

FROM THE MINISTRY OF



THRUthe**BIBLE**

HOW TO HAVE

Fellowship

WITH GOD



DR. J. VERNON MCGEE

HOW TO HAVE FELLOWSHIP WITH GOD

That which we have seen and heard we declare we to you, that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ. And these things we write to you that your joy may be full. –1 John 1:3, 4

How can we have fellowship with God? In one of the last conversations Jesus had with His disciples before the Cross, Jesus wanted to talk with them about how they were going to continue their relationship after He went back to heaven. “When Jesus knew that His hour had come that He should depart from this world to the Father, having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end” (John 13:1). Now He wanted to continue this fellowship with them even though He would be in heaven and they would continue on earth.

This was going to be a new way to have fellowship—something they’ve never seen before. Then He showed them what He meant. Before He tells them about the future, what would be coming ...

- that He would be returning to take His own out of the earth
- before He tells 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 in the upper room, He got up and washed His disciples’ feet. He spans the nearly twenty centuries, looks down on us today, and says, “I want you to have fellowship with Me, 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.

Jesus told Simon Peter, “If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me” (John 13:8). He wasn’t discussing salvation in the upper room. The topic was fellowship with Him—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 Bible mentions three different beginnings. The most familiar, of course, is Genesis 1:1, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” The next beginning 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. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. –John 1:1-3

No matter where you set down your marker on the timetable, the Ancient of Days comes out of eternity past to meet you. “In the beginning was [not *is* but *was*] the Word”—He’s already past tense. He truly is the God of eternity.

The third beginning is the one John spoke of when “the Word became flesh” (John 1:14)—the incarnation, when the Lord Jesus Christ came down to this earth and took on Himself our humanity. It’s this beginning that opens 1 John:

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, concerning the Word of life—the life was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness –1 John 1:1, 2

Before getting down to the business of teaching us how to have fellowship with God, John gives us his credentials, saying, “For three years I *knew* Jesus. I listened to Him, and I saw Him.” In doing this, John addresses Gnosticism, which was the first heresy in the church. Gnostics didn’t question the deity of Christ—but instead they questioned His humanity. They were sure the Lord Jesus was God, but they questioned *when* He became God. We get most of our information through our eyes and ears, so John assures them, “We *heard* Jesus’ voice, and we *saw* Him with our eyes.”

John doesn’t stop with that, though:

... Which we have looked upon –1 John 1:1

The word “looked” is an altogether different word from the word “see.” It is *theao*; you can see the word, “theater” in it. When you go to the theater you don’t just give it a passing glance. No, for hours you sit and watch with a steady gaze. John was saying they not only saw Jesus, but they gazed upon Him. “*For three years we looked at Him steadily. We know who He was. We know deity didn’t come upon Him at His baptism and didn’t leave Him at the cross. We know He is God, that He was born in Bethlehem, and even as a little baby lying helplessly in Mary’s arms, He could have spoken the universe out of existence at any moment.*” I like

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the way the earliest church creed puts 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 unique in the history of this world. This is the one John not only saw with his own eyes, but he couldn't take his eyes off Him.

We cannot see Jesus with our physical eyes, but we can see Him with the eye of faith. The Apostle Peter told us, "Whom having not seen you love. Though now you do not see Him, yet believing, you rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, receiving the end of your faith—the salvation of your souls" (1 Peter 1:8, 9). And when Thomas would not believe Jesus had been resurrected until he could see and touch Him with his own hands, the Lord said to him, "Thomas, because you have seen Me, you have believed. Blessed are those who 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 (see 1 Peter 1:8).

Someone has said it is the look that saves, but it's the gaze that sanctifies. John 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 snakes and needed healing were told to look to a brass serpent mounted on a pole. John applied that to the Lord Jesus and said we are to look to Him in faith for salvation. After we have done that, we are to gaze upon Him. The Son of Man must be lifted up "that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). The look saves, but the gaze sanctifies.

Many of us need to do more than simply look to Jesus for salvation. We need to spend time gazing on Him with the eyes of faith. I'm convinced the *one* thing we need is more occupation with the person of Jesus Christ.

... And our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life.

-1 John 1:1

John said they also handled Jesus. Some believe 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 the others didn’t actually touch Him. I think they did. John said, “*I know 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 touched the Word of Life.*”

Feeling those nail-prints in Jesus’ hands convinced them He was indeed man, God manifest in the flesh.

The life was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness, and declare to you that eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to 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 so He might not only reveal God but also redeem man.

What comes next is quite wonderful. John tells us 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 we declare to you, that you 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, or *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.

Suppose you wanted to learn everything there is to know about Shakespeare so you could teach it. You would go to Oxford University and attend the school specializing in teaching Shakespeare. When you ate, you would sit down at the board with 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. You would hear many things that let you know you had a lot to learn. So, you would begin to study, read books from the library, and go to lectures. After you had been at the school for two or three years, they would make you a fellow. Then when you sat at the board with the other students and professors, you'd join right in the conversations about the sonnets of Shakespeare. You would have *fellowship* with them, sharing the things of Shakespeare.

Fellowship for the believer means 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 John is speaking of when he says, "That you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ."

John has a second reason for writing his epistle:

And these things we write to you that your joy may be full.

-1 John 1:4

How wonderful to have 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 here 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, which ultimately brings great joy to their hearts—just

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 and that our fellowship might be sweet.

There is a sadness among believers today that ought not to be there, friend. The church has a reputation out in the world of being boring. But going to church or a Bible conference should be known for inspiring great joy in our hearts. Real joy can come only through fellowship with Christ, so if we have fellowship with God, our joy will naturally be full.

However, there is a hurdle to get over:

This is the message which we have heard from Him and declare to 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. This is all-important. We've emphasized love all out of proportion. God is love and life, but first He is holy. Light speaks of the glory, radiance, beauty, and wonder of God. But light also reveals flaws and impurities, so it speaks of the purity of God.

Here is the dilemma: You and I are sin-filled creatures. Without the grace of God for salvation, I would be nothing in the world but a creature in rebellion against Him. God makes it very clear He finds no good within man. Paul said, "For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells" (Romans 7:18) and also, "There is none righteous, no, not one" (Romans 3:10). Not only that, but we live in a world today that is in rebellion against almighty God. "Because the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be" (Romans 8:7).

So if God is holy and I am a sinner, how can I have fellowship with Him? Men and women have attempted to do this in three different ways, two of which are wrong.



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METHOD #1

BRING GOD DOWN TO
MAN'S LEVEL

If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. –1 John 1:6

That's strong language! If you and I say we have fellowship with God but walk in darkness, we are liars. I'm too polite to say it so bluntly, but John isn't. He used the strongest language of any of the apostles. We always think of John as being gentle, perhaps because he's known as the apostle of love. But our Lord called him a son of thunder. John was a very rugged fisherman. When he talked about love, I tell you, it made it even more important.

A great many today say they have fellowship with God, but they're not dealing with 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 with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin. –1 John 1:7
[keeps on cleansing]

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, and it’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, 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 *will* be saved. “Beloved ... it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him ...” (1 John 3:2).

A dear little lady down in Mississippi years ago got up in a testimony meeting and said, “Most Christians ought to have written on their backs: This is not the best the grace of God can do.” Don’t be discouraged; God is not through with us. He wants to deliver us from the pollution of sin.

There is a little jingle that says “Jesus is a friend of mine.” Is He? Listen to Him: “You are My friends if you do whatever I command you” (John 15:14). If I said 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 I am 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 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.


If you want to call Jesus your friend, make sure you're first asking yourself, "*Am I obeying Him?*" We need to be very careful about getting familiar with Him and bringing Him down to our level.

Dr. Harry Ironside tells of his own confusion about what it means to walk in the light. He read 1 John 1:7 as though it said if we are meticulous about obeying every command of God, God will cleanse us. Then he noticed 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 once went squirrel hunting in Woodbury, Tennessee. My friend and I had some good hunting that day, and when we came to a fork in the path we decided to split up and meet back up further down the way. When I started out by myself, it started drizzling. The path led me around the hill, and I noticed quite a few caves in the hillside. So, when it started to really rain, 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. It was cold, 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 I wasn't alone. I have never been in a place with 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. Working on the assumption that possession is nine-tenths of the law, and since those creatures had the cave ahead of me, I determined it belonged to them. My friend, I got out of there in a hurry.

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, today multitudes are sitting in churches every Sunday morning but are not hearing the Word of God. As a result, they are sitting

in darkness, hearing some dissertation on politics or the “good life” or an exhortation on doing the best they can. Of course, they are *comfortable!* But if they would get into the light of the Word of God, they would see they are *sinner*s and that they cannot bring God down to their level. John says if a person says he is having fellowship with God but is living in sin, he is *lying*.



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METHOD #2

BRING MAN UP TO GOD'S LEVEL

The other side says man has reached sinless perfection and is living on the same high plateau as God. 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. The only trouble with him was that he was *perfect*. When we first met, he introduced himself and informed me 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 a while. 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 he claimed.

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

METHOD #3
CONFESS

Since you cannot bring God down to your level or 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 God says. When His Word says something you’re doing is sin, you are to get over on God’s side and look at it. And the only acceptable answer is, “*You are right, Lord. I say the same thing You do: It is sin.*” Rationalizing it isn’t an option, either. If God says it is sin, it is sin, and we must confess the same thing God says about it. That is what it means to confess your sins, and it is one of the greatest needs in the church. Not public confession—you don’t take a bath in public, I hope, so let’s not do our cleansing of sin in public, either. It needs to be done privately. We need to Go to Him privately for cleansing. If we confess our sins, He is faithful. This is God’s way for a Christian to deal with the sin in his own life.

When the Lord Jesus was here some 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."* 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.)

Go to the Lord, my friend, and 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 want to serve Him. He has made a marvelous, wonderful way back to Himself!

A photograph of two men, one Black and one white, smiling and talking to each other outdoors. They are gesturing with their hands as if in conversation. The background is slightly blurred, showing other people in a park-like setting.

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A close-up photograph of a person's hands holding a smartphone. The phone screen displays a list of booklets from TTB.org. The background is a blurred outdoor setting with a wooden table.

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