

“Boldness in the Presence of God” (An Exposition of 1 John 3:19-24)¹

Introduction

We have said a number of times throughout our study of 1 John that this epistle is primarily about the doctrine and experience of *assurance*. The Apostle John himself makes this clear later in 1 John 5:13 when he writes:

“I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life.”

The reason that he wrote the things that he did in this letter was so that we as believers might *know* that we have eternal life by faith in Christ – in other words, that we might have a settled sense of assurance. What is assurance? *The Westminster Confession of Faith* describes it this way:

“ . . .such as truly believe in the Lord Jesus, and love him in sincerity, endeavoring to walk in all good conscience before him, *may, in this life, be certainly assured that they are in the state of grace, and may rejoice in the hope of the glory of God, which hope shall never make them ashamed.*” (18.1)

You will notice that the *Confession of Faith* speaks of assurance in much the same terms as we find throughout 1 John, that is, that the conditions for experiencing assurance involve faith, love, and obedience. These things are *not* meritorious; we do not earn assurance (much less salvation!) by them, but they *are* the simple and indispensable *conditions* of experiencing assurance.

And this is the case because these things (faith, love, and obedience) are clear and sure *evidence* of the work of God in salvation, even the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of all believers.

Have you ever struggled with doubt? Have you ever struggled with a lack of assurance or certainty in your heart that you are truly saved, despite the fact that you are a believer in Christ? These struggles are all-too-common among believers - and that is no new phenomenon, otherwise John would not have needed to write this letter in the first place!

So if you have struggled with a lack of assurance in the past, or if you are struggling with doubt *right now*, know that you are in good company. I hope that you will be encouraged by the sure counsel of the Apostle John here in this book and in our sermon text this morning.

A Condemning Heart

The first thing that we want to look at from our text today is a lack of assurance, a troubled conscience in a believer, which John speaks of as *a condemning heart*. In v.19-20 he writes:

“By this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our heart before him; for whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything.”

¹ All Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version (ESV) unless otherwise noted.

When John says “**By this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our heart before him,**” it seems clear that “**this**” refers back to what he said in the previous verse, where he told us, “**let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.**” (v.18)

A sincere love of the brethren is one of the primary evidences of being born of God, and so when we see the evidence of such love in our lives, we may know or have certainty that we are “of the truth” and truly know the Lord. (No doubt that the false teachers who were troubling the church in John's day were telling believers that if they did not follow their false doctrines, they were not of the truth.)

In v.19 John actually uses a word that speaks of assurance directly. He says there that “**by this we shall . . . reassure our heart before him** [i.e. *God*].” The word for “**reassure**” there can be translated as to *assure, persuade, or convince*. It is the same word that Paul uses in passages like Romans 8:38 and Philippians 1:6, which also both deal with assurance in some way.

In Romans 8:38–39 Paul tells us:

“For I am sure [KJV = “persuaded”; NASB = “convinced”] that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

And in Philippians 1:6 (one of my favorite verses in the entire Bible), he writes, “**And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.**” In that passage in Romans Paul is telling us that he was assured that nothing can separate believers from the love of God in Christ Jesus; and in Philippians 1:6 he was telling the believers at Philippi that he was assured that they were truly believers because he saw the work of God in their lives, and was assuring them (and us!) that *God finishes what He starts in us by His grace in Christ!*

But what if we *lack* assurance? What if (as Paul says in v.20) “**our heart condemns us**”? It is one thing to have *someone else* accusing and condemning us, and casting doubts on our salvation, but when that accuser is *within our own chests*, where can you turn? (See Proverbs 4:23.)

Now verse 20 has always been a notoriously difficult verse to interpret. Commentators are divided on how we are to understand it. When John says that “**God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything,**” that in itself is not difficult to understand at all – it is an obvious truth. But is this truth intended to *convict* us or *comfort* us?

If it is to *convict* us, it is as if he were saying that if you think your own heart has something against you, that's nothing, for God *really* knows how messed up and sinful you really are! That too is true enough – God *does* know our sins and shortcomings even better than we do!

But John's purpose here and throughout this epistle has been to comfort and strengthen the assurance of believers in Christ, and so, as difficult as it may be to understand v.20, it seems most likely that we are to understand it to be speaking *comfort* to believers, and not adding to our lack of assurance.

For assurance is *never* found in looking for *sinless perfection in our lives as believers*; it is *not* to be found in *perfection of love for the brethren* – none of us attain that in this life. It must *first and foremost* be found in *looking to Jesus Christ*, and to our justification by faith alone in Him alone. *In Him* alone we are freely forgiven of all of our sins and accepted as righteous in God's sight.

And so if we are believers in Christ, and sincerely (even if not perfectly) following Him and loving the brethren, when our hearts are troubled and assurance is disturbed, we are to look to Christ and be assured that **“God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything.”** He knew everything, all of your sins and shortcomings, when He *chose you in Christ “before the foundation of the world.”* (Ephesians 1:4) There is nothing new to take God by surprise and overturn His love for you in Christ!

Confidence in Prayer

The second thing that John points us to is one of the great blessings of assurance in the lives of believers – confidence before God, even *confidence in prayer!* In v.21-22 John writes:

“Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God; and whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him.”

When our heart *condemns* us, we have *no confidence before God*. If you are an *unbeliever*, you know this to be true of you. You have no reason for confidence before God if you are still in your sins and have not received Christ by faith for salvation. The Bible tells us that **“the wages of sin is death”** (Romans 6:23). In other words, we *deserve* or even *earn* death and Hell by our sin and rebellion against God.

But thanks be to God that Romans 6:23 doesn't stop there! Paul says, **“For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”** Hell is *earned by sin*, and we have *all* sinned (Romans 3:23); but eternal life is **“the free gift of God”** given to us by faith in **“Christ Jesus our Lord.”**

And if you *are a believer in Christ*, but sometimes struggle with doubt or a lack of assurance, you know that when that is the case, you *lack* **“confidence before God.”** And this will show up in your prayer life, won't it? For *assurance and prayer always go together*, which is another reason why assurance is so important!

When your sense of assurance is in some ways “shaken, diminished, and intermitted,” it is often (as our *Confession of Faith* puts it) “by negligence in preserving of it, by falling into some special sin which woundeth the conscience and grieveth the Spirit; by some sudden or vehement temptation” (18.4).

Just as it has been said that either the Word of God will keep you from sin, or sin will keep you from the Word; even so the same is true of prayer, isn't it? When your conscience is wounded by *unconfessed* sin or some *besetting* sin, it keeps you from praying, doesn't it? We act like Adam hiding from God in the Garden of Eden after the Fall!

But if by the grace and mercy of the Holy Spirit we diligently **'make our calling and election sure'** (2 Peter 1:10, KJV), and so enjoy the blessing of assurance, *then* we will *not* shrink back from prayer! This brings to mind the exhortation of Hebrews 4:16 which tells us:

“Let us then *with confidence* [or “boldly” – KJV] draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”

In Christ alone (not on our own!) can we **“draw near”** to God in prayer and do so boldly!

If you are a believer in Christ, God would have you draw near to Him in prayer. He would have you be confident in coming to Him in prayer. In other words, He would have us pray with confidence that He is truly well-pleased to hear and answer us from heaven. As John says in v.22, **“and whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him.”**

Our Lord Jesus said much the same thing in Matthew 7:7–11, where He tells us:

“Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!”

Now when John says that we will receive what we ask of God **“because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him,”** he is *not* saying that we *earn* answers to our prayers. As John Stott puts it:

“Obedience is the indispensable condition, not the meritorious cause, of answered prayer.”²

Just as sincerely walking with God in Christ and loving the brethren is the way to assurance, so it is the way to fellowship with God in prayer. And just as our children do not earn our love, but we as parents are often pleased to reward their obedience in order to encourage them in it, even so God is pleased to reward us in many ways by His grace, when even our best good works and prayers are sorely lacking.

The Commandment of God

Last but not least, John points us to *the commandment of God*. In v.22 John spoke of keeping God's commandments; what commandments did he have in mind? In v.23-24 he tells us:

“And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. Whoever keeps his commandments abides in God, and God in him. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit whom he has given us.”

Once again, love, obedience, and truth; or faith, love, and obedience, are the conditions of assurance. The commandment of God is first and foremost **“that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ.”** Did you know that this is not just an offer but *a command*? *God commands all men everywhere to repent* (Acts 17:30). And God *commands* all people to *believe* on the name of His Son for salvation.

Have you believed in the name of the Son of God? Have you trusted in Him alone for salvation? That is the way to eternal life, as well as to confidence in prayer.

And *what else* has God commanded? (And notice that faith and love are **“his commandment”** - it is *singular*, not plural.) That we **“love one another.”** Simple as that. If we believe on Christ and love the brethren, we abide in God and He in us!

2 *The Letters of John*, p.152

And how do we know this? By the work of the Holy Spirit: **“And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit whom he has given us.”** (v.24) Paul says much the same thing in Romans 8:16,

“The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God,”

But how does the Spirit do this? By working faith and love in us. That is why Paul says in Romans 8:14 that **“all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.”**

In closing John Stott summarizes the message of v.24 and our whole text well when he writes:

“So if we would set our hearts at rest, when they accuse and condemn us, we must look for evidence of the Spirit's working, and particularly whether he is enabling us to believe in Christ, to obey God's commands and to love our brothers; for the condition of Christ dwelling in us and of our dwelling in him is this comprehensive obedience (24a), and the evidence of the indwelling is the gift of the Spirit (24b)”³

May God enable us who believe to set our hearts at rest in Him in this way, that we might have assurance and be confident in prayer, all to His glory. - Amen

3 Ibid, p.155