

1 John 2:4

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him.

Analysis

He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. John applies the test from verse 3 negatively, exposing false profession. "He that saith" (ho legōn) addresses verbal claims to know God—religious profession without reality. The present participle indicates habitual claiming, not a single statement. Yet this profession is contradicted by action: "keepeth not his commandments" (tas entolas autou mē tērōn)—the negative present participle indicates ongoing, habitual disobedience.

The verdict is severe: "is a liar" (pseustēs estin). This isn't merely mistaken or confused—it's deliberate falsehood. Claiming to know God while living in disobedience is self-deception at best, willful deception at worst. The claim and the conduct contradict each other; conduct reveals the truth. "The truth is not in him" (hē alētheia ouk estin en autō) indicates more than intellectual error—the living reality of God's truth hasn't penetrated and transformed the heart.

This test demolishes easy-believism and nominal Christianity. Many claim to know God—they've prayed a prayer, attend church, or affirm orthodox doctrine. But if their lives are characterized by habitual disobedience, their profession is false. Genuine knowledge of God transforms character and conduct. This doesn't mean perfection—believers struggle with sin (1 John 1:8-2:1). But the trajectory is obedience, not rebellion; when believers sin, they confess and repent rather than persist defiantly.

Historical Context

The gap between religious profession and ethical practice was widespread in the ancient world. Pagan religion was primarily ritualistic—offering sacrifices, attending festivals, reciting formulas—with minimal moral expectations. Some philosophers emphasized ethics but separated it from worship of the gods. Judaism emphasized both faith and obedience, yet prophets repeatedly condemned Israel for honoring God with lips while hearts were far from Him (Isaiah 29:13).

The Gnostic crisis John addressed explicitly divorced knowing God from obeying Him. Gnostics claimed secret knowledge (*gnōsis*) elevated them above moral law. Some practiced asceticism (despising the body); others practiced libertinism (arguing physical actions didn't affect spiritual purity). Both rejected the connection between true knowledge and transformed conduct.

Church history repeatedly witnesses the tension between profession and practice. Medieval Catholicism battled nominal Christianity—masses professing faith while living pagan lifestyles. The Reformation emphasized that genuine faith produces good works, though works don't earn salvation. Puritan divinity developed detailed practical tests of grace to help believers examine whether their profession was genuine. John's simple test remains timeless: those who know God keep His commandments.

Related Passages

Ephesians 2:8 — Salvation by grace through faith

Romans 10:9 — Confession and belief for salvation

Study Questions

1. How can you examine whether your Christian profession is backed by genuine obedience or is merely verbal?
2. What's the difference between struggling with sin (while pursuing obedience) and habitually disobeying (while claiming to know God)?

3. How should churches apply this test without becoming judgmental or fostering self-righteous legalism?

Interlinear Text

ο	λέγων,	Ἐγνωκα	αὐτοῦ	καὶ	τὰς	ἐντολὰς	αὐτοῦ	
G3588	He that saith	I know	him	and	G3588	commandments	him	
	G3004	G1097	G846	G2532		G1785	G846	
μὴ	τηρῶν	ψεύστης	ἔστιν·	καὶ	ἐν	τούτῳ	ἡ	ἀλήθεια
not	keepeth	a liar	is	and	in	him	G3588	the truth
G3361	G5083	G5583	G2076	G2532	G1722	G5129		G225
οὐκ	ἔστιν·							
not	is							
G3756	G2076							

Additional Cross-References

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

Titus 1:16 (Parallel theme): They profess that they know God; but in works they deny him, being abominable, and disobedient, and unto every good work reprobate.

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

1 John 4:20 (Parallel theme): If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen?

1 John 2:9 (Parallel theme): He that saith he is in the light, and hateth his brother, is in darkness even until now.