

“LIVING CONFIDENTLY BEFORE GOD”

First John is a letter about the doctrine of assurance. John wants his readers to be able to test the genuineness of their faith. He wants us to be certain that we really have been born of God. We can see the prominence of the theme of assurance in the passage we have just read by noting how it begins and ends. It begins by saying “By this we shall know that we are of the truth,” and it ends with the phrase “by this we know that he abides in us.” There is no question that the focus of this passage is upon the doctrine of assurance. *In these verses John tells us that Christian obedience, working together with the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit in our hearts, produces assurance that gives us confidence with regard to our relationship with God.* This is the idea we will be exploring as we study this passage today.

The first question that we have to ask as we begin our study of this text is what John is referring to in verse 19 when he says “By this.” Does the word “this” point backwards or forwards? While both are grammatically possible, the context strongly favors seeing it as pointing back to verse 18, where John urged us to love not in word or talk but in deed and in truth. Taken this way, we see that the passage opens with John telling us that the way we can know that we are of the truth is by loving one another in deed and in truth. Simply put, Christian love produces Christian assurance.

Love is an important theme in 1 John. And it is important to understand that, in the Bible, love is not so much a way of feeling but a way of acting. The kind of love to which John calls us is a love that is patterned after Christ’s sacrificial love for us. Jesus

did not merely tell us about his love for us; he demonstrated his love by laying down his life for us. This shows us that loving others in deed and in truth means giving of yourself to serve other people and meet their needs. It is a kind of love that is marked by its willingness to be inconvenienced for the sake of others. A good rule of thumb is that if you are not in some way inconveniencing yourself to do good to others, you are probably not loving people as Christ loved us.

John tells us that the presence of self-giving love in our lives is strong evidence that we have truly been born of God. The practice of this kind of love testifies that God's truth dwells within us. When we see such love in our lives, we can reassure our hearts before God. We can be assured that we really have been born again.

It is important to clarify, though, that this does not mean that our confidence before God is in some sense based upon our works. As the apostle Paul makes very clear in Philippians 3, we must not place our confidence in works of the flesh or in having a righteousness of our own that comes from the law, but only in the righteousness that "comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith" [Phil. 3:9] And as the writer of Hebrews tells us, "we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus." [10:19] The Scriptures make it very clear that the believer's only objective source of confidence before God is not our works, but the atoning work of Jesus Christ on our behalf.

For this reason, when John says that our love for others enables us to reassure our hearts before God, he is clearly talking about the subjective aspect of our confidence

before God. While our works do not stand as the basis of our acceptance with God, they do stand as evidence that we truly belong to Christ and have come to share in his saving benefits. Because self-giving love and obedience to God's commandments are the product of the Holy Spirit's transforming work in the hearts of the redeemed, the presence of these things in our lives assures us that we really have been born again. This is one of the reasons why it is so important for us to strive to live lives that are marked by obedience and self-giving love. The more we do so, the more we will grow in our assurance that we really do belong to Christ. As the apostle Peter says in his second epistle, it is the duty of every Christian "to be all the more diligent to make your calling and election sure." [2 Pet. 1:10]

While this is true, John is also aware of the fact that we are not always able to reassure our hearts before God. On the contrary, there are times when we find that our hearts condemn us. There are times when we look at our lives and wonder if we really are loving others in deed and in truth, times when we are convicted of our failure to keep God's commandments. What are we to do at such times? What is the basis of a Christian's assurance when he lacks assurance? This is the question that John is addressing in verse 20.

As we begin to unpack what John is saying in this verse, it is important to reiterate that he is talking about the subjective aspect of assurance in this passage. What he has in mind is the settled conviction that a believer can have that he really has had his sins pardoned and that his soul really has been saved. This subjective assurance does not

belong to the essence of saving faith. And because of this, it is possible for a true believer's sense of assurance to waver. There can be times when a believer looks at his life and wonders if the fruits of faith are really present. He may ask himself: Do I really exhibit self-giving love? Do I really practice righteousness? True children of God can sometimes struggle with doubts and uncertainties about their salvation.

That being said, this verse is not only relevant for those who have questioned whether they are truly born again. Even if you have never gotten to the point of doubting your salvation, you still know what it is to have your heart condemn you. Your heart condemns you whenever you fall under conviction for your sin. This verse speaks to all of us, because we all know what it is to be stricken with a guilty conscience.

What should we do when this happens? What should we do when our hearts condemn us? John tells us that we need to remember that "God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything." Now I need to tell you that not all interpreters agree about the meaning of this statement. Calvin actually sees it as a warning, understanding John to be saying that if our own hearts condemn us, how much more will we be condemned by God, who knows our hearts far better than we do. But as much as I respect Calvin, I have to side with the majority of contemporary interpreters in believing that John is providing a word of comfort, not warning, in verse 20. When we look at this verse together with verse 19, we can see that this passage bears a striking resemblance to what John said in 2:1, where he wrote these words: "I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the

righteous.” Note how similar this is to verses 19-20, where John tells us that the practice of Christian love breeds assurance, but then quickly shifts gears to tell us what we need to remember at those times when our hearts condemn us. At such times, we need to remember that God is greater than our hearts, and that he knows everything.

Now it is true that in one sense, the fact that God knows everything is not a comforting thought but a terrifying one. It means God knows the extent of our sin and failure far better than we do. He can look into our hearts. He can perfectly judge our motives. This is a dreadful thought for those who are apart from Christ. But it is not so for the Christian. For us, this really is a word of comfort, because it tells us that God is able to see through all of the filth that still remains in our hearts and discern the principle of new life that he planted within us when we were born again. To use the language that John employed earlier in this chapter, God is able to see his seed abiding in us, even at those times when our sin clouds our ability to see it. This is what the psalmist means when he says, “When iniquities prevail against me, you atone for our transgressions.” [Ps. 65:3] And Thomas Boston speaks of something like this when he writes:

“For as the goodness in you was not the ground of the promise [that was proclaimed to you in the gospel]; so the evil in you doth not overturn it, and make it of none effect. The foundation of the promise stands sure in Christ, whatever alterations the frame and case of a believer’s spirit do undergo. It is established as

the moon (Ps. 89:37), which is still the same in itself, notwithstanding of the variety of its appearances to our sight, one while waxing, at another time waning.” [*A View of the Covenant of Grace*, 95]

I think Boston’s analogy about the moon is especially helpful. Even though the moon appears different to us as it goes through its various phases, in reality it always remains the same. Regardless of how it looks to us, it is still the same moon. Well, the same is true when it comes to the believer’s sense of his standing with God. When our subjective sense of assurance is shaken, the objective basis of our assurance still stands firm. This is what John is telling us in verse 20. God knows our hearts better than we do. And because of this we can be confident, even at those times when our hearts condemn us, that he still accepts us because of what Christ has done for us. Regardless of what a believer thinks of himself at any given moment, God is always able to see the faith that he planted within him, the faith that unites that believer to the One who is our advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.

After turning aside to talk about those times when our hearts condemn us, John returns in verse 21 to his discussion of the subjective confidence that obedience instills within us. He 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.” John says that we can be confident that we will receive what we ask if we are living lives that are characterized by obedience to

God's commands. Notice the connection that John draws between obedience and answered prayer. Now, it would be very easy for something like this to be taken in the wrong way. This is why it is so important for us to always be using Scripture to interpret Scripture. This statement about prayer needs to be understood in light of all of the other things that the Bible has to say about the kind of prayer that prevails with God. Other passages tell us that effective prayer is prayer that is persistent, done in the Spirit and not in the flesh, offered according to God's will, offered in Jesus' name, and offered in faith. All of these things need to be taken into account when we think about how God answers our prayers.

That being said, we do not want to lose sight of the fact that this passage does say that there is a connection between obedience and answered prayer. And when you think about it, it is not very hard to understand why this is the case. After all, how can a person claim to be praying according to God's will if he is not striving to live according to God's will? In the words of John Owen, "He who prays as he ought, will endeavor to live as he prays... To pray earnestly and live carelessly, is to proclaim that a man is not spiritually minded in his prayer." [*The Grace and Duty of Being Spiritually-Minded*, 59] Faithful Christian living demonstrates that we are sincere when we say that we are praying in Jesus' name.

One other thing to point out about what John says about prayer here is that it presumes that Christians are people of prayer. John assumes that we are regularly asking things of God. But is this really true? Are we people of prayer? Are you a person of

prayer? Prayer is our great privilege as children of God, but it is something that is so easy for us to neglect. And this is tragic because prayer is the means by which we cultivate intimacy with the Lord and express our continued reliance upon him. This is why the Bible often describes true religion as ‘calling upon the name of the Lord.’ [see Gen. 4:26; 1 Chr. 16:8; Ps. 116:13; 1 Cor. 1:2] Yet God’s people often seem to be allergic to prayer. We need to be reminded of the blessedness of a life of prayer. Listen to how Thomas Boston describes a time of prayer that he had during the period in his life when he was seeking a call to serve as a minister of the gospel, a process that was made extremely difficult for him because of the unhealthy state of the church in Scotland at the time. Boston writes,

“I went to prayer, and, with confidence in the Lord, unbosomed myself unto Him. And, O but a heavenly frame was sweet in my eyes! and I saw how pleasant a life a habit thereof, if I could reach it, would make.” [*Memoirs*, 88]

At that moment, Boston was able to see that a life of habitual prayerfulness would make for an exceedingly pleasant life. Does this have any resonance with you? What is your picture of the good life? Do you see how vitally important prayer is to your life as a Christian?

After speaking of the importance of keeping God’s commandments if we want to be able to pray confidently, John sums up what those commandments are. He writes in

verse 23, “And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another.” Here is a concise summary of the Christian life: believing in Jesus Christ as he is revealed in the gospel and living a life of love. Notice how this includes both our beliefs and our behavior. This shows us that creeds and deeds always need to go hand in hand.

Verse 23, then, is John’s picture of what life in Christ looks like. It is what your life as a Christian should look like. Even though there are things about each one of us that make us unique, there is a fundamental shape that every Christian life should take. Christians are people who are being conformed to the likeness of Christ. And because of this, there is a degree of uniformity to the Christian life. This may sound like heresy in a culture that is so obsessed with individual identity and self-expression, but it is still true.

In the final verse of our passage, John tells us that the way for us to have confidence that we really are abiding in Christ is by keeping his commandments. It is a truth that is repeated again and again in this letter. Because obedience is the fruit of faith in Jesus Christ, it serves to reassure us that we really do belong to Christ. Notice, however, that John adds one more element to this in verse 24. He also says that we know that Christ abides in us by the Spirit whom Christ has given us. This shows us that it is not our obedience itself that assures us of our salvation. Rather, we receive assurance through the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit, who enables us to see that our works are not works done in the power of the flesh, but works done through the power of the Spirit. This is the real reason why our obedience can be a source of confidence for us. The

Spirit of God uses our Spirit-empowered obedience to confirm his transforming presence in our lives.

These verses provide us with a good example of how biblical truths typically exist in tension with each other. On the one hand, John tells us that we can have confidence before God when we see ourselves doing what pleases him. And as we have said, John is not talking about placing our confidence in our own dead works, but about believing that our desire and ability to do what is pleasing to God is evidence of the Holy Spirit's renewing work in our lives. Seeing the Spirit's handiwork in our lives strengthens our confidence.

On the other hand, John admits that there are going to be times when we do not feel very confident before God, times when our hearts condemn us. We still sin. We fail to love as we ought to love. And because of this, our conscience will sometimes get the better of us. But John tells us that even at those times when the darkness of our hearts results in the shaking of our confidence, we can take comfort in knowing that God is greater than our hearts, and he is still able to discern the new life that he has implanted within us.