

The Right Kind of Confidence 1 John 2:15-17

April 30, 2017

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It is very difficult to have the right amount of self-confidence. Many folks are over confident and have an exaggerated opinion of their own abilities. Surveys find that almost 90% of American adults believe they are more intelligent than the average person. These folks maybe think like Samuel Goldwyn who said, "I am not always right, but I am never wrong." We sometimes encounter this ultra-confidence. Someone said a good salesman is one who enters a sales contest wondering "Who will finish second." Other people, however, almost always seem to lack confidence. This often prevents them from using their talents and abilities God has given them. These folks are unable to look another person in the eye during a conversation. Arturo Toscanini was a great orchestra conductor. He sought to balance the confidence of his performers this way: Before the concert he would go up to the soloist and say, "You are not very good, I am not very good." If the conductor senses he had succeeded in deflating an oversized ego, he would say to the performer as they walk out on stage, "We are not very good, but the others are worse, let's go give a great concert."

Friends, as we have explored the book of 1 John, our focus has been on the problem of over-confidence. There are many folks who think they are in good spiritual health just because they attended church sometimes and have some religious beliefs. Surveys find two-thirds of Americans believe they will end up in heaven. Well, that is God's call and only He knows the real number. However, I tend to think that is an inflated percentage, and that many folks are overly optimistic when it comes to their eternal destination. John insists it is only genuine faith in Jesus that enables one to become a true Christian. All through this letter, the Apostle John is popping bubbles of false assurance and over-confidence. However, he is also a wise and caring pastor. He knows that some folks need their confidence built up. He has been asking really tough questions: Are you obeying God? Are you committing sin? Are you loving other Christians? Any honest person has to say, "Sometimes I don't obey God, sometimes I sin,

sometimes I fail to love others as I should." Those with sensitive consciences will be very troubled. Their answers might cause them to question if their faith is genuine. They might wonder if they really are a Christian.

Yet, as I have said before, my goal is to destroy false assurance, and build up true assurance. And I think John has the same goal. And that is why he wrote our text today. Our journey through the letter of 1 John brings us to 3:19-24. Let's pause and pray God would use His word this morning to help us have the right kind of confidence.

A teacher asked her fourth-grade class, "What is the difference between 'conscious' and 'conscience'?" One boy raised his hand and replied, "Conscious is when you are aware of something and conscience is when you wish you weren't." John's description of a troubled conscience is in **3:20** (CSB) *Even if our conscience condemns us, God is greater than our conscience, and He knows all things.* Other versions say God is greater than our "heart" or "feelings." Back in 3:9 John told us that a Christian doesn't practice sin and cannot practice sin. He knows some of his readers will think "Wow: I know I sin. I don't rob banks, but I sometimes get angry with the kids when I should not. I sometimes have lustful thoughts. I sometimes worry about health problems instead of praying about them. I don't always speak up about my faith in Christ when I have a chance to do that at school. I wonder, am I really a Christian?" I suspect most of us have had those types of thoughts at some point. Those are not fun thoughts. Shakespeare wrote, "The conscience doth make cowards of us all." A troubled conscience can bring a lot of pain to our souls. It can cause us to doubt the promise of God and Satan can use it to really discourage us.

Again, there are some people whose conscience doesn't seem to bother them at all, even if they commit terrible crimes. A group of teenagers assaulted and killed a woman in New York City. When they were arrested, the boys laughed and joked about the incident. The police chief said they appeared to have no conscience at all. On the other hand, some people feel badly about killing even a mosquito. That is the overly

sensitive conscience. Back in 1895, President Grover Cleveland received a letter from a young man with a conscience like that. It read: *“To His Majesty, President Cleveland. (We already have a hint of a problem) Dear Mr. President, I am in a dreadful state of mind and I thought I would write and tell you all. About two years ago I used two postage stamps that had been used before on letters. I did not realize what I had done until recently. My mind is constantly turning on that subject and it is my focus night and day. Dear Mr. President, will you please forgive me. I promise I will never do it again. Enclosed find the cost of three stamps. Please forgive me, for I was but 13 years old and I am heartily sorry for what I have done. From one your subjects.”* Friends, because our conscience can be either very “under-sensitive” or “over-sensitive,” John says, “don’t trust your conscience, trust God.”

1 John 3:19, 20a (CSB) *This is how we will know we belong to the truth and will convince our conscience in His presence, even if our conscience condemns us. Or as the NLT puts it, 1 John 3:19, 20a Our actions will show that we belong to the truth, so we will be confident when we stand before God. Even if we feel guilty, God is greater than our feelings.* In other words, if God says “You are okay, you are my child,” it doesn’t matter what other people think, and it doesn’t even matter what you think or feel. The conscience is a valuable tool that God has given each of us. However, it is not infallible. It makes mistakes. Instead of relying on our conscience or feelings, God has given us objective criteria to help know whether or not we are genuine Christians. Consider **1 John 3:23, 24a** (CSB) *Now this is His command: that we believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ, and love one another as He commanded us. The one who keeps His commands remains in Him, and He in him.*

Thus, two questions:

1. Do you believe in Jesus? This is more than merely believing Jesus was a historical figure like George Washington. Do you believe in His name, trusting He is your Savior and Lord?
2. Do you love other Christians?

If so, you are obeying God’s command and that is evidence that you really do believe in Jesus and that your faith is genuine. So, if doubts start swirling in your head, these are facts on which you can restore your confidence. Now, maybe

you are thinking, “But Pastor Dan what is this loving other Christians part? I thought we were saved by grace through faith alone. Just believing in Jesus makes me a Christian, doesn’t it?” It certainly does. Anyone who believes in, trusts in, Jesus Christ, is a Christian and is saved for eternity. However, loving other believers, John says, is a very basic command that anyone who really believes in Jesus, and has been born of God will obey. “Well, okay, but what about the person who believes in Jesus, but doesn’t love?” I think John would say, “Don’t be silly. Anyone who really believes in Jesus, will love other Christians, not perfectly, but genuinely.” If someone says he is a Christian, but doesn’t love other believers, that person needs to examine his soul to make sure he really is trusting in Jesus Christ.

Then John says, there is also a more subjective, inward basis for assurance. **3:24b** (CSB) *And the way we know that He remains in us is from the Spirit He has given us.* Friends, the presence of God’s Spirit in our lives, is clear proof our faith is real and that we truly belong to the Lord. Friends, it is very important that we know that to be true. Knowing Jesus is my Savior. Knowing my sins are forgiven. Knowing I will receive eternal life. Are just about the most important things anyone can know. Now, some folks think it is presumptuous for me to say, “I know I will receive eternal life.” Someone once told me, “Pastor Dan, somewhere in the Bible it says, “If a person claims he knows he is going to heaven, he will end up in hell.” Wrong! That is not found anywhere in the Bible. We can have confidence that we have eternal life and will be in heaven after we die. But we need to make sure we have a legitimate basis for that confidence. We cannot, as someone did for me, hold up a baptismal certificate and say, “This is how I know I will be in heaven.” Nor can I say, “I know I will be in heaven because I am a member of Chisholm Baptist Church, or because I have a piece of paper which says I repeated a prayer on September 16, 1996.” The only reason any of us will be in heaven is because we are trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ. John says, our profession of faith in Jesus, our love for other Christians, and God’s Spirit inside of us are the signs that we are trusting in Jesus Christ and remain, or abide, or live, in Him.

Okay, what are some of the practical implications of being confident we belong to the

Lord and knowing that we have eternal life through Jesus Christ? Here are four benefits.

Number one, this confidence helps us when we pray and come before the Lord. **3:21, 22** (CSB) *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's basic point is that we should never be afraid to approach the Lord. Do you remember in "The Wizard of Oz," that it was not just the Cowardly Lion, but also Dorothy, the Scarecrow and the Tin Man....and Toto too, who were afraid to approach the Great Oz and ask for help? Friends, God is far greater than the Wizard pretended to be, but we don't need to be afraid to ask Him for help. He is indeed the Creator and Ruler of the universe, but He is also our Father. Though we must never forget that He is the Creator and we are His creatures, we also need to remember that as Christians we are His children. Thus, we should not hesitate to bring our concerns and requests to Him. No matter how difficult our problem is, or how small and dumb our concern seems, we should never hesitate to pray. We can be confident God is able and willing to act on our behalf. Or as **Hebrews 4:16** puts it: *Let us come boldly to the throne of our gracious God. There we will receive his mercy, and we will find grace to help us when we need it most.*

Number two, our confidence we know the Lord will sustain us, keep us afloat, even when it seems we are overwhelmed by problems. Folks, trouble and tragedies have a way of intruding into our lives. We get let go from a job. Our parents file for divorce. The doctor says the biopsy shows cancer. Maybe at the same time our soul is parched. We are in a spiritual drought and don't feel close to God. We try to pray and read the Bible, but that doesn't seem to help. We find ourselves asking, "If God loves me, why is He letting this happen?" Friends, in those times, we can still say, "I know I am a Christian, I know I am a child of God." We need to remember that children don't always understand their parent's love. A mom insists her son eats peas and carrots instead of Snickers bars for dinner, and the boy might think, "If my mom really loved me, she would let me eat what I want." Often children just don't understand. It is because parents love their children that they do not let kids simply do what they want to do.

As God's children, we need to remember that it is because God loves us that He chooses to answer our prayers according to His will rather than ours. The fact we don't understand what God is doing, does not mean He doesn't love us. So even when tough times come, even when tragedy strikes, even when God seems very far away, we can still be confident in His love. If I know I am a child of God, I also know, based on Romans 8:28, that everything that happens in my life will be used for God's glory and for my ultimate good. Yes, His ways are higher than ours. Sometimes His plans are so high that when we look up we barely see a speck, if anything at all. We have no idea how the Lord could possibly bring good things into our life out of our current situation. Yet, if we know God is our Father, we can be confident. We know He cares for His children. He has a plan and when He carries it out, as He surely will, we will be able to say, "Lord I am glad you did things your way, rather than how I thought you should do it." Having this type of confidence allows us to enjoy each day and sleep each night.

Number three, knowing we belong to the Lord means we can have a "Christ-confidence." Instead of always encouraging folks to increase their self-confidence, I think it is far better to inspire Christ-confidence, and it is important that we understand the difference. Each of us needs to have an accurate and realistic picture of himself or herself. **Romans 12:3** says, (NLT) *Don't think you are better than you really are. Be honest in your evaluation of yourselves, measuring yourselves by the faith God has given us.* Yet, self-confident folks are really not honest in their self-evaluation. For one thing, they tend to overestimate their worth and abilities. They tend to think they are smarter, stronger and better than they really are. Yes, every human being is made in the image of God, and because of that is worthy of respect. However, we are all fallen, finite creatures. No matter what level our physical and intellectual abilities are, we as human beings are really very frail and fragile. The second error of those who are self-confident is to forget that we are all moral failures. We are sinners, guilty of failing to honor God as we should. We are deserving of God's wrath. There is no reason God should show us His favor or bestow His blessings on us.

As Christians, however, we can have a different view of ourselves. We should recognize that our primary value comes not from who we are as God's creatures, but from who we are as God's children. It is because we are in Christ, because we have experienced God's grace through the faith He has given us (Romans 12:3), that we know we are okay. This is what enables us to be secure and confident. What gives us value is not primarily something in ourselves, but the fact that Christ is now in us through His Spirit. Here is an illustration that might help. I have in my hand two pieces of money: a silver quarter and a green twenty-dollar bill. Which is worth more? The green piece of paper is. Why? Well, the government declares it to be worth more. If the United States government ceased to exist, this piece of metal would be more valuable than the paper. The government gives this piece of paper value. In a similar way, apart from Jesus, our lives really are not worth more than a piece of paper. But, as Christians, the Lord gives us value.

If we are trusting in Jesus Christ we know we are God's children and can be confident that we are okay, and that we will be able to accomplish whatever the Lord calls us to do. That is why the Apostle Paul could say, **Philippians 4:13**, *I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me*. When we are confident of that, we can look in the mirror and see wrinkles, pimples or a double chin and know it is still okay. Because I am a child of God, I know He has a very special purpose for me.

Number four, knowing we belong to God enables us to have confidence before other people. Christ-confidence does not just help me when I am looking in the mirror and battling my own fears and anxieties. Knowing I am a child of God can give us boldness as we seek to serve Christ in an unbelieving world. It can free us from the bondage of always trying to please others. Some of us live our lives in constant fear we will do something that the people around us think is weird, or say something they think is stupid. Yet, when we have Christ-confidence, it doesn't matter if someone thinks we are weird, stupid, or even ugly. Why? Because we are playing for an audience of one, if the Lord is pleased with who we are and what we are doing, it really doesn't matter what other people think. His opinion is all that really counts. And that means we don't have

to be afraid of what other people think. We can become like the great Puritan preacher, John Owen, of whom it was said, "He feared man so little, because he feared God so much."

Many years ago, I came across something called The Freedom Prayer. Over the years, it has been helpful to me. It speaks of the confidence we can have before others, a confidence to stand up for what is good, right and true. It reminds me of a confidence which enables us to speak up and share the gospel, the great news of Jesus Christ, with people around us at work, school, in our family or neighborhood, or wherever we might be. This is a confidence many of us lack, but a confidence we are going to need in this world that seems increasingly hostile to Christian truth. Here is the prayer:

"Lord, I renounce my desire for human praise, for the approval of my peers, and the need for public recognition. I deliberately put these aside today, and am content to hear you whisper, "Well done, my good and faithful servant."

Friends, that prayer is the path to real freedom and boldness. It is a prayer we can make when we have the right kind of confidence, based not on ourselves, but who we are through faith in Jesus Christ. Let's affirm and celebrate that confidence as we sing...