

**Assurance**

12/1/20 dkm

Read: John 14:12-31, 1John 3

Text: 1John 3:19-24

Psalms: 66:1-4 &amp; 16-20, 34:11-18, 36:1-7, 134

God knows all things; he is omniscient. The psalmist says he knows our sitting down and our rising up (Ps 139:2). God watches over our going out and our coming in (Ps 121). Do you find comfort in this truth? Or would you like to be free of God's prying eyes? God not only sees our coming and going, he also sees into our hearts. He knows every word we speak and every thought we have (Ps 139:2, 4). For a child of God this truth should be comforting and re-assuring. John writes of God knowing all things and being greater than our hearts (3:20). So much for thinking that you were in control of your life! God is in the control room of your life, knowing you better than you know yourself. 'Such knowledge is too wonderful for me', you might say (Ps 139:6).

Other religions devise ways for you to get in touch with your inner self, things like yoga, controlled breathing, meditation, drugs and the like. We want to know who we really are. If we don't know God all we can do is look inward, believing the answer is hidden in our soul. But knowing God, as we do through Jesus Christ, we look outward and upward to the One who made us and knows us better than we know ourselves. 'When my heart is overwhelmed; Lead me to the rock that is higher than I' said the psalmist (Ps 61:2). Let us look to this Rock and find assurance of where we are going. It was in knowing this that Jesus proceeded to wash the feet of his disciples (John 13:3). Knowing that God knows all about us, and that our future is in his hands, frees us from pride and jealousy and allows us to love one another as Jesus loved us.

In verse 16 of this chapter John defined love as Jesus laying down his life for us. He then said we ought to lay down our lives for brothers and sisters in Christ. He spoke of 'works of love', not just words of love, and of these being evidence of our abiding in God. John is

always concerned about the truth, in contrast to false teachers and indeed of the people of the world today. This word 'truth' is the link between verse 18 and 19, and with the passage we are looking at today. This passage is about being assured we are 'of the truth'. The truth, of course, is Jesus Christ. Let us now look at the passage under the subheadings: 'assurance', 'access to God', 'answered prayer', and 'abide in him'.

### **1. Assurance**

In this letter John gives the church criteria by which they can test their teachers because false teachers were arising in the church. These teachers were departing from orthodox doctrine, from the gospel that they were taught in the beginning. They were unsettling members of the church such that some were questioning and even doubting their faith. John's test, based as it was on loving one another in practical ways, might also have led to doubts in those with an overly sensitive conscience. When it comes to living the Christian life, some believers are always condemning themselves for perceived failures. John does not want faithful believers to be crippled by doubts. He is concerned for those whose heart condemns them, for all of us whenever our hearts condemn us (3:20).

How can we know that we are Christians? A boy who came to beach mission said he was a Christian because his mum had a card signed by the bishop. Maybe it was a baptismal certificate. Being born into a Christian home or having a certificate from Sunday school is no guarantee of being a true Christian. 'You must be born again' said Jesus. Being born again does not change your outward appearance; wearing special clothes or growing long hair does not make you a Christian; although when a Hindu I knew believed in Jesus she became a much happier and cleaner person. New birth affects our heart, something others cannot see and we ourselves may not be sure about. One day we might feel we are a good Christian and the next not so sure. The 'accuser of the brethren', and his agents, are ever ready to condemn us (Rev 12:10).

In the Reformed faith we hold to the doctrine of assurance. In churches which teach salvation by works, or by faith plus works, the doctrine of assurance is ridiculed. Many go the grave having no assurance of where they will spend eternity. But John teaches that we can 'know we are of the truth', and that 'He abides in us' and we in Him (3:19, 24). But the question remains, 'How can we know this truth?' It is possible to be presumptuous in this matter and actually deceive ourselves.

When John writes, 'and by this we know', he is referring back to what he said about love 'in deed and in truth' (3:18). If we are closing our heart, and our hands, to a brother or sister in need, how can we claim to be a believer? (3:17). Such action, or lack thereof, reveals an insensitive heart, a hard heart, a heart not touched by the love of Christ. But John is not talking about dead hearts; he is talking about hearts that are alive in Christ. Such hearts will at times be self-condemning. We will regret not showing more love, not doing more to help someone in need. We all know these self-condemning thoughts. My thoughts keep going to a fine Christian woman who was always in church and always helping others but got depressed because of her failures. Maybe you know someone like this, or maybe you are like this. If so, please listen to what the apostle is saying.

'If our hearts condemn us, God is greater than our hearts, and knows all things' (3:19). Calvin and other Reformers took this to mean that God is the great judge and will judge even more severely than our own hearts. God, of course, knows our hearts, our very thoughts, and will judge us accordingly, but in the context of assurance John is teaching that God may not condemn us when we condemn ourselves, or when others condemn us (Rom 8:34). He is telling us to look to God who is greater than our own heart. Looking to God means looking to his word, looking to what is objective rather than

subjective. God's word contains promises as well as commandments. God's word speaks of forgiveness when we repent (1:9).

We know the commandments and seek to obey them. But when we fail we must repent and accept God's forgiveness. As a believer you are an adopted child of God, not a stranger, or even a foster child. You may not have a piece of paper saying you are a Christian but you have the mark of God on your heart, the mark of love, love for God and love for one another (Jer 31:33-34, John 13:35).

## **2. Access to God**

John began this letter saying, 'Truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ' (1:3). He wants us to have joy in our relationship with God, and in our relationships with one another within the family of believers. Doubts have a negative effect on these relationships and on our joy. We lose confidence in approaching God. We are to approach God with humility but not with doubting (James 1:6). If we sin we repent and accept God's forgiveness- at the same time setting things right as we are able. God wants us to approach his throne with confidence and assurance, looking for grace and mercy (Heb 4:15).

The Lord wants our relationship with him to be ongoing, to become closer and stronger each day. He wants us to know his love more deeply and live the life of love that we see in Jesus Christ our Lord. Our relationship to God is based on listening to him as he speaks to us in his word. It is based on our communicating with God in prayer. The more we know God's word, and the more we pray to him, the more confidence we will have in our standing within the family of God- not forgetting, as John reminds us, to practice love for one another.

## **3. Answered prayer**

'And whatever we ask we receive from Him' (3:22). What an amazing promise! These words remind us of what Jesus himself promised

(John 15:23, 24). In fact, much of what John teaches in this letter reflects what Jesus taught him in the Upper Room (John 13-16). What Jesus promised was with the proviso that, 'you ask the Father in my name' (John 16:23). John also sets out conditions for answered prayer here in this letter.

Firstly, we must keep the commandments, and indeed, do what is pleasing in his sight (3:22). Are these not the same thing? Yes and no. God is pleased when we keep his commandments but most pleased when we do so with joy and when we actually delight in our relationship to God. A sister in Christ once reminded me that tithing and giving were different; tithing is the command while giving is going beyond the command.

What commandments is John talking about here in verse 22? He elaborates in the next verse with a second condition, namely we should believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ (3:23). Jesus said we must ask the Father in his name (John 13:13, 16:23). We cannot approach God without Jesus, the only mediator between God and man (1Tim 2:5). The Bible says nothing about Mary being a mediator with the Father or with Jesus. To the extent that Jesus is the second person in the Trinity, and that he speaks of answering our prayer (John 14:13, 14), it is not wrong to pray to Jesus, but he does specify asking the Father in his name (John 16:23). John implies asking God here in these verses.

The third condition relates to the commandment to love one another (3:23). We know this is one of the commandments we must obey, but John is highlighting it because the Gnostics, and others, failed to obey this command. He sets it up as a 'test' command because it is easily seen, or not seen, in the life of the church. People can say they love God and even be diligent in attending church meetings, but do they love others in the fellowship? This is a necessary condition of being in fellowship with God, yet a condition too many forget or fail to obey. John said of the false teachers, who may have been leaders

in the church: 'They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us' (2:19).

Others conditions for answered prayer are found elsewhere in the Bible. If you regard sin in your heart your prayers will not be heard (Ps 66:18). If husbands are not honouring their wife their prayers will be hindered (1Peter 3:7). John later says that God hears us if we ask according to his will (5:14). In knowing his Son Jesus, and in practicing obedience to his commandments, we are in a position to know God's will and can therefore pray with the confidence that our prayers will be heard and answered (Rom 12:2, James 5:15). If you ask for something contrary to God's will, as set forth in his word, do not expect an answer, unless God is sending leanness to your soul (Ps 106:15).

#### **4. Abide in Him**

When we spoke of assurance you may have been saying, 'What about the Holy Spirit?' You may have been thinking of Romans 8 where we read, 'The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God' (Rom 8:16). Well, we have come to the Spirit as John comes to the Spirit here in this closing verse. John returns to the theme of abiding in Christ, a theme he heard from Jesus (John 15).

If we love Christ and abide in him we will keep his commands, and we abide in him and he in us (3:24). John now introduces the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit saying, 'by the Spirit whom He has given us' (3:24). When the Spirit quickened our dead hearts, making us alive in Christ, he came to stay. The Spirit gives us life and keeps us living as children of God; he is the life-giving Spirit.

Jesus said that if anyone loves him and obeys his teaching, 'We will come and make our home with him' (John 14:23). John is saying the same thing. Father, Son and Holy Spirit come to abide in our hearts when we believe in Jesus and keep his commands. What an amazing

truth! It is not easy to comprehend but this is what John teaches, and what Jesus taught. So do not listen to those who say you can be a Christian and not have the Holy Spirit. 'This we know' says John, as he concludes this teaching on assurance. Is this the truth you know?