

Overcoming Condemnation

Please open your Bible to the book of 1 John 3, or turn to page 960 in the Bible under the chair in front of you.

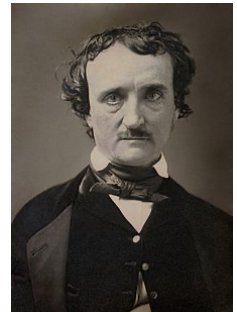
We've seen in this series, John's writings have been very black-and-white. He writes in stark manner – you must do this if you're really a Christian. Last week, for example, John said that we must lay down our lives for others in love. If you don't love that way, you shouldn't have confidence that you're really a Christian. Well, maybe some of you left and felt the weight of that command. Maybe you've been struggling with the burden of not loving people as you should, even this week.

So now John is going to speak to this topic of assurance – how do we know that we're really saved? The text in front of us has some challenging grammar, but John wants us to know and feel the assurance that we really are in Christ, that we really can have confidence before God.

Read **1 John 3:16-24** (though our passage is 19-24)

Intro

Well, Halloween is behind us, and with it many of the scary tales and stories people sometimes tell around that holiday. One such story that is sometimes shared was written by Edgar Allan Poe, called "The Tell-Tale Heart." (show picture) In it, the narrator describes how he kills another man in the night. But when the police come, he imagines that he hears the dead man's heart beating loudly in his ears. And it overwhelms him so that he confesses to his crime.



It's a scary story because it draws on something that we all fear – the condemnation of our own hearts. The accusations of a guilty conscience. The fear that our sins will find us out and show that we have no hope. Some of you, and probably all of us at one time or another, have lived under this kind of guilt and shame. Or you've wrestled with doubts about God, or the Bible, or if you really can be forgiven for your sins through Jesus. It may feel like your sins are forever going to haunt you and you hear their heart beats in your ear. Your heart condemns you.

Edgar Allan Poe's story of the "Tell-Tale Heart" speaks to this universal question, How do I overcome a condemning heart? What can I do to escape the guilt and shame I feel for all of the mistakes and sins of my past? Or for the Christian, how can I know – *really know* – that my sins have been forgiven?

This was a central question for the Reformation of the 1500's. Some of you know that Halloween is also Reformation Day, October 31st. It's the anniversary of the day Martin Luther nailed his 91 complaints on a church door in Germany, an event which he didn't know would lead to the Reformation, the great splitting away from the Roman Catholic Church by those who would come to be known as Protestants. There were several issues at the core of the debate, including the nature of salvation, the Bible, and the function of the church.

And related to the questions about salvation was this question that we're thinking about this morning – is it possible for a person to *really* know that God has forgiven them? To *really* know that you're saved?

The Roman Catholic position was stated in the Council of Trent in 1547,

Even so each one when he regards himself, and his own weakness and indisposition, may have fear and apprehension touching his own grace; seeing that no one can know with certainty of faith, which cannot be subject to error, that he has obtained the grace of God.¹

In other words, when you look at yourself honestly, you can't ever really know if you are in the grace of God. You can't know for sure that you are saved.

The Catholic Cardinal Robert Bellarmine said,

The principle heresy of Protestants is, that saints may obtain to a certain assurance of their gracious and pardoned state before God.²

He's saying this is the big problem that Protestants have – they think they can know for sure that they've been saved and forgiven by God.

¹ Council of Trent, Session 6, On Justification, First Decree, Chapter 9 (January 13, 1547)

² *De Justificatione Impii*, 3.2.3, *Disputationes de Controversiis Christianae Fidei adversus huius Temporalis Haereticos*, 4 vols., Cologne, 1619.

And that has all kinds of effects, of course. If you're always guilty, then you need the church to constantly be telling you that you're ok. You need to partake in the sacraments – like giving money, confessing to a priest, or doing acts of penance to show you're really repentant – you have to do all of this stuff to help you know that you're in God's grace. And even then, you can't really know for sure.

By the way, this lack of assurance is found in many other world religions – like Islam or Buddhism. You can't know for sure that you've obtained the favor of God. And it produces a kind of slavery under a condemning conscience.

And so the Reformers like Martin Luther and John Calvin argued strongly against that position. They held that all Christians, even new believers, can know that the love and grace of God has been given to them. God does not desire that His children wallow about in doubt and despair.

So the Westminster Confession of Faith will say

Believers may in this life be certainly assured that they are in a state of grace, and may rejoice in the hope of the glory of God.³

They go on to argue that assurance for the believer is a real possibility. But it is not always experienced as a certainty. They also understood that true believers may endure seasons of doubt and difficulties before laying hold of it. But nonetheless, this kind of assurance is for all Christians, apart from special revelation, but through the ordinary means of grace.

So they're saying that while Christians may wrestle with questions of assurance, it really is possible to know that you know that you know that you're saved. You can really be assured of that, and you don't need to hear an audible voice from heaven or a word from a religious authority to tell that to you. The work of the Spirit and the revelation of God in the Scriptures are able to give you what you need.

³ Westminster Confession of Faith, 18.1

We can know that we're saved. And I bring up this history and the story from Edgar Allan Poe because they speak to the same issue that John is writing about here in 1st John 3. How do we have real assurance in our hearts that we're in the truth? That we're really saved? Is it even possible to know? Were the Protestants correct in saying that assurance is really available to all Christians?

This is important because we know that our hearts may wrestle with doubts. And at times, we may feel them condemning us – accusing us of being closed off when presented with opportunities to love others, accusing us of being selfish rather than generous, accusing us of being proud and looking down on our brothers and sisters.

The picture that John gives could be likened to a courtroom...
So we can imagine that you are the defendant. You're the one on trial.
The accuser is your own heart. It's testifying against you, condemning you.
And you stand on trial before the Judge, who is God Himself.

And so in this courtroom, John calls us to look at some evidence. How can we know if we're really saved? What evidence should we look for?

I want to just pause and clarify here because I know this whole discussion can get complicated. John is talking about the question – how do we know that we've been saved? This is a different question than “How does a person become saved?” The Bible is crystal clear on that question – we are saved by faith alone through grace alone in Christ alone. We do not earn our salvation; it is a gift of God by grace.

But then after a person puts his or her trust in Christ, we may find ourselves wrestling with doubts. How do I know that I'm really saved? How can I be sure that the death and resurrection of Jesus has really been applied to me? And for that question, we can see two lines of evidence that John gives us here.

Objective Evidence

The first line of evidence is what we might call 'objective evidence.' What are the facts? What can we look to in real, tangible terms?

John sort of summarizes what he's been saying so far in the last couple verses of our passage, look there. He reminds us that there are three tests that we can use as objective evidence: the obedience test – are we keeping His commandments? The belief test – is our faith in Jesus Christ? And the social test – do we love one another? We've seen all of these before, and so we'll cover them quickly as John circles back over them.

We'll start with the test of obedience. Look at verses 22 and 24...

1 John 3:22

...because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him

1 John 3:24

Whoever keeps his commandments abides in God...

Is your life characterized by obedience to the commands of God? Are you submitted to the authority of God in your life? Do you try to obey what the Word of God calls you to do and avoid what the Bible warns against?

This is one objective line of evidence we can look to. It will help us know if we really are in the faith and really have been saved.

Sinclair Ferguson observes,

(show picture) "High degrees of Christian assurance are simply not compatible with low levels of obedience."

HIGH DEGREES OF CHRISTIAN ASSURANCE

are simply not compatible with

LOW LEVELS OF OBEDIENCE.

Sinclair Ferguson



If you're knowingly walking in disobedience to the commands of God, then you will not have and should not have a high degree of assurance that you're really saved.

Secondly, John says that we can look to the objective evidence of our faith.

Look at verse 23...

1 John 3:23

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.

Do you believe in the name of the Son of God, Jesus Christ? Notice what John is really saying here – do you have faith in the **name** (singular) of the Son Jesus Christ?

There are three parts here in the one name. First, do you believe in the Son? Jesus is the Son of God – fully God in human flesh. Do you believe that? Second, his name is Jesus. What does the name “Jesus” mean? The one who saves. Remember the angel tells Mary that her son will be named Jesus because He shall save the people from their sins? And third, the name Christ means the anointed King. Jesus is the Savior and the King. He is the Lord, the ultimate authority, the one who deserves your allegiance and obedience.

So do you believe that Jesus is God, that He saves, and that He is King? That’s what it means to believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ.

Before we baptize folks, they meet with one of the pastors and we talk through their story of how they came to believe in Jesus. And sometimes people know the specific details; they can tell you the moment and the circumstances on that day. But others don’t know. They can’t point to a specific time. Their testimony is more like that of John Newton who wrote the hymn *Amazing Grace*. “I once was lost but now am found, ‘twas blind, but now I see.” They don’t know the day or the hour, but they know that once they did not believe and now they do.

And so the question the New Testament asks us is not – can you point back to a specific time in the past when you first believed? That’s a fine question to ask. But the Bible is much more concerned with whether or not you are right now believing in the name of His Son Jesus Christ.

Are you trusting in Christ alone to save you? That’s the question I ask at a person’s baptism. To profess Christ means that you are declaring that you are right now, believing in the name of Jesus.

So can I ask you today – as you look at the objective evidence in your life, are you believing in Jesus for your salvation? Are you looking to Jesus to save you when you die and stand before the Lord on the day of judgment? Or are you hoping that you’ve been a good enough person? That your good deeds will sort of outweigh your bad ones? Or that you’re good compared to some other people?

Friend, if that's you, then I want to tell you in love that you're heading for disaster. Jesus alone can save. He alone can forgive your sins. He alone is worthy to be the King and Lord of your life. Won't you trust in Him today?

Jesus lived a perfect and sinless life, in total obedience to the Father. He was crucified by the Romans though He was innocent. But He rose again on the third day and ascended to the right hand of the Father, where He now commands all people to turn from their sins and believe in Him. Won't you believe in Him today? If you have questions, I would love to talk with you today or sometime soon about how you can put your trust in Jesus.

The third line of evidence that John points us to is whether we love one another. It's also there in verse 23...

1 John 3:23

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.

John talked about this earlier in chapter three, and he will have more to say about it in chapter four. But here, John includes it as part of his summarizing his whole message. If we want to know that we know that we're saved, then we should be able to look at our lives and see the objective evidence of love for others.

As we behold what kind of love the Father has for us, as we see the love of God that calls us His children, as we look at how Jesus laid down His life for us – that love on the vertical plane should stir us up to love one another on the horizontal plane. God's love for us compels us to love one another.

So the Christian should be able to look at his or her life and see a growing love for other people, one marked by real acts of love and not words only. The horizontal love we have is evidence that the vertical love is there.

So looking at the big picture, not just one day at a time, or one rough evening with your family, but the over-arching pattern of your life over the last several months or years – is there genuine evidence of love for other people? That's what John wants us to see.

Or is your life more characterized by what Paul describes in Titus 3, “passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another,”? Do you see people as a means to an end – are they merely in your way as you try to advance in life? Or do you seek to just work at getting people to serve and love you? Is that what your life is about? The Christian is someone who recognizes that you be the most gifted and talented person in the world, you can have all the friends you could ever want, you could know it all, but if you don’t have love, you have nothing.

So in those times when your heart drags you into that courtroom and starts bringing condemnation and accusation against you, look at the objective evidence: are you obeying the Scriptures? Are you believing in Jesus? Are you loving others? Look at the facts.

Subjective Evidence

And then secondly, John wants us to see the subjective evidence as well; he wants us to feel the assurance that comes from knowing we’re saved. This is really what many of us struggle with – we don’t always feel like we’re Christians, like we really are children of God.

So look back up to verses 19-21. The Greek syntax here is challenging, to say the least, and there are a few choices that you have to make as you interpret these verses, but after my time in studying them, here’s what I think they’re saying.

Let me read nineteen and twenty again for us...

1 John 3:19-20

By this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our heart before him; **20** for whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything.

John begins by saying “by this” we shall know. By what? I think he’s looking back at verse 18 which told us to love not in word only but in deed and truth when we see a brother in need. So verse 19 is saying, when our hearts are tempted to be closed to our brothers, those times when my own heart is testifying against me saying “you don’t really love that person” or more broadly “you’re not really God’s child,” in those times we can reassure our hearts before God.

That word 'reassure' can also be translated 'persuade' or 'convince.' So in those times of doubt, John says we can persuade our condemning hearts. We can be reassured.

He's talking here about those times of internal doubting and internal wrestling. I remember having questions and doubts about whether or not I really believed in the gospel as a kid. It may sound silly, but I have memories of sitting on the school bus with my head against the window, looking outside and praying on multiple occasions, "God, would you save me? Will you forgive me?" If I didn't mean it before, I mean it now...

Maybe you've had times where you've experienced something similar. You're in good company, many, many people in the history of the church have wrestled with a condemning heart.

And so what do we do to reassure or persuade our hearts in those moments? Look at verse 20. **1 John 3:20**

...for whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything.

In those moments of doubt, John wants us to remind our hearts, that God is greater than our hearts. We are not saved because we feel saved. We are saved because God says we are. John is teaching us that we can be saved and yet not feel confident we are.

It's important to remember the context of the letter here. John is speaking to the person who has the objective evidence that they're saved, but they lack the subjective experience. The facts point to their salvation, but their feelings haven't yet caught up. When the facts point to a life of obedience and faith and love, but our hearts are telling us that we are not or might not really be saved, remember – God is greater than our hearts.

I often use a GPS app on my phone when driving to new places. But sometimes, when I'm in an area without good cell coverage way out in the wilderness or I'm driving through a long tunnel, then I can't trust the GPS to be accurate. My GPS might tell me that I'm way off course or heading in the wrong direction. In those times, I have to look elsewhere for the truth.

Brothers and sisters, when our souls feel like we're going through the wilderness or a dark tunnel, in those times, we need to trust in God, who is greater and more reliable than my own heart. In the end, God's judgment is the one that really matters. He is the Judge, not my feelings or whatever my heart wants to tell me.

The apostle Paul makes a similar point in 1 Corinthians 4 where he says...

1 Corinthians 4:3-4

But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. **4** For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me.

He says, it's not the opinions of others that counts. It's not even my own opinion of myself. It is the Lord who judges me.

Some of us spend our whole lives trapped in our pursuit of the approval of others. Others of us don't care what others think as much as we care about our own sense of self-worth. And Paul says, don't put your efforts into pleasing others or trying to appease your own heart. It is God whose opinions count. Take your eyes off yourself and look to Him. He is greater than our hearts. His judgment is the only one that matters in the end.

And God is not only greater because He can overcome my hard heart, He is greater because He knows everything.

I think the idea here, in the flow of John's argument, is that God sees the 'real you.' God knows that you are His child, and that what you really are will one day appear when Jesus returns. He knows the depths of your motives deeper than you know yourself. He knows that for the Christian, your most fundamental desires are for what is good and true and right. It feels a bit trite to say it this way, but in a deep way, God sees the real potential you have as His child.

I think of the story of Peter who was one of Jesus's disciples. The night before Jesus's crucifixion, Peter denied Jesus three times. There, in the courtyard of the high priest, by a roaring fire, Peter had sworn, "I don't know the man" (Mark 14:71). And then, after the rooster crowed, Peter ran out and wept bitterly.

His heart condemned him. He probably thought, in that moment, he'd seen his true self: I'm a failure, a backstabber, a betrayer. His heart had spoken.

But Jesus saw the true Peter. He knows everything. He is greater than our heart. So, after His resurrection, Jesus built another fire and called Peter to it. Three times, He asked Peter, "Do you love me more than these?" Peter said, "You know that I love you."

There are subtle nuances to the story but notice this: Jesus saw something wonderful in Peter. He saw the bold evangelist, the one who would one day be beaten and imprisoned for Christ and rejoice because he was considered worthy to suffer for His Savior. Peter's heart couldn't see those things, but Jesus could. Jesus told Peter, feed my sheep. Tend my lambs. Feed my sheep.

You see, God knows you better than you know yourself. He sees what you could be, what you're called to be, what you've been redeemed to become. And He also sees your truest intention, your innermost heart's desire. He sees the new nature He's placed within you. God is greater than our hearts, and He knows everything.

And then, John goes on to say, when our hearts are persuaded, when they are not condemning us, there are a couple results that come about. Look at verse 21...

1 John 3:21

Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God;

So the first result we see from having assurance of our salvation is this – confidence before God.

Confidence

God does not desire that His children walk through life hanging our heads or wallowing about in doubt and despair. He doesn't want us imagining the sound of a beating heart from our past sins.

Eugene Peterson puts it this way in The Message, which is like a commentary on or paraphrase of the Bible.

1 John 3:21

And friends, once that's taken care of, and we're no longer accusing or condemning ourselves, we're bold and free before God!"

We are bold and free before God. There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. We are free; no longer enslaved to a guilty conscience, plagued by doubt and insecurity.

My kids feel this kind of freedom when they're with Grandma...they know they can do no wrong at Grandma's house, they know the love she has for them, and they're so secure in it, they feel a tremendous freedom and boldness when they're there.

Johns wants us to know that kind of freedom before God. It is a wonder and a privilege that God calls us to enter into His presence with boldness in our time of need. We are bold and free before Him. Which leads us to the second result...

Answered prayer

Johns wants us to see that our subjective experience of God's salvation gives us confidence before God and the conviction that our prayers are heard and answered.

1 John 3:22

and whatever we ask we receive from him,

Of course, John's words here can be abused and wrongly taken to mean that we can just kind of treat God like a genie who grants us wishes and has to give us whatever we want. We know that's not the case. We have to take into account the rest of what the Scriptures have to say about prayer. Even a couple chapters over, John circles back to this same idea and writes.

1 John 5:14

And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything *according to his will* he hears us.

So our prayers need to be in accordance with the will of God; not just whatever strikes us at any given moment.

But I think we can be too quick at times to run past what this verse is seeking to give us. I think John wants us to rejoice in the fact that our prayers really are heard by God, and that He really does answer them because we really are His children.

So when you as a Christian ask God for something that you know He promises to give you – help in your battle with sin, faith in times of doubt, grace to endure suffering – know that in those times, God hears and will give what you seek in His time and in His way. He is a good Father who desires good for us as His children.

Don't believe when your heart tells you that God wouldn't want to bless you anyway. Or that He doesn't want you to be too happy. There is this lie out there that our hearts can fall into which says, "God won't answer your prayers because He knows you don't deserve it." Friends, God is pleased with you in Christ. He is not looking for opportunities to thwart you or trip you up. He wants good for you. And when you ask for things in accordance with His will, He is pleased to grant those requests.

So what do your prayers look like? Do you pray with a confidence that God really will answer your requests? Do your prayers show that kind of boldness?

Mutual abiding

The third result John shows us is what we might call a mutual abiding. Look at verse 24...

1 John 3:24

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.

When we show the objective evidence of obedience, God abides in us and we in Him. It's been said that God is a home for the Christian and the Christian is a home for God. And we can know that He abides in us because He has given us His Spirit. John will talk about the Spirit's role in working out truth and love in chapter 4.

But here, he wants us to recognize that we can know the assurance of our salvation because the Spirit of God is within us as believers. We no longer walk by the flesh but by the Spirit. God indwells us and intercedes for us, He convicts us of sin, and opens our eyes to truth of the Scriptures. The Spirit helps us and guides us and gives strength and grace in our walk with the Lord. He abides in us and we in Him.

So what has John taught us in this portion of his letter?

He wants us to have confidence in our salvation. We really can have assurance that we're saved. But our feelings alone don't determine our salvation.

You see, God wants everyone who has the objective evidence to feel the subjective assurance and confidence in Him. But He doesn't want us or the false teachers in that day to feel the subjective confidence without the objective evidence in their lives. The Facts come before the Feelings.

I'm so thankful that the Bible is clear that we can have assurance. We do not need to look to the church or the Pope or a priest to give assurance to us. We don't have to give money to buy it or do certain acts of penance to show God that we're really sorry.

We can look to the objective evidence which in turn gives the subjective assurance – that the work of Jesus has been applied to me. Brothers and sisters, God is greater than your heart. You can know and have confidence that God hears your prayers and that the Spirit of God really abides in you and you in Him.

So let us have confidence and boldness and joy... now and forever.

Let's pray...