

Verses 19-21 are typically interpreted in terms of two general perspectives, both of which reflect John's assertion that "God is greater than our hearts and knows all things." The first one views this instruction as a warning based on the severity of God, whereas the other views it as encouragement based on God's mercy and provision for His children. In truth, the two perspectives stand together and complement each other, since John's instruction pertains to the children's obligation of love. On the one hand, John rightly insisted that love proves one's sonship, since a son shares in his father's life and nature, and God is love (3:14-15, 4:7-8). In this regard, his instruction does warn his readers of the dire implication of lovelessness. But, while the Father's children *do* love, it is equally true that love isn't yet perfected in them; it doesn't presently appear what they shall be (3:2). And so, love as the sure proof of sonship must be understood in terms of the reality of present sonship – sonship that is "already-but-not-yet." The children of God love, but not fully and not without flaw. Thus John's instruction also provides reassurance and encouragement to those who fall short in their love for their Father and their brethren.

- g. The second half of chapter 3 focuses on how it is that God's children share in and manifest His likeness, and John concluded this treatment by highlighting the issue of *obedience* (3:22-24). He insisted that the children keep their Father's commandments, *but he did so as summing up his broader instruction*. This is critically important, for treating these verses in isolation can leave the reader concerned to assemble and comply with a list of scriptural commandments, perhaps with a view to God granting him the things he desires.

Not only is compiling such a list a daunting task, it is made all the more challenging by the need to determine the *criteria* for it. In other words, which commandments/directives should be included, and how does one know? And are there commandments that pertain only to Christians (as opposed to ancient Israel), and which, if any, are universal? Different traditions give different answers to these and other related questions, which only compounds the difficulty.

- There are some who take the broadest approach, arguing that everything God commands in the Scripture applies to all people. Everything the Scripture prescribes is God's "will" for human beings, and they will be judged accordingly as obedient or disobedient.
- Others distinguish between laws and commandments that apply to all people versus those that pertain only to specific groups. One example is Thomas Aquinas' formulation (adopted by many in the Reformed tradition) which treats God's law under the categories of moral, civil, and ceremonial. The "moral" laws are said to be universal and unchanging, while the civil and ceremonial laws were limited to Old Testament Israel.
- Another approach is based on distinguishing between the Old and New Covenants. In general, this view holds that the Law of Moses contained God's laws and commandments for Israel, while the New Covenant sets out and prescribes the "Law of Christ," which pertains to Christians.

Of course, one must then determine which particular laws and commandments comprise the Law of Christ. Some argue that it includes every prescription and directive found in the New Testament writings; others go further, insisting that the Law of Christ also includes every Old Testament law and commandment that isn't specifically rescinded by Jesus and/or the New Testament writers. (This criterion is helpful to those who associate the so-called "unchanging moral law" with the Decalogue.)

In the end, what might at first glance appear to be a simple obligation – *keep God's commandments* – quickly turns into a massively complex, convoluted and confusing undertaking that all too often leaves people frustrated and discouraged. But, if John's instruction is allowed to take its place within his epistle and its own context, the difficulties and complexities begin to evaporate.

First and foremost, John defined "God's commandments" as the obligations of faith and love (3:23). Starting from the premise that God has issued a multitude of commandments, the natural conclusion is that faith and love are simply two that John happened to mention here (perhaps regarding them as most important). His point, then, is that Christians must exercise faith in Jesus and love one another, but they must also keep *all* of God's commandments (whatever they may be). John's statements, however, don't seem to support this understanding.

- Again, after speaking of keeping God's commandments, John specifically identified faith and love as the Christian's obligation of obedience. He didn't say, "here are a couple of those commandments that you need to keep" but "*this* is His commandment."
- John's wording indicates that he was encapsulating all of God's commandments within the obligations of faith and love, a conclusion reinforced by his shift from the plural (commandments) to the singular (commandment). This is further supported by the fact that he referred to faith in Christ and love for the brethren – two distinct obligations – as comprising *the* commandment (cf. 4:20-5:5; 2 John 4-8).

In context, then, it seems that John understood all of God's commandments to be subsumed in the obligations of faith and love. Moreover, he saw these two obligations as together comprising God's *singular* commandment. While this may seem strange and even incorrect to some, it perfectly accords with Jesus' teaching (cf. John 14:15-21, 15:7-17, 17:1-26) and the apostolic writings.

- In Romans 13:8-10, Paul insisted that any and every commandment – even those associated with the so-called "moral law" – is simply a specific articulation of the singular obligation of love. In a word, "*love is the full substance and full expression of law (torah).*" He made the same assertion to the Galatians, writing them that the whole law is fulfilled in one divine word: You shall love your neighbor as yourself (Galatians 5:14).

In making this claim, Paul wasn't innovating a new approach to God's law or perpetuating some rabbinic tradition beyond the scriptural text. Rather, he was simply reiterating what Jesus Himself taught (Matthew 22:25-40), a practice the other apostles followed (James 2:1-8; 1 Peter 1:3-23).

- So Paul also affirmed the idea that faith and love together comprise the Christian's singular obligation of obedience. Writing to the Galatians, he insisted that God's true covenant people – His sons and daughters in Jesus, the Messiah – are defined by *new creation*, which manifests itself in "*faith working through love*" (ref. Galatians 5:1-10 and 6:12-16).

Faith expresses itself in love, but it's equally true that love presupposes faith, since all who love have been born of God (1 John 4:7-8). Two implications follow from this: First, love and faith are inseparable, mutually implying and mutually defining. Second, because love is the substance and fullness of law (torah), love and faith together encompass all of God's commandments for His image-children.

This helps to explain John's connection between keeping God's commandments and *doing what is pleasing to Him*, and why the one who does so can expect to receive from God what he asks of Him (v. 22). The obligation God imposes on all people is to attain their true humanness as image-sons by sharing in the life and likeness of the incarnate Son. As True Man, Jesus embodies the full truth of Torah – He is in Himself what Torah requires of human beings; He is man fully and perfectly characterized by love, faith and faithfulness. And as True Man, Jesus' mind, heart, purpose and will are fully conformed to His Father's (John 4:31-34, 8:28-29, 10:17-18), so that seeing Him was seeing the Father who sent Him (John 14:1-11, cf. also 5:15-24, 12:44-45, 15:20-24). This perfect unanimity of Son and Father saw the Father granting the Son's desires, for they were His own (John 17). *But so it is with those who share in the Son*; the children's conformity to Christ insures that the Father will grant their requests and fulfill their desires and longings (cf. 5:14-15, John 15:7-8, 16:26-27; cf. also Psalm 37:4; James 5:16-18).

God's requirement for human beings is faith and love: faith in the Son (here, faith in the Son's *name*, which emphasizes the truth of who the Son actually is) that unites the believer to the Son's life and mind, and so produces a life characterized by love – first for the Father and Son, and then for the Father's other children. This is what it means to "keep God's commandments," and this is why John could insist that such obedience demonstrates that the person abides in God (3:24; cf. 2:3-10, 24-29, 3:1-9, 4:11-16). And abiding in *God* means abiding in the Son and Father through the power and abiding presence of the Spirit. The Spirit is the substance of the divine "abiding," and therefore the proof that one abides in God and God in him. But how does a person know that he possesses the Spirit so as to abide in God? The answer takes John's argument full circle: It is by "keeping God's commandments" – *not as compliance with a set of directives, but a life characterized by faith and love; a life of authentic sonship marked by the "I in you and you in Me" obedience in the Spirit that distinguished the incarnate Son.*