles, Simon the Zealot was from a radical political group whose hobby was killing tax collectors. Matthew was a tax collector! Jesus brought them together and said, "Love one another!" Paul emphasizes that in the church, there are no distinctions between slaves and freemen, or Jews and Gentiles, but "Christ is all, and in all" (Col. 3:11).

So true Christian unity at the basic level consists in mutually knowing Christ through the gospel (Eph. 4:3). Such unity deepens as we grow to know Him better through His Word (Eph. 4:13).

- C. True fellowship with God and with one another is the basis for laboring together in the gospel.

John was not advocating joining with the heretics in a crusade to win Ephesus for Christ! Far from it! We should not join together in evangelistic efforts with churches or organizations that blur the gospel. Paul commended the Philippian for their "participation [Greek = *koinonea*, "fellowship"] in the gospel" with him (Phil. 1:6). A few verses later, he exhorts them (1:27), "Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or remain absent, I will hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind [lit., "soul"] striving together for the faith of the gospel."

If you want to experience true fellowship with other believers, join together in laboring for the gospel. Yes, there is increased potential for disagreements and conflict. Paul and Barnabas split up over their differences in how to go about their mission. But, there is also the potential for deeper fellowship. Just as soldiers who fought together and survived later feel a close bond, so those who labor together for Christ will know true fellowship.

2. True fellowship with God is based on the truth that God has revealed about His Son.

John says (1:3), "What we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, so that you may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ." As we saw in the introductory study, one of John's main themes in all three epistles is, believing in the truth about Jesus Christ (see 2 John 1-4, where he uses "truth" five times, and 3 John 1-4, where he uses "truth" four times). This has three important implications:

- A. Fellowship not based on the revealed truth about Jesus Christ is not true fellowship.

Often those who try to promote Christian unity will say, "Doctrine divides. We should set aside our doctrines and just love one another." John would say, "Nonsense!" Sound doctrine unites, as Paul teaches in Ephesians 4:13. True fellowship centers on the truth of the apostolic testimony about Jesus Christ. If we depart from that, we have left the biblical foundation for unity.

This is why we cannot have true fellowship with liberals, who deny the deity of Jesus Christ. What do we share in common? Nothing! They supposedly believe in Jesus or His moral teachings. But the Jesus they believe in is not the Jesus of the apostles. This is also why a believer should not marry an unbeliever. Although in the context, Paul includes much more than marriage, it is certainly included when he writes (2 Cor. 6:14), "Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness?" He goes on to ask (6:15), "or what has a believer in common with an unbeliever?" If you don't share the truth about Christ together, you do not have the basis for true Christian fellowship.

B. Fellowship with God exists only through the blood of His Son.

In the next section, John presents us with a serious dilemma. God is absolutely holy (1:5), but we are not. How can sinners have fellowship with such a holy God? John's answer, in line with the whole Bible, is that the only way a sinner can draw near to the holy God is if his sin is atoned for. The only thing that can atone for our sin is the blood of God's perfect Son, Jesus Christ. If someone claims to know God, but denies the need for the blood of Jesus Christ to atone for sin, in John's language, he is a liar and deceiver. He does not know God and there is no basis for true fellowship.

C. Fellowship based on the truth about Jesus Christ is a matter of shared life in Him.

As we saw last week, John relays to us the message about "the Word of Life" (1:1), "the eternal life, which was with the Father and was manifested to us" (1:2). This means that fellowship with God and with one another is not just a matter of subscribing to correct doctrines about Jesus. It is a matter of receiving new life through the new birth. This new life leads to a growing, deepening fellowship with God and with His people.

Picture a new baby, born into a family. Life is not peripheral to his entering into fellowship with that family! It's absolutely essential! Without new life, there cannot be any fellowship. But when there is new life, that child will grow and begin to communicate with his parents and with his brothers and sisters. It's always such a joy as parents when your children begin to talk with you! As the child grows, he comes to understand more of how much his parents love and care for him. Even though I knew that my parents loved me, I didn't know how much they loved me until I had my own children.

If you have experienced new life in Christ, then the Father lovingly cares for every aspect of your life. He has given you all that you need for life and godliness through the promises of His Word (2 Pet. 1:3-4). He encourages you to cast all your cares on Him, knowing that He cares for you (1 Pet. 5:7). He sympathizes with your weaknesses and invites you to come to His throne of grace to receive mercy and grace to help in your times of need (Heb. 4:14-

16). So you can share every burden, every struggle, and every thought openly with Him and know that He welcomes you!

Such fellowship with God through Christ is not automatic or effortless. Relationships take time and effort. There is no such thing as a good marriage that just happens spontaneously. If you see a good marriage, it's because the couple makes it a priority to spend time together and to work at being close. They are committed to work through any difficulties or hurt feelings. They work hard at communication and they avoid temptations that would create distance or divide them.

Fellowship with God is no different. You've got to work at it, make time for it, and turn away from things that would create distance between you and God. Of course, sin hinders fellowship, but so do other things. The enemy will try to get you to anything except spend time alone with God. It may be TV, the newspaper, work, hobbies, or time with your friends. But if you allow these things to crowd out consistent time in God's Word and in prayer, you will not grow close to God in genuine fellowship.

As you grow in fellowship with God, you will find that increasingly, His purposes and desires become your purposes and desires. If His purpose is to be glorified by saving some from every tribe and tongue and people and nation (Rev. 5:9), then you will find great joy when you hear news of the gospel advancing around the world. If you don't care about missions and you yawn when you hear of someone coming to Christ, but you hear of the score of a sports event and come alive with excitement, you may want to examine whether you enjoy true fellowship with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ. This leads to John's final point:

3. True fellowship with one another and with God is the source of true joy.

As we saw last time, the original text (1:4) probably read "our joy," not "your joy." But both are true. When a sinner comes to Christ, it brings great joy to those who already know Christ, but it also brings great joy to the sinner who is saved. And as our fellowship with God and with one another deepens, the joy deepens. In commenting on the fact that God has given us eternal life, Calvin exclaims (*ibid.*, p. 157), "But if we consider how miserable and hor-

rible a condition death is, and also what is the kingdom and the glory of immortality, we shall perceive that there is something here more magnificent than what can be expressed in any words.”

And so as God’s children we are obligated to seek our greatest joy in Him. If we seek joy in lesser things, we miss the greatest joy of all and we do not glorify the God who rescued us from the ravages of sin and death.

Conclusion

Fellowship with God and with one another really are just the two Great Commandments, to love God with all your being, and to love your neighbor as yourself (see Matt. 22:37-40). The aim of the entire Bible is to help us glorify God as we experience the deep joy of a close relationship with Him and close relationships with one another. As grow in obedience to these two Great Commandments, we will grow in great joy, not only in this life, but also for all eternity!

I encourage you, *work on your relationship with God*. Don’t settle for occasional, distant fellowship. Make time daily to spend with Him in His Word and in prayer. Read books that help you to know Him better. Cut out of your life anything that hinders fellowship with Him.

And, *work on your relationships with other believers*. In this sinful world, such relationships will never be perfect, but they can be good. But they won’t be good without effort! The payoff is that true fellowship with one another and true fellowship with God will bring you true joy.

Application Questions

1. Why is it a serious mistake for evangelicals to seek unity and fellowship with the Roman Catholic Church?
2. Where do we draw the line on doctrinal compromise before we refuse to work together in the gospel with fellow Christians?
3. How would you advise a Christian who confided that his fellowship with God had gone cold? Where should he begin?
4. Is it contradictory to work at relationships? Shouldn’t they be spontaneous?

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