

How to Have Fellowship With God

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(1 John 1:3, 4)

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How to Have Fellowship With God

When our Lord went into the Upper Room that last Passover, He erected on the dying embers of that famed feast something new. The Lord Jesus and His disciples were having fellowship. But before He began to tell them about the future, what would be coming – that He would be returning to this earth to take His own out of the earth; before He told them about the new, living relationship with those personally and vitally identified with Him, baptized by the Holy Spirit into the body of believers, a union that is like the vine and branches; before He uttered that great Lord's prayer in John 17 where the One who is our great intercessor prays for His own; before He entered into any of that, during that last meal He had with them He got up and washed His disciples' feet.

He would not proceed any further until He had washed their feet. He told Simon Peter, "If I wash you not, you have no part with Me" (see John 13:8). He was not discussing salvation – that was not the subject in the Upper Room. The great subject in the Upper Room was the matter of fellowship with Him – of vital, personal relationship to Him. He says, "If I do not wash you, you will not have that fellowship with Me." You cannot fellowship with Him unless the wrong things in your life are dealt with in a very definite way.

The book we are dealing with, that of 1 John, is believed by some to be the book of the Bible that was written last – not Revelation. Here John deals with the matter of fellowship. The

Lord has left and ascended back to heaven. Having loved His own, He loved them right on through to the end, and He wants them to have continued fellowship with Himself despite the fact that He is now back up there and we're down here on the earth.

John is talking to you and me. He spans the nearly twenty centuries, looks down on us today, and says, "We want you to have fellowship with Him, and this is the way it's done." The Lord washed the feet of His disciples when He was here on earth, and He's still in the foot-washing business.

That which was from the beginning... (1 John 1)

The beginning that John talks about here is not any of the beginnings that have been mentioned before. There are actually three beginnings mentioned in Scripture.

There is, of course, the one in Genesis:

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.

(Genesis 1:1)

That beginning, in my judgment, cannot be shaken. When I was in college, the teaching was that you and I lived in a universe that was probably 200,000 years old. That seems to contradict Genesis 1:1, according to some. The figure moved up to two million, then it went to 200 million, and I believe now they are more or less settling for 200 billion years. It could be 200 billion years, it could be 200 trillion years, it could be 200 "squillion" years – you and I live in a universe that's very old. It is important to remember that we are dealing with the God of *eternity*. Some seem to think that God came out of eternity twiddling His thumbs, waiting for man to appear on the scene. Man is a Johnny-come-lately in God's universe. We can only speculate about what God did in eternity past, because He didn't tell us.

He comes out of eternity, and you and I find ourselves in this great universe. We may pick up rocks and say, “Oh, these are two million or 200 million years old.” All right. You can put any date you want on Genesis 1:1 and you’ll still be in the realm of what Moses has written.

There’s another beginning that makes the one in Genesis look like it happened yesterday:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not anything made that was made.

(John 1:1-3)

That is the beginning which is the beginning, because you and I can go back in our thinking as far as we want to. You can move creation back billions and billions of years and put down your pegs, and wherever you put them down He comes out of eternity past, the Ancient of Days, to meet you. He’s already past tense. “In the beginning was [not *is* but *was*] the Word” – imperfect tense, continued action. He moves out of eternity to meet you anywhere you want to go into eternity past. He is the God of eternity

But John also said that in time “the Word was made flesh” (John 1:14), and that’s the beginning that we have in 1 John. That is the incarnation. He’s referring to when the Lord Jesus Christ came down to this earth about 2000 years ago and took upon Himself our humanity.

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life (for the life was manifested, and we have seen it, and bear witness...). (1 John 1:1, 2)

Essentially, John was saying, “For three years I *knew* Him. I listened to Him, and I saw Him.” It is quite obvious that here John is meeting the first heresy that arose in the church, which was Gnosticism. The question of the Gnostics was not so much about the deity of Christ as about the humanity of Christ. They were sure of the deity of the Lord Jesus, but they questioned when He became God and when He deleted it. So John said, “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes.” We get most of our information through the eye-gate – that’s the reason television is so potent. Through the eye-gate and the ear-gate you and I get our information, so John said, “We heard Him and we’ve seen Him with our eyes.”

But he didn’t stop there:

... *Which we have looked upon...* (1 John 1:1)

The word “looked” is an altogether different word from the word for “see.” It is *theao*, and we get our word theater from that. The theater is a place where you sit and look, not just with a passing glance but with a steady gaze for a couple of hours. John was saying that they not only saw Him, but they gazed upon Him. He said, “For three years we looked upon Him. We know who He was. We know that deity didn’t come upon Him at His baptism and didn’t leave Him at the cross. We know that He is God, that He was born yonder in Bethlehem, and even as a little baby lying helplessly on Mary’s bosom, He could have spoken the universe we live in out of existence at any moment.” I like the way the earliest creed has it: He is very God of very God, and He is very man of very man. He is not any more man because He is God, and He is not any less God because He is man. He is the God-man, the theanthropic Person who is unique in the history of this world. May I say that He is the One John was talking about when he said, “We gazed upon Him.”

In our day we cannot see Him with our physical eyes, but we can see Him with the eye of faith. The Apostle Peter told us, “Whom, having not seen, ye love; in whom, though now ye see him not, yet believing, ye rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory, receiving the end of your faith, even the salvation of your souls” (1 Peter 1:8, 9). And the Lord Jesus said to Thomas, who would not believe He had been resurrected until he could see and handle Him, “Thomas, because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed; blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed” (John 20:29). May I say, He’s talking about you and me. We today are walking by faith, and the Lord Jesus Christ can be made as real to us as He was to Thomas. We haven’t seen Him, but, “whom, having not seen, we love.”

Someone has said that it is the look that saves, but it’s the gaze that sanctifies. It was John who wrote, “And, as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up” (John 3:14). During the wilderness march, the people who had been bitten by serpents and were in need of healing were told to look to a brass serpent which had been lifted up on a pole. John applied that to the Lord Jesus and said that we are to look to Him in faith for salvation. After we have done that, we are to gaze upon Him. To look saves; to gaze sanctifies. The Son of man must be lifted up “that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (John 3:16). The look saves; it’s the gaze that sanctifies.

Many of us need to do more than simply look to Him for salvation. We need to spend time gazing upon Him with the eye of faith. Because I was a pastor a long time, I am a little weary of methods, and I am a little weary of gimmicks. Somebody always comes along with a new approach to something. I’m convinced that the *one* thing we need is more occupation with the person of

Jesus Christ. I was a busy pastor too long, and it's too bad I didn't spend more time with Him.

...And our hands have handled, of the Word of life. (1 John 1:1)

John said that they did more than merely gaze on Jesus from a distance; they handled Him. There are those who believe that when He appeared after His resurrection and said, "Behold my hands and my feet, that it is I myself; handle me, and see" (Luke 24:39) that they didn't actually touch Him. I think they did. John said, "I know that He's God manifest in the flesh, because when He came back from the dead I handled Him. I know what I'm talking about. Our hands have handled of the Word of life." Feeling Jesus' hands and those nailprints in them convinced them that He was indeed man, God manifest in the flesh.

For the life was manifested, and we have seen it, and bear witness, and show unto you that eternal life, which was with the Father, and was manifested unto us. (1 John 1:2)

He was eternal life – God, the Ancient of Days – who came down and was robed in the flesh of our humanity that He might not only reveal God but also redeem man.

What comes next is quite wonderful. John tells us that we can have fellowship with *God!* One of the most glorious prospects before us today is that we can have fellowship with the Father, with the Son, and with one another.

That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son, Jesus Christ. (1 John 1:3)

Fellowship, *koinonia* in the Greek, is a unique word. It means “having in common or sharing with.” Christian fellowship means sharing the things of Christ. To do this, we must know the Lord Jesus – not only know about Him, but know Him as our personal Savior. In our day we have lost the true meaning of the word fellowship, but let me give you an illustration of one place where the word is used correctly.

I had the privilege of being at Oxford University as a tourist and seeing the different schools that comprise the university. I visited one school which specialized in Shakespeare. Now suppose you wanted to know all about Shakespeare so that you could teach that subject. You would go to Oxford University and attend the particular school specializing in that subject. When you ate, you would sit down at the board, and there you would meet others who were studying Shakespeare, and you would meet the professors who did the teaching. You would hear them all talking about Shakespeare in a way you had never heard before. For instance, in the play *Romeo and Juliet* most of us think that Juliet was the only girl Romeo courted. It is shocking to find that when he said, “One fairer than my love! the all-seeing sun/Ne’er saw her match since first the world begun,” that fickle fellow Romeo was talking about another girl! You would hear many things that would alert you to the fact that you had a lot to learn about Shakespeare. So you would begin to study and pull books off the shelf in the library and go to the lectures. After you had been at the school for two or three years, they would make you a fellow. Then when you would go in and sit at the board with the other students and professors, you would join right in with them as they talked about the sonnets of Shakespeare. You would have fellowship with them, sharing the things of Shakespeare.

Now fellowship for the believer means that we meet and share the things of Christ. We talk together about the Lord Jesus Christ and His Word. That is the kind of fellowship that John is speaking of when he says, “That ye also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son, Jesus Christ.”

And these things write we unto you, that your joy may be full. (1 John 1:4)

Now this is the second reason he mentions for writing his epistle: “That your joy may be full.” How wonderful to have joy – not just a little joy but a whole lot of joy because we are experiencing fellowship. *Koinonia* sometimes refers to the act of fellowship – the communion service in a church is an act of fellowship, giving is an act of fellowship, and praying is an act of fellowship. But in this chapter John is talking about the experience of fellowship, such as Paul had in mind when he wrote, “That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings...” (Philippians 3:10).

My friend, the ultimate aim in preaching is that, through conviction and repentance, men and women might come to salvation and that it might bring great joy to their hearts, like the Ethiopian eunuch who came to know Christ with the help of Philip. He didn't continue his trip bragging about what a great preacher Philip was; he went on his way rejoicing. Why? Because he had come to know Christ. The purpose of John's epistle is that you and I might share together these wonderful things of Christ, that the Spirit of God might make the Lord Jesus and the Father real to us in such a way that our fellowship might be sweet.

I have noticed that there is a sadness among believers today. It ought not to be there, friend. There ought to be joy. You know,

the trouble is that the devil has made the world outside believe that if you want to have a boring time, the thing to do is to go to a church service. (If you want to know the truth, some of them are that way.) But actually, going to church or to a Bible conference ought to be a time of great joy in our hearts. When you share the things of Christ and have fellowship, there ought to be real joy. It can come only through fellowship with Him.

John said he wrote these things so that we can have fellowship and so that our joy might be full (and our joy would naturally be full if we could have fellowship with God). However, there is a hurdle to get over, which every child of God recognizes. The very possibility of man having fellowship with God is one of the most glorious prospects that come to us, but immediately our hopes are dashed when we face up to this dilemma:

This, then, is the message which we have heard of him, and declare unto you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. (1 John 1:5)

God is light, which means He is holy. I believe that's the thing which is all-important as far as God is concerned. We've emphasized love all out of proportion. God is love and He is life, but first of all God is light – holy. Light speaks of the glory of God, the glory of this universe, and the radiance, beauty, and wonder of it all. Light also reveals flaws and impurities, so it speaks of the purity of God. God is light; He is holy.

Now we are presented with this dilemma. I am a little creature down here on earth filled with sin. If you want to know the truth, I am totally depraved. Without the grace of God for salvation, I would be nothing in the world but a creature in rebellion against God, with no good within me at all. God has made it very clear that He finds no good within man. Paul said, "For I know that in

me (that is, in my flesh) dwelleth no good thing” (Romans 7:18). He also said, “There is none righteous, no, not one” (Romans 3:10). Not only have they no innate goodness, but they are in *rebellion* against God.

Paul goes on to tell us about the rebellion that is in the human heart: “The carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, neither, indeed, can be” (Romans 8:7). We are living in a world today that is in rebellion against almighty God. God is holy; I am a sinner. I am saved by grace, yes, but how am I going to have fellowship with Him? How am I going to walk with Him? Men have attempted to do this in three different ways, two of which are wrong.

The first method is to bring God down to the level of man.

If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth. (1 John 1:6)

That’s strong language! If you and I say we have fellowship with God and we walk in darkness, we are liars. I’m too polite to say it so bluntly, but John makes that harsh statement. We always think of John as being a ladylike apostle. I don’t know how that rumor got started, unless it began during the Middle Ages when an artist painted John with *curls*. I wouldn’t want to be that artist for anything in the world, because if he is in heaven someday he’s going to have to settle with John. I suppose the artist got the idea of curls because John is called the apostle of love, but our Lord called John a son of thunder! I think that artist is going to know what thunder is, even in heaven! John was a very rugged fisherman. When he talked about love, I tell you, it made it all the more important. He is called the apostle of love, but our Lord called him a son of thunder because he had that nature in him.

John used the strongest language of any of the apostles, and he said that if we claim to have fellowship with God and yet are in darkness, we *lie*. There are a great many folk today who say they have fellowship with Him, and they're not settling the things that are wrong in their lives. My friend, if you are going to walk with God, you are going to walk in *light*. And if there is sin in your life, you are *not* walking with Him. You cannot bring Him down to your level.

But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ, his Son, cleanseth [keeps on cleansing] us from all sin. (1 John 1:7)

He died to save us from the guilt of sin. I *have been* saved – that's justification. I *am being* saved – that is sanctification. That's what the old theologians call deliverance from the pollution of sin. That's what is needed today. Then there is the future, where death lurks. Friend, I don't have the viewpoint a great many folks have of death, that it will be wonderful. I don't think so. You may argue that the sting is gone from death. Yes, but I can never tell when a bee has a stinger and when it doesn't have a stinger; therefore, I'm afraid of every bee. I'm not looking forward to death by any means, I can assure you. But do you know what Christ did? He delivered us from that fear of death. He has taken care of the future – I *shall be* saved. "Beloved...it doth not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him..." (1 John 3:2).

Don't be discouraged; God is not through with us. A dear little lady down in Mississippi years ago in a testimony meeting got up and said, "Most Christians ought to have written on their backs: This is not the best the grace of God can do." Sometimes I ought

to have that written on my back. He's not through with us, thank God for that. But He wants to deliver us from the pollution of sin.

There are a lot of songs I don't like, and one of them is the little jingle that says, "Jesus is a friend of mine." Is He? Listen to Him: "Ye are my friends, if ye do whatever I command you" (John 15:14). If I said to you that the President of the United States is my friend, I would bring him down to the level of Vernon McGee. But if the President went on television and said Vernon McGee is his friend, he brings me up to his level.

There are those who say they'd like to shake the hand of the Lord Jesus. If He entered a room today where a group of us had gathered, none of us, friend, would be rushing up to Him. We'd all go down on our faces before Him. Even John – who had handled Him – when he saw the glorified Christ on the Isle of Patmos, "fell at his feet as dead" (Revelation 1:17). Jesus said you are His friend if you do what He commands. When I hear anybody sing, "Jesus is a friend of mine," I always feel like saying, "Look, are you obeying Him? Are you following Him?" I tell you, we need to be very careful about getting familiar with Him and bringing Him down to our level.

"If we walk in the light," that is, if we walk in the light of the Word of God. Dr. Harry Ironside tells of his own confusion of mind relative to this verse. Noticing that the cleansing of the blood depends upon our walking in the light, he read it as though it said, "If we walk *according* to the light, the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanseth us from all sin." He thought it meant that if he was very punctilious about obeying every command of God, God would cleanse him. Then he noticed that it does not say if we walk *according* to light, but if we walk *in* the light. The important thing is *where* we

walk, not *how* we walk. Have we come into the presence of God and allowed the Word of God to shine upon our sinful hearts?

You see, it is possible to walk in darkness, thinking you are all right. Let me illustrate this. I went squirrel hunting several years ago when I was holding meetings in my first pastorate in Middle Tennessee in a place called Woodbury. After the morning service a doctor came to me and asked if I would like to go squirrel hunting, and I told him there was nothing I would rather do. After lunch he brought me a shotgun, and we drove out to his farm and parked in the barnyard. We walked along by the creek there and had some good hunting. Finally we came to a fork in the creek, and he said to me, "I'll take the right fork, and you take the left fork. It will lead you around the hill and back to the barnyard. We will meet there."

In the meantime, it looked like it was going to rain. When I started out by myself, it started drizzling. I kept going, and I made the turn around the hill. I noticed quite a few caves in the hill, and when it started to really rain, I knew I was going to get wet; so I crawled into one of those caves. I went into the largest one I could find and sat in that dark cave for about thirty minutes.

I began to get cold and decided I needed a fire; so I gathered together a bunch of leaves scattered on the floor of the cave and put a match to them. I soon had a small fire going, and when I looked around the cave, I found out that I wasn't alone. I have never been in a place where there were as many spiders and lizards as there were in that cave! Over in one corner was a little snake all coiled up, just looking at me. My friend, I got out of there in a hurry. Working on the assumption that possession is nine-tenths of the law, and since those creatures had the cave ahead of me, it

belonged to them. I proceeded down to the barn and really got soaking wet, but I wasn't going to stay in that cave!

Now let me make an application. I had been sitting in comfort for about thirty minutes while I was in darkness, but when the light of the fire revealed what was in the cave, I could no longer be comfortable there. My friend, across this land today are multitudes of folk who are sitting in churches every Sunday morning but are not hearing the Word of God. As a result, they are sitting there in darkness, hearing some dissertation on economics or politics or the "good life" or an exhortation on doing the best they can. And they are comfortable. Of course, they are comfortable! But if they would get into the light of the Word of God, they would see that they are *sinner*s and that they cannot bring God down to their level. John has said that if a person says he is having fellowship with God but is living in sin, he is *lying*.

Another method which is often used is an attempt to bring man up to God's level, saying that man has reached sinless perfection and is living on that very high plateau. Well, John deals with that approach:

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. (1 John 1:8)

This is even worse than being a liar. When you get to the place where you say you have no sin in your life, there is no truth in you at all. This doesn't mean you are simply a liar; it means you don't even have the truth. You are deceiving yourself.

I ran into this problem very early in my training for the ministry. When I went to college as a freshman, my first roommate was a young man who was also studying for the ministry. He was a sweet boy in many ways. The only trouble

with him was that he was *perfect*. When I first met my roommate, he introduced himself and informed me that he had not committed a sin in so many years – I have forgotten if he said one, two, or three years. It shocked me to meet a fellow who didn't sin. I had hoped he would be my buddy, but he wasn't a buddy. You see, in every room where I have lived, things go wrong once in awhile. And there I was living in a room in which there were only two of us and one of us couldn't do anything wrong. So when something went wrong, guess who was to blame? Now I admit that *usually* it was my fault – but not *always*. Although he was a nice fellow, he hadn't reached the level of perfection which he claimed; he wasn't perfect.

My friend, whom do you think you deceive when you say that you have no sin? You deceive *yourself*, and you are the only person whom you do deceive. You don't deceive God. You don't deceive your neighbors. You don't deceive your friends. But you sure do deceive yourself. And John says that the truth is not in a man like that because he can't see that he is a sinner and that he has not reached the place of perfection. Yet a great many folk are trying that route in their effort to bridge the gap between themselves and a holy God.

Since you cannot bring God down to your level and you cannot bring yourself up to His level, what are you going to do? John gives us the alternative:

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

(1 John 1:9)

The word “confess” is from the Greek verb *homologeō*, meaning “to say the same thing.” This is important. You are to say the same thing that God says. When God in His Word says that the thing you did is sin, you are to get over on God's side and look at

it. And you are to say, “You are right, Lord, I say the same thing that You say. It is sin.” That is what it means to confess your sins. That, my friend, is one of the greatest needs in the church. This is God’s way for a Christian to deal with the sin in his own life.

Now in the past, I have always been able to say to the Lord, “Lord, I did this, but I want to tell You the reason why I did it.” I rationalize. It doesn’t matter; God says it’s sin.

We have to confess the same thing God says about it. That’s desperately needed today. Not public confession – you don’t take a bath in public, I hope, so let’s not do that kind of cleansing in public. It needs to be done privately. We need to go to Him for cleansing. “If we confess our sins, He is faithful.”

When the Lord Jesus was down here almost 2000 years ago, He washed the feet of His disciples. He has gone up yonder now, but He’s still washing feet because “having loved his own, He just keeps on loving them right down to the very end” (see John 13:1). Today He’s girded with a towel of service: “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). We have to go to Him for cleansing again and again, saying, “Look, Lord. Here are the hands. Here are the feet. Here are the eyes. Here are the ears. Here is the mind. I want to walk with You, I want to love You, and I want to enjoy You. I want to have *fellowship* with You.”

He longs for our fellowship, but we’re not going to bring Him down to our level. The prodigal son, when he got home, didn’t say, “Dad, they tell me you went to the far country.” He didn’t say that. No, he came back and said, “Father, I’ve sinned,” and the father said to the servants, “Go get the robe. Kill a fatted calf. We’re going to have fellowship together again. My boy is back home.” (See Luke 15:21-24.)

Why don't you go to the Lord, my friend, and just open your heart and talk to Him as you talk to no one else. Tell Him your problems. Tell Him your sins. Tell Him your weakness. Confess it all to Him. Say to your Father that you want to have fellowship with Him and you want to serve Him. My, He has made a marvelous, wonderful way back to Himself!