

1 John 5:2

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God, and keep his commandments.

Analysis

By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God, and keep his commandments. This verse presents a profound reciprocal relationship between vertical love (toward God) and horizontal love (toward fellow believers). The Greek word *ginōskō* (γινώσκω, "we know") indicates experiential, relational knowledge—not mere intellectual assent but lived reality that provides assurance and verification.

John's logic is striking: genuine love for God's children is authenticated when we love God and obey His commands. This appears paradoxical at first—one might expect the reverse formulation ("we know we love God when we love His children"). But John presents obedience to God as the litmus test for authentic love of the brethren. The conjunction *hotan* (ὅταν, "when") coupled with the present subjunctive indicates ongoing, habitual action. Love for God manifests in covenant faithfulness—keeping His commandments (*tas entolas autou tēroumen*).

The term *tēreō* (τηρέω, "keep") means to guard, preserve, and observe carefully, implying devoted attention and protective custody of God's word. This echoes Jesus' teaching: "If ye love me, keep my commandments" (John 14:15). True agape love cannot be separated from obedience. John guards against sentimental love divorced from truth and holiness. Authentic Christian community is built not on mere affection but on shared devotion to God and His revealed will. The children of God are loved as children of God—because they belong to Him and bear His image.

Historical Context

First John was written circa 85-95 AD, likely from Ephesus, addressing churches wrestling with early Gnostic influences that divorced spiritual knowledge from moral behavior and emphasized elite mystical experiences over communal love. False teachers claimed superior love for God while despising ordinary believers and dismissing ethical obedience as irrelevant for the "spiritual."

In the Greco-Roman world, philosophical schools emphasized individual enlightenment and hierarchical relationships based on status and wisdom. The radical Christian concept of loving fellow believers equally—regardless of social standing—while simultaneously maintaining high ethical standards was countercultural. Jewish readers would recognize echoes of Deuteronomy 6:5 (love God) and Leviticus 19:18 (love neighbor), but John synthesizes these into an inseparable unity.

The early church faced constant pressure to compromise doctrine for unity or to pursue doctrinal purity while abandoning love. John's balanced emphasis—authentic love flows from right belief and produces right behavior—provided crucial apostolic guidance. The historical context of persecution also meant that loving God's children often required personal sacrifice, making obedience to God's commands essential for maintaining genuine Christian fellowship despite external pressures.

Related Passages

1 John 4:8 — God is love

1 Corinthians 13:4 — Characteristics of love

Study Questions

1. How does keeping God's commandments actually demonstrate love for other believers in practical terms?

2. In what ways might we deceive ourselves into thinking we love God's children while disobeying God's commands?
3. How can we guard against the twin errors of loveless orthodoxy and truth-compromising sentimentalism?
4. What specific commandments of God most directly impact our love for fellow Christians?
5. How does this verse challenge contemporary ideas that separate belief, behavior, and belonging in Christian community?

Interlinear Text

ἐν	τούτῳ	γινώσκομεν	ὅτι	ἀγαπῶμεν	τὰ	τέκνα	τοῦ
By	this	we know	that	we love	G3588	the children	G3588
G1722	G5129	G1097	G3754	G25		G5043	
Θεὸν	ὅταν	τὸν	Θεὸν	ἀγαπῶμεν	καὶ	τὰς	ἐντολάς
God	when	G3588	God	we love	and	G3588	commandments
G2316	G3752		G2316	G25	G2532		G1785
αὐτοῦ	τηρῶμεν·						
his	keep						
G846	G5083						

Additional Cross-References

1 John 2:5 (Love): But whoso keepeth his word, in him verily is the love of God perfected: hereby know we that we are in him.

1 John 4:21 (Love): And this commandment have we from him, That he who loveth God love his brother also.

John 15:17 (Love): These things I command you, that ye love one another.