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## BLESSED ASSURANCE

1 John 3:19-24

By

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1 John Lesson 17

## Blessed Assurance 1 John 3:19-24

Every child has a basic need to feel assured of his parents' love. It should be obvious that if parents verbally or physically abuse a child, that child will not feel loved by his parents. Eventually, he will distance himself from them through withdrawal or rebellion. So even when a child disobeys and must be disciplined, it is important for parents to affirm their love for him. Assurance of love is essential for close relationships.

The same is true spiritually. Even though the heavenly Father disciplines us for our good, that we might share His holiness, He does it out of love (Heb. 12:6, 10). He wants us, as His children, to be assured of His great love for us. John begins chapter 3 by exclaiming (3:1), "See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we would be called children of God; and such we are." God wants His children to feel His arms of love around them, even when they go through difficult trials.

The enemy of our souls knows that we will not feel close to God if we doubt our standing before Him as beloved children. So he accuses us in an attempt to drive a wedge between us and God (Rev. 12:10; Zech. 3:1-4). In addition, at times our conscience condemns us as we compare ourselves with the holy standards of God's Word. We know that we should love others, but in our hearts, we struggle with anger or bitterness or hatred toward those who have wronged us. We know that we should pray for God to bless this difficult person with His salvation, but inwardly, we'd rather see him punished. When we have those thoughts, either our guilty conscience or the enemy comes in and says, "A true Christian can't have thoughts like that! You're not even saved!"

John is in the second cycle of applying the three tests of authentic Christianity: (1) the moral test of obedience; (2) the relational test of love; and, (3) the doctrinal test of faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ. During the first application of the tests, John paused after the second test to give a word of assurance about his confidence in his readers' spiritual condition (2:12-14), as well

as a warning about the danger of worldliness (2:15-17). Here, in the second application of the tests, John follows the same pattern. He has repeated the first test of obedience (2:28-3:10) and the second test of love (3:11-18). Before he goes on to the third test of believing the truth (4:1-6), he interjects this word about assurance.

Our text falls into two sections: (1) the condemning heart and the basis for assurance (3:19-20); (2) the confident heart and the blessings of assurance (3:21-24). John is saying that...

When our hearts condemn us, we must rest on the basis of assurance; when our hearts are confident, we will enjoy the blessings of assurance.

Before we examine the text more carefully, I should mention that there are two very different approaches to these verses. Some commentators whom I highly respect—John Calvin, Charles Simeon, and Martyn Lloyd-Jones—interpret these verses as a warning to those who do not conscientiously apply John’s admonition about love. They understand these verses to be aimed at those who love only with word or tongue, not in deed and truth (3:18). So they say that if anyone is condemned by his conscience, how much more will he be condemned by God, who knows all things. They do not see these as verses of comfort to disturbed hearts, but rather as verses to disturb comfortable hearts.

While I agree that we should never shrug off our shortcomings or ignore a guilty conscience, I think that to view these verses primarily as a warning is to misinterpret them. John begins this chapter with those wonderful words of assurance of the Father’s great love for us as His children. In the section about love, he addresses his readers as “brethren” (3:13) and “little children” (3:18). In our text, he calls them “beloved” (3:21) to remind them that they are loved both by God and by the apostle. Also, in parallel with the first cycle of the tests, the interruption was for the purpose of encouraging those who may feel like they’re falling short. So here, I believe that John’s main purpose is to assure his little children of their standing before God, as well as to urge them to go on in faith, obedience, and love.

On the subject of assurance of salvation, R. C. Sproul (*Essential Truths of the Christian Faith* [Tyndale], pp. 201-202) points out

four possibilities. First, there are those who are unsaved and they know that they are unsaved. They don't make any claim of salvation. Second, there are people who are saved but do not know they are saved. They doubt their salvation, perhaps due to a troubled conscience. Third, there are people who are saved and know that they are saved. Fourth, there are those who are not saved but confidently believe that they are saved. They have false assurance. As I understand our text, John is mainly addressing the second group—those who are saved, but they're having doubts because of their awareness of falling short of God's commandments. John wants them to know the basis and the blessings of true assurance.

1. When our hearts condemn us, we must rest on the basis of assurance (3:19-20).

John's meaning in these two verses is that a person who is troubled with doubts and self-condemnation must take himself in hand and confront himself with what he knows to be true about God's work in his life and what is true of God's greater knowledge of his heart. As James Boice puts it (*The Epistles of John* [Zondervan], p. 122), "... faith (which is the opposite of doubt), being based on knowledge, must be fed by it." John makes two points:

- A. Assurance is based on the knowledge of God's work in our lives (3:19-20a).

There are some difficult grammatical and interpretive problems here that would be tedious to explain in this message. Suffice it to say that I think that the way that the NASB and the NIV translate the verses gives an adequate sense of the meaning.

When John says, "by this" (3:19) he is referring back to 3:17-18, where he talks about love expressing itself in practical good deeds. As we saw there, John's point is that self-sacrificing love is the mark of the Christian, whereas self-centered hatred is the mark of the world. Thus in verse 19 John is saying, "When you are troubled by doubts and self-condemnation, don't focus on your failures. (After all, what Christian hasn't failed at times?) Rather, focus on the many times that God's love has flowed through you since you became a believer. Let these acts of self-sacrifice be your evidence that you are of the truth, and cease doubting."

It is helpful at times to examine our failures and learn from them. Why did I sin in that way? How can I avoid that sin in the future? But it is not helpful to dwell on your sins and become introspective to the point of depression. You've got to know your own heart here. Due to personality or other factors some are more prone to be introspective. Some are by nature such perfectionists that if they do not come up to God's perfect standard of love, they condemn themselves, even after they've confessed their sins. While we should maintain a sensitive conscience and not tolerate any disobedience or sin, at the same time we need to accept our human limitations. Our overall focus should be on what God is doing in our lives, not on our failures.

Probably if I were to ask, "Name five times you've failed," you wouldn't have any problem coming up with your list. But if I said, "Name five times you've experienced God's victory," you'd have to think harder. John is saying, "Look at the specific deeds of love that God has done through you, and be assured."

If you can't think of any such deeds of love, you may need to examine whether or not you truly know Christ. If you have experienced God's love in Christ, then you ought to love others (3:16; 4:11). If you never see opportunities to show God's love to others, you are too self-focused. Many people come to church with the mindset, "I need to get my needs met." In fact, they live each day with that selfish focus. They get frustrated or depressed because others are not meeting their needs. The proper way to come to church or to live each day is with the mindset, "Lord, use me to meet someone's needs." When you live that way, you find that the Lord does meet your needs. When you live to love others, it comes back to you "a good measure—pressed down, shaken together, and running over" (Luke 6:38).

So John says, "We will know by this—by our loving deeds—that we are of the truth, and will assure our heart before Him."

B. Assurance is based on God's greater knowledge of us (3:20b).

A second truth by which we may assure our hearts is that of God's greater knowledge of us. I agree with James Boice (p. 125), that John is saying, "... whatever our hearts may say, God knows

us better than even we ourselves do and, nevertheless, has acquitted us. Therefore, we should reassure ourselves by His judgment, which alone is trustworthy, and refuse to trust our own." As I said earlier, some take this to mean that God's judgment of our hearts is more rigorous than our judgment, not more merciful. But that does not fit the context here.

Two other texts illustrate and reinforce what John is saying here. One is when Jesus met Peter after the resurrection, after Peter's shameful denials that he knew Jesus. To restore him, Jesus asked Peter (John 21:15), "Simon, son of John, do you love Me more than these?" Peter replied, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You." Jesus replied, "Tend My lambs." Then, Jesus repeated the question (21:16), "Simon, son of John, do you love Me?" Peter answered, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You." Jesus said, "Shepherd My sheep."

Peter had denied Jesus three times, so Jesus asks a third time (21:17), "Simon, son of John, do you love Me?" Peter was grieved, probably because he was recalling his awful sin. But note his reply, "Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You." Jesus said, "Tend My sheep." In effect, Peter said, "Lord, as far as I know my own heart, I do love You. But, You know me better than I know myself, and I appeal to Your knowledge."

The other text is Romans 8. In verse 1, Paul affirms, "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." Then, in 8:31-34, Paul wrote these reassuring words,

What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things? Who will bring a charge against God's elect? God is the one who justifies; who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us.

He goes on to state that there is absolutely nothing that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. That is the thrust of John's point in our text. If you know that you are God's child through faith in Jesus Christ, then even when your heart condemns you for falling short, God is greater than your

heart. He knows that He has justified you. If you have sinned, by all means confess that sin and come back to Him. But don't allow yourself to go on in guilt and condemnation. Assurance is based on the knowledge of how God has already worked in your life and the knowledge of God's greater knowledge of your heart. He saved you even though He knew every sin that you ever would commit. He wants all of His children to be assured of His great love.

After giving this basis for assurance to the condemning heart, John goes on to give the blessings of assurance that come from a confident heart:

2. When our hearts are confident, we will enjoy the blessings of assurance (3:21-24).

John says (3:21), "Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God." This confidence leads to two blessings, that of answered prayer (3:22-23), and that of the abiding relationship through the Spirit (3:24). In support of the interpretation that I am advocating, B. F. Westcott (*The Epistles of St. John* [Eerdmans], p. 118) writes, "The thought here is of the boldness with which the son appears before the Father, and not of that with which the accused appears before the Judge."

This is illustrated by a story of a Roman emperor who was parading through the streets of the capital in a victory celebration. Roman soldiers lined the parade route to keep back the cheering masses. At one point along the route there was a small platform where the royal family was sitting. As the emperor approached, his youngest son, who was just a little boy, jumped down, burrowed through the crowd, and tried to run out to meet him. One of the guards caught the boy by the arm and said, "You can't do that! Don't you know who that is? That's the emperor!" But the boy quickly replied, "He may be your emperor, but he's my father!" (From "Our Daily Bread," July, 1977.)

John wants us to know that if we are God's children, we have that kind of confident access to the Father's presence. He outlines two blessings that result from this confidence:

- A. Confidence before God gives us the blessing of answered prayer (3:22-23).

John makes a staggering claim (3:22), "and whatever we ask we receive from Him...." John was not coming up with a new doctrine of prayer here. As in so much of First John, the apostle is reflecting the words of Jesus in the Upper Room, where He told the apostles (John 14:13-14), "Whatever you ask in My name, that will I do, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask Me anything in My name, I will do it." (He repeats the same promise in John 15:7, 16, and 16:23-24.)

To be honest, I do not completely understand or experience these promises to answer *all* of our prayers. I realize that there are conditions attached to the promises. The Bible never teaches that we can pray for selfish wishes and they will be granted in Aladdin's genie fashion. To pray in Jesus' name is to pray in accord with His will. As in the Lord's prayer, we are praying (Matt. 6:10), "Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

Furthermore, John adds (1 John 3:22) that the reason we receive whatever we ask is, "because we keep His commandments and do the things that are pleasing in His sight." God does not answer the prayers of the disobedient. To do what is pleasing in God's sight refers to living with a God-ward focus, seeking to please Him beginning on the heart (or thought) level (1 Thess. 2:4).

In 3:23, John sums up God's commandments in one command with two prongs, "that we believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, just as He commanded us." The verb tense of "believe" points to the act of faith at salvation, whereas the tense of "love" indicates ongoing love for one another. This is similar to Paul's words (Gal. 5:6), "For in Christ Jesus, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything, but faith working through love." When we trust in Christ and walk in love, He promises to answer our prayers.

Also, we need to understand that God does not answer our prayers in our way or in our timing. To teach us in His school of faith, He sometimes makes us wait on Him for years. Sometimes He answers by giving us what we really need, which isn't always exactly what we were asking for!

Where I struggle with these promises (I'm being very candid here), is when I ask for something that is for God's glory and ac-

according to His revealed will, but He doesn't answer. I have prayed for the salvation of people who have died without being saved. I have prayed for the restoration of Christian marriages that have ended in divorce anyway. I have prayed for the repentance of sinning Christians who did not repent.

My only answer to these difficulties is that I do not understand the mysteries of God's ways, and so I do not always pray correctly. When Jesus predicted Peter's denials, He said, "I have prayed for you, that your faith would not fail" (Luke 22:32). I probably would have prayed that Peter would not have sinned at all, but Jesus didn't pray that. Concerning Jesus' prayers, Martyn Lloyd-Jones observes (*Children of God* [Crossway], p. 131), "God answered Him and granted His requests, and the nearer we approximate to Him, in the same way we can be certain that our requests will be granted." So as we grow to "do the things pleasing in His sight," we will see more and more of our prayers answered.

B. Confidence before God gives us the blessing of the abiding relationship through the Spirit (3:24).

John has already spoken about our abiding in Christ, but this is the first time he has mentioned God's abiding in us, which Jesus taught also (John 15:4). As in John 15:10, so in our text, obedience is the condition of the abiding relationship. As we walk in obedience to the Lord Jesus, we enjoy close fellowship with Him and He with us. His life flows through us, producing fruit that pleases Him.

John adds (3:24b) that the way we know that He abides in us is "by the Spirit whom He has given us." Although John has already referred to "the anointing" that abides in us (2:27), this is his first explicit mention of the Holy Spirit. This serves to introduce the next section, with its emphasis on discerning God's Spirit from evil spirits.

At first glance, it may seem that John is referring to an inner, subjective sense of the Spirit's presence in our lives. But, John Stott argues that this is not so. Rather, John is saying that the Spirit's presence in our lives is manifested objectively in our life and conduct. Stott writes (*The Epistles of John* [Eerdmans], p. 151), "So if we would assure our hearts, 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 commandments and to love the brethren; for the condition of abiding is this comprehensive obedience (24a), and the evidence of abiding is the gift of the Spirit (24b)." Thus John comes back full circle to knowledge as the basis for assurance.

### Conclusion

The first anchor for assurance is always faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ. If your trust is in Christ, God has promised you eternal life and He has promised never to allow you to be snatched out of His hand (John 3:16; 10:28-30). A man once told D. L. Moody that he was worried because he didn't feel saved. Moody asked, "Was Noah safe in the ark?" "Certainly he was," the man replied. "Well, what made him safe, his feeling or the ark?" The point is, if you're in Christ, it's not your feelings that save you from God's judgment. It's Christ who saves! Faith puts you on the ark! Make sure you're on board!

But, the problem was that the false teachers claimed to believe in Jesus, but their claim was just empty words. By their deeds, they denied Christ. So, throughout First John, the apostle gives these tests of authentic faith. Do you obey God's commandments? Do you love the brethren? Do you believe in the name of God's Son, Jesus Christ, including His sacrificial death for you?

You may think, "Yes, but I don't do those things perfectly. I often fall short." It's to you that John writes these verses. Do you see evidence of God's working in your life through your loving others? Do you see answers to your prayers? Do you enjoy fellowship with Christ as you live to please Him? If so, know that God is greater than your heart. He wants you to be confident in His love. He wants to assure you that you are His child.

## Application Questions

1. How can we know whether feelings of guilt stem from Satan's accusations or from the Holy Spirit's conviction?
2. Where is the proper balance between accepting our human limitations, but not tolerating sin or spiritual immaturity?
3. Is it a cop out of faith to pray, "not my will, but Yours be done?" Why/why not?
4. How would you counsel a Christian who said that he doesn't experience close fellowship with the Lord? Where would you start?

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