

Assurance for an Unsure Heart

(1 John 3: [18], 19–24)

What is True & What to Do:

The Bible teaches that it is possible to be saved and yet have doubts and become discouraged. In such cases, look to God and confront your doubt by taking Scripture's three-fold test: 1) Do you have an explicit belief in the Son of God, Jesus Christ? 2) Do you love and truly obey God? 3) Do you have a love for others? The saved say, "Yes!"

Background:¹

The first-century Gnostics confused the early Christians regarding who was truly God's child. John does not want you confused! As a pastor, John knows that despite all he has said in his letter, there will still be some who feel condemned in their own eyes and who are therefore depressed by this and lack assurance. This self-condemnation can be due to several factors. It can be a matter of disposition; some people are just more introspective and melancholy than others. It may be a health question; how a person feels inevitably affects his/her thoughts. It may be due to a specific sin. It may be due to circumstances. But whatever the cause, the problem is a real one and is quite widespread. How is a believer to deal with such doubt? How can he/she overcome depression? John apparently recognized this problem as a real one in his time and wisely interrupts his argument at this point to deal with it.

Over the past two weeks, we have looked at two indicators of spiritual rebirth. First, the test of "doing what is right" (righteousness) in 1 Jn. 3:4–9. John sounded a somber warning: "Anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God." Such a person is of the devil! Let no man deceive you! John gives this warning to all who have not been born again. The spiritually dead (lost people) are to turn from all forms of sin and seek the Savior. Second, the test of "loving one another" in deed and truth.

How does a Christian deal with doubt? There is only one answer: by knowledge of God's Word. The Christian must simply take himself in hand and confront himself with what he knows to be true concerning God and God's work in his life. In other words, faith (which is the opposite of doubt), being based on knowledge, must be fed by it. This is the point that John develops at the close of this third chapter. We do not indulge in our feelings or our emotions; we seize our minds and trust in God's love and promises!

1.) God is greater than the condemning human heart (v. 19–20)

- When your heart hurts, and your conscience condemns you, look to God. Our assurance is anchored in God and God alone, never in our own ability to generate feelings of confidence. So, look to Christ and the gospel because He "is greater than our conscience, and He knows all things."² God is mightier than your heart.
- In this [the love and obedience we exhibit, v. 11–18], we will know that we belong to the truth. We will reassure our hearts in His presence whenever our hearts condemn us, because (1) God is greater than our hearts, and (2) God knows all things.
 - Take the three-fold test we have already seen in 1 John:
 - Belief: Do I really believe rightly about Jesus?
 - Obedience: Am I really obeying God as I ought?
 - Love: Is my love for others what it should be?
 - The Bible teaches that unbelievers do not concern themselves with the right beliefs about obedience to, or love for, God.
 - So, how do you reassure your heart? First, remember what God has said concerning His love and its expression in Jesus Christ (both in deed and truth). Second, look to God's merciful promises of forgiveness and remember He is trustworthy irrespective of your own doubts and misgivings.
 - NOTE: The NIV makes the verb tense present ("we know") when it is actually future ("We will know"). In other words, John is equipping his church, planning for a future episode when self-doubt and self-incrimination might paralyze them.

2.) Blessings of a clean conscience: confidence before God and knowing that He hears our prayers (v. 21–23).

- There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Rom 8:1, 31–34). Seeing who I am in Christ, I have confidence and boldness. This confidence before God, resulting from a clear conscience in Christ, provides motivation and assurance as I approach Father God in prayer: "If our conscience doesn't condemn us, we have confidence before God and can receive whatever we ask from Him because we keep His commands and do what is pleasing in His sight" (v. 21–22).

¹James Montgomery Boice, *The Epistles of John: An Expositional Commentary*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004), 98–99. Background excerpts edited and adapted.

² Daniel L. Akin, *Exalting Jesus in 1,2,3 John* (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2014), 1 Jn 3:20.

- The Greek phrase literally says, “confidence toward God,” meaning that confidence by which we turn trustingly toward Him. It is one fruit of justification in the Christian life (Rom. 5:2).
- Confidence before God has at least two specific implications in John’s letter: (1) on the day of His judgment and (2) in prayer. Ex: “And now, dear children, continue in Him, so that when he appears we may be confident and unashamed before Him at his coming” (2:28) and “Love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment” (4:17). In this instance (3:21) and in the last of the letter (5:14), the term refers to confidence in prayer.
- Now that we are confident before God, Christians can pray confidently, meaning their prayers will be answered. This is not just for some Christians in some instances, but in every instance for any Christian who (1) does what pleases Him and who (2) obeys His commandments; however, you will not always get whatever you want. Prayer is answered according to God’s will. He is not a genie.
- Our request made in prayer flows from a heart and life that, first, delights in keeping His commands and, second, does what pleases Him. These provide the crucial context for the promise we will look at in a few weeks in 1 John: “Whenever we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears whatever we ask, we know that we have what we have asked Him for” (5:14–15).
- John is not inventing any new belief or doctrine at this point. He is only taking at face value what he had learned from Jesus. Jesus said, “I tell you the truth, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. Until now, you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete” (John 16:23–24). In these verses, the phrases “keep his commandments,” “do what pleases him,” and “ask ... in my name” point to an attitude in which the will of the one praying is subjected to the will of the Father.³
- “Believers with clear consciences, confident access, and obedient lives that please Christ can be assured that God will hear and answer their prayers for their good and for His glory. After all, I am a trusting child coming to a loving Father who knows all my sins and imperfections and still loves me and accepts me anyway in His Son.”⁴

- God’s command is “that we believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ.” It means, “to trust or rely on.” Jesus’ “name” conveys His person and work and all that He is and accomplishes. That Jesus is the “Son” emphasizes His eternal deity and unique relationship to the Father. “Jesus” is His human name, equivalent to the Hebrew name Joshua. It means “Yahweh saves” or “Yahweh is salvation.” And “Christ” means “Anointed One,” the Messiah of God. To believe in the name of God’s Son, Jesus Christ, is to place your trust, your faith, in Him and only Him and all that He is—the divine Son, the incarnate Deity, the sinless human, the perfect atonement for our sin, the Messianic Savior. You trust all of Him, not some, part, or even most. You trust the biblical Christ, or you trust in no Christ at all.⁵

3.) Remain in God and know that He remains in you by the gift of His Spirit (v.24)

- By the Holy Spirit, whom God has given us as a gift, we know that God abides in us, and we abide in God. And, as a habit of his new life in Christ, the one who abides in God continually keeps His commands. John’s point is that keeping God’s commands and abiding in God always go together. Having the Spirit of God and abiding by or remaining in God always go together.
- Verse 24 is the first direct mention of the Holy Spirit in 1 John. This Third Person of the triune God is essential to God’s abiding in us and our abiding in God. He is crucial to helping us discern the false spirits that do not confess that Jesus is from God (cf. 4:3).
- The Spirit, whose presence is the test of Christ’s living in us, manifests himself in our life and conduct. He inspires us to confess Jesus as the Christ come in the flesh, as John immediately proceeds to show. He empowers us to live righteously and to love our brothers and sisters. To set our hearts at rest, we must look for evidence of the Spirit’s work 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, and the evidence of the indwelling is the gift of the Spirit.⁶

APPLICATION:

- Have faith in Jesus; obey/please Jesus; be filled by the Holy Spirit. Look not to yourself but to God’s love and promises for assurance.

³ James Montgomery Boice, *The Epistles of John: An Expositional Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004), 103.

⁴ Daniel L. Akin, *Exalting Jesus in 1,2,3 John* (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2014), 1 Jn 3:21–22.

⁵ Daniel L. Akin, *Exalting Jesus in 1,2,3 John* (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2014), 1 Jn 3:23.

⁶ Daniel L. Akin, *Exalting Jesus in 1,2,3 John* (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2014), 1 Jn 3:24. John Stott explains the Spirit’s role in our abiding in his work, *The Letters of John*, 154–55.