

The Way of Assurance

1 John 3:19–24

June 18, 2017

A strange phenomenon exists in churches across the globe. Multitudes that have not a qualm of doubt about their salvation *should* because they give no evidence of the new birth. While many others struggle with assurance when they *shouldn't* because Christ has saved them.

We come to Christ with an array of personalities, range of mental and emotional wiring, and breadth of influences and backgrounds. While the gospel affects those things it does not eradicate them. One's personality as a Christian should have something of the aroma of Christ and His love, but it's still the same personality. Saul of Tarsus believed the gospel yet still had the intense personality that characterized him as a Pharisee intent on destroying Christianity, but now *in Christ*, the intensity turned toward pursuing others with the gospel. Instead of bitter hatred, the love of Jesus colored his intensity.

In other words, if my normal emotional wiring tends toward highs and lows, then as a new creation in Christ, I still possess that emotional wiring. The highs and lows are wrapped into my DNA. As I grow in Christ, those emotional patterns that might be predictable about me begin to gradually adjust to some degree. Not that they totally leave—nor should they, but I'm learning how to submit all of my life to Christ's power and depend upon His grace and sufficiency. His strength is made perfect in my weakness.

That's where the matter of assurance of salvation comes into sharp focus. We're never to just assume that we're Christians. That's eternally dangerous. We're to know that we're Christians; we're to experience assurance that we are in Christ. Our personalities, wiring, and background do not vacate the premises when it comes to assurance. They continue to affect the way that we perceive and process the Christian faith. So how do we work through who we are while coming to terms with assurance?

Some treat assurance as though it is a decision that we make. Just decide or pray a prayer of assurance or come forward at the appropriate time, and presto, assurance happens. But that's not biblical or realistic. *Assurance is not a static position or a*

decision but an active process in which we experience confidence with God. What does this process look like? That's what we'll investigate with our text.

1. God conquers the heart to bring assurance.

Think about John's layered argument regarding assurance. "By this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments" (2:3). "The one who loves his brother abides in the Light and there is no cause of stumbling in him" (2:10). "If you know that He is righteous, you know that everyone also who practices righteousness is born of Him" (2:29). "By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious: anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor the one who does not love his brother" (3:10). "We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love abides in death" (3:14). Obedience, love, and practicing righteousness are hallmarks of assurance that we belong to Christ. Do we just do those things once in a very decisive manner? Certainly not, but rather, we practice obedience, love, and righteousness as *evidences* that we are in Christ.

But what happens to us in the process of life as we give attention to obedience, loving one another, and practicing righteousness? We blow it. We struggle with obedience in some area of life. We can easily love those who love us but find it very difficult to love someone with a snarky attitude or who talks too loud or who boasts. We take a look at our righteousness-level and the tank seems pretty low. So do we lose assurance because we're not measuring up to the level that we think we should?

That's realistic, isn't it? If we're honest with ourselves, don't we admit that we have those times when obedience, love, and righteousness seem to be abstract ideas instead of concrete realities with us?

Notice how John considers this issue. In 3:11–18, he fathoms this matter of what it means to love by contrasting Cain's hatred with the love of Christ shown in laying down His life for us. Then John writes, ". . . we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But whoever has the world's goods, and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him?" Does that sting? Don't we sometime wrap our fists around our stuff and turn the other way with someone in need?

Yes, it happens, so John gives this tender exhortation, “Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and in truth.” Look what happens next.

“By this we shall know that we are of the truth and [shall] reassure our heart before him” (ESV). The opening words, **“By this,”** were also used in verse 16, as well as 2:3 and 5, and 3:10. It’s John’s way of gathering what he’s stated and bringing it forward. *By this* I mean that he’s not abandoning his previous subject in verses 11–18; instead, he’s extending the argument; he’s carrying it forward. Here’s what I mean. The intense conviction of failing to lay down our lives for the brethren and to love in such a way that we withhold nothing from those in need as he’s just stated, disrupts our spiritual equilibrium. It unsettles us. So John tells us how we’ll come to the place of once again walking in assurance and confidence in the Lord. Surprisingly, it’s not by the level of our performance. He doesn’t say, ‘Work harder and do better and you’ll have assurance.’ We can do great obedience, love, and righteousness, and yet still see more that we could do. Those markers *simply give evidence* that we’re in Christ. They do not, in themselves, actually give us assurance. Assurance must come from the Lord. That’s where John takes us. Notice how he makes the case.

“By this we shall know [future middle, so ‘we shall ourselves know,’ so he indicates a process] that we are of the truth and assure [‘shall assure,’ another future indicating the process continues] our heart before him; for whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything.” Why does our heart condemn us? Sometimes our hearts bog us down with guilt over sins, failure to obey as we should, acts of disobedience, failing at loving others, selfishness, etc. When that happens, especially when our personality wiring is pretty intense, our hearts try to exercise eternal control over us to subjugate the reign of Christ in grace in our hearts. Our personalities take over, recklessly slinging accusations of doubt and unbelief at the sight of our failures. Of course, the adversary adds to those accusations. Our hearts betray us. Something in the *feeling department* of our minds goes astray from confidence in Christ. We wonder if we’ll ever recover. So we get desperate. We try to work up good feelings. We double-down on doing things to achieve assurance. But it’s not found in any of those things.

Look what John tells us happens in such cases with those who are in Christ. **“For whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and He knows everything.”** Yes, He knows our sins, disobedience, loveless ways, selfishness, and far more than we even know about ourselves. He knows everything. But He also knows this, as Paul told Timothy after describing some who went astray from the truth by saying that the resurrection of the dead had already happened, “Nevertheless, the firm foundation of God stands, having this seal, ‘The Lord knows those who are His’” (2 Tim 2:19). So does He let us flounder in condemnation through our betraying hearts? **“For whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart.”** He takes action to conquer the wavering heart to bring sweet confidence and renewed assurance.

And how does He conquer the heart to bring assurance? He takes us into back into His big-hearted grace of forgiveness through Christ. He shows us the power of the cross once again because in the flurry of condemnation we’ve lost sight of what Jesus has done. We’ve latched onto works-righteousness once again, thinking that if we could just do enough we’d find assurance. But no, it’s not in what we do that we find assurance; it’s in what Jesus Christ has already done in His death and resurrection. The Lord brings that truth—that saving Person—back to the mind and washes over our doubts and strips away the condemnation.

So why is this assurance so important? Without it we’re paralyzed spiritually.

2. Confidence with God leads to more intense God-dependence

In a sense, assurance of salvation that gives us confidence with God greases the tracks of our spiritual lives. Without assurance, the normal patterns of Christian living feel like finger nails running across a chalkboard. We pray but not with confidence. We obey but without joy. We attempt to please God but only out of desperate necessity instead of enjoying His pleasure. In other words, without the kind of assurance that John speaks of, we can go through the motions of Christianity without its joy and deep satisfaction.

So John tells us, **“Beloved [note the tenderness], if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God.”** When the weight of condemnation is lifted, confidence with God abounds. That word **“confidence”** is the same term used in Hebrews 4:16, “Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that

we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” But what gives us the confidence to do so? It’s that “we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, [so] let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin” (Heb 4:14–15). So condemnation is not removed because we happen to live a little better than we used to live. It’s removed through Christ who took our sin and guilt in His own body on the cross. Our confidence before God, then, is only because we’ve seen in a fresh way what Christ Jesus has done on our behalf and believed Him. We live in that confidence when we go to the Lord in prayer.

“And whatever we ask we receive from Him.” Paralyzed assurance leads to prayerlessness. No wonder the devil would gladly berate us with condemnation! If he can keep us from prayer then he keeps us from that communion with the Lord and growing reliance upon the Lord. So we run to assurance in Christ that we might pray with confidence.

Notice that John states categorically, **“Whatever we ask we receive from Him.”** When we lack assurance we look to God as though He were a miser who only feigns generosity but lacks it. Assurance lavished upon us primes the pump of our requests and opens our arms to receive from Him. Confidence to make requests of God is not brashness but the right that belongs to us because Jesus stands at the throne to welcome us, and our requests. He encourages us to ask so that we might receive.

This confidence is also evident by our treasuring Christ’s commands. **“Whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments.”** That word **“keep”** means to watch over or to pay attention to or to treasure. It’s not the obedience of a fearful subject to an all-powerful tyrant but the treasuring obedience of a loyal, loving child to a gracious, generous Father. If our hearts condemn us we might obey but we only do so because we fear something bad will happen to us. That’s the cold heart of a legalist and not the warm heart of family love. So our praying is affected by our obedience. John is not giving us a *quid pro quo*, ‘you do this and God will do that,’ but rather obedience is the fruit of a life experiencing assurance in Christ. Confidence with God becomes more and more evident by treasuring His commandments.

John adds one more layer to how this confidence with God leads to more intense God-dependence: “**because we keep His commandments and do the things that are pleasing in His sight.**” He changes his preposition in this phrase from the simple way that it’s translated to a word that carries more intensity. We “do the things that are pleasing before (*enopion*) His face.” In other words, confidence with God makes us conscious that we’re living life before God’s face.

Yet, can we even begin to imagine such a thing? Pathetic, inconsistent, weak, faltering, struggling as we are, when He conquers condemnation in our hearts and His grace reigns, we realize that our standing with God is not on the basis of our performance but *totally dependent upon the work of Jesus Christ*. We live before God’s face, recognizing that “**God . . . knows all things,**” including our hidden weaknesses, yet our confidence is not in ourselves but in Christ.

So how does that impact us? How do we respond when we know that nothing is hidden from God yet He breathes confidence and assurance into us by bringing to fresh light the effectiveness of His Son on our behalf? We ask and keep asking, and we receive and keep receiving. We keep treasuring His commandments while seeking to live God-pleasing lives before His face. Assurance doesn’t make us cocky but humbles us and motivates us to pray, obey, and please God as we live with more intense God-dependence.

3. The way of assurance follows His commandment

John has just spoken of our treasuring God’s commandments as those who have confidence through Him conquering condemnation in our hearts. Now he zeroes in on one commandment. And yet this one commandment has two prongs that inevitably cannot be separated. “[**And**] **This is His commandment, that we believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, just as He commanded us. The one who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him. We know by this that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us.**”

I’m referring to this as “the way of assurance” because that’s how John has posed it. The conjunction “**and**” that is in the Greek but not in the NASB translation, shows that he’s joining the previous declarations—God conquering the heart to bring assurance and

this new confidence with God leading to more intense God-dependence. Now he gives an action that he calls “**His commandment,**” as the *process* or the way that assurance continues in us. Here it is: believe in Jesus and love one another. That’s really the essence of the Christian life; it’s both tables of the Law rolled into one commandment that is practiced by grace.

Believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ. Rather than the typical present tense for believing as in John 3:16 and Romans 10:10, he uses more of an urgent, take action now tense (aorist). Believe in Jesus and don’t budge from Him. Believe, rely upon, trust in, rest in, look to Jesus and no other for your standing with God. To believe “**in the name of His Son Jesus Christ**” means the whole person of Christ revealed in the gospel, including what He did in His saving work. Believing is focused upon Him. It considers what He’s done; ponders the wonder that God’s Son died in our place bearing the wrath of God; relives with awe that truth of His resurrection from the dead. To believe in His name is to count on His promises in the gospel.

Here’s the point. The way of assurance is not found in working up some kind of mental gymnastics so that you feel better about yourself. It’s found by anchoring your trust in Jesus. It’s found by seeing what He accomplished on your behalf in His death and resurrection. It’s found by relying with satisfaction in Jesus and the God-satisfying finality of His work. That’s why we regularly read God’s Word, meditate upon it, pray through it, gather with the body of Christ to study this gospel and worship the Christ of the gospel, fellowship around it, share it, and discuss it. As we do, we settle more and more into the way of assurance through believing in Jesus.

Love one another. The gospel of Christ wraps us into relationships with fellow believers—the body of Christ. This gospel is worked out and into relationships as we learn to love one another through the myriad idiosyncrasies of personalities and life. He can command this kind of love because He gives it to us through the gospel. As Pastor Matt put it last week, “Our spiritual pulse is love for other Christians. If you love, you show life.”

Assurance, the subject of John’s writing, is not found in isolation from other people. You don’t hide in a cave and hope for assurance. Instead, John tells us to believe in the

Lord Jesus and love His people. In the process of believing and loving, assurance grows into a lively reality in daily life.

Assurance is not a static position. It's an active process that we enter into together in the body of Christ. We're helping one another with assurance as we believe the gospel together, sing the gospel, talk about the gospel, and apply the gospel. Plus as that gospel gives us power by the Spirit we love one another, and so get involved in encouraging, admonishing, serving, loving, forgiving, showing kindness, bearing burdens, and accepting one another. Assurance grows in this atmosphere.

What follows believing Jesus and loving one another? We become the people that John calls, "the ones who keep on treasuring His commandments." That's now our life. And so we're the ones who abide in Him and He in us. John has already described true believers as those abiding in the Lord (2:5–6; 24–25; 27; 3:6, 9). So he's not embarking upon new ground but reiterating that abiding in Christ means that He abides in you. We can go on treasuring His commandments because we're branches living in dependence upon the Vine. His life is being lived through us (John 15:1–11). We live in relationship to Him. We find Him as our very life and joy.

How do we know that He abides in us, that we truly belong to Christ? **"We know by this that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us."** Martyn Lloyd-Jones quaintly describes this gift of the Spirit in the believer as, "A disturbance, something, someone interfering in our lives. We are going along," he writes, "and suddenly we are arrested and pulled up, and we find ourselves different. . . . There is a disturbance, an interruption to the normal ordinary tenor of life. There is something different, an awareness of being dealt with" [*Children of God*, 141]. And what a glorious disturbance!

Do you know that sense that he describes by the witness of the Spirit (Rom 8:16) that interrupts and interferes with ordinary life so that you're moved toward godliness, obedience, trusting Christ, loving the body? Do you find yourself wanting the Word, desiring to worship, longing for fellowship with believers, being filled with wonder at what God is doing around you? Do you have conviction of sin where there used to be none? Do you feel a longing to know Christ and love Him more? Do you sense an inner urging to follow Christ with more faithfulness? No wonder a little later John writes, "By

this we know that we abide in Him and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit” (4:13).

When we believe Jesus and love one another, the practice of abiding in Him grows as does that consciousness of the Holy Spirit actively working in us. Consequently, assurance gets strengthened. So John doesn’t call for assurance in passivity or a spiritual vacuum but in the process of believing Jesus and loving one another.

That’s the way of assurance. Are you walking in it?