

“Blessed Assurance”

1 John 2:3-14

June 29, 2014

INTRODUCTION:

In our study of John’s first letter, we’ve noted before how often John talks about certainty. In an age of skepticism such as ours, the very idea of certainty is commonly rejected. To be certain is viewed as arrogance, narrow-mindedness or ignorance. But that is not the Bible’s view. While there is certainly a great deal we don’t know—and we need to be honest about those things—there are some things about which we can be certain. We see this emphasis in John’s use of the word “to know.” There are two Greek words that are translated by our English word for knowing, and these two Greek words appear 39 times in the five chapters of this letter.

What does John want us to know? There are two matters in particular that concern him, and every pastor I know deals with these two matters frequently. John is concerned that those possessing a genuine faith experience an assurance of that faith. He wants us to have the security of knowing that God loves and accepts us fully, and that our future is secure. He is equally concerned with the problem of false assurance. There is some irony in this. The error John is seeking to correct in his letter is an early form of what is called Gnosticism. That name comes from the Greek word for knowledge, because the Gnostics claimed special knowledge. John wants them to know that they don’t know as much as they think they know. They haven’t even made it to first base when it comes to true knowledge, to know God.

These are still big needs today. There are many Christians who suffer through insecurity in their lives because they lack assurance. Even more tragically, there are many non-Christians who possess a false assurance. That is, they think they are Christians when they actually aren’t. Satan wants Christians to be uncertain of God’s love, and he wants non-Christians to be certain of God’s love. John wants both groups simply to grasp the truth. In pursuit of that goal for truth, the passage before us today contains two warnings and one reassurance. The warnings are for those possessing a false assurance and the reassurance for those with a true faith. But since it is possible to be mistaken about which category we might be in, the need is for all of us to listen carefully both to the warnings and the reassurance.

I. A Warning about Obedience – v. 3-6

John gives some stern warnings here to those who possess a false assurance. These warnings are especially needful here in Birmingham,

Alabama. Until recently, Birmingham was the most churched city in the nation, as measured by the number of churches per 10,000 population. We have now dropped to second in that ranking, behind Chattanooga. Though I am thankful to live in a city with such a large number of churches, there is a challenge accompanying that. The challenge is that since church attendance is more socially acceptable in Birmingham, and in some cases even beneficial for one's business or social standing, the likelihood of those who are Christian in name only is greater in a city like ours. How do you engage in evangelism when ninety percent of the population thinks of itself as Christian already? Very often, we need to get someone unsaved before they can get saved.

John's first warning concerns the test of obedience. He is very direct in his wording. **"And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments."** The word for "keep" means more than observing a rule in the way we would observe the speed laws if a police car was nearby, a conformity that is merely external. It has the idea of careful and heartfelt obedience. By referring to a person's actions, John is rejecting other possible grounds for assurance. Many people today might base their assurance on some spiritual experience they had. This person might say, "I know that I am a Christian because I once had an experience where I felt very close to God." Or someone else might base assurance on an answer to prayer they experienced. The most common basis for assurance is the one John explicitly rejects here, one's words. **"Whoever says, 'I know him' but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him"** (v. 4). John has this person say the right words, "I know him," but describes him as a liar without any truth in him. I learned long ago that people's actions are a far better indicator of what's inside than are their words. I have had people tell me to my face that they are completely confident God's love and acceptance of them while at the same time they are determined to pursue a course of action they know God doesn't approve of. John says here to believe the actions, not the words.

If obedience to God's commands is a true indicator of one's inner heart, what exactly does this obedience look like? John says it means to walk as Jesus walked. He means by this that we begin to resemble Jesus. He was a humble man, and we are humble. He was a man of prayer, a man of joy, a man who loved people, and we resemble him to some degree in these things if we truly know God.

John's warning is pretty strong. He says of the person who doesn't pass this obedience test that he is a liar devoid of truth. He is going to speak just as strongly about the second test of love. Why does he use this kind of language? This is the language of warning, and the warning is worded strongly simply because the danger is great. Our daughter, Kathryn, called me last week when a friend borrowed her car and it overheated. I told her that she should have it checked out by a mechanic, and she replied that she really didn't have time

that day to do so. So I gave her some quick diagnostics she could do herself and told her simply to watch it carefully. I should have warned her more strongly. She called me early on Tuesday because she was climbing a hill in Chattanooga again when the car overheated, and this time stopped running. As it turned out, the source of the problem was a cracked heater hose that was leaking the coolant, a relatively inexpensive repair, especially compared to the alternative. We ended up deciding not to repair the engine with its blown head gasket and to sell the car as salvage. I knew in my mind that this happens when cars get overheated, but that didn't lead to as strong a warning as I should have given to Kathryn to have it checked out. John's warning is strong because of the grave dangers associated with thinking of oneself as a Christian when that is not actually the case. John Piper words it like this. "I am more concerned about nominal hell-bound Christians who feel loved by God, than I am about genuine heaven-bound Christians who don't feel loved by God."

II. A Warning about Love – v. 7-11

John's second warning is about the test of love. One whose faith is genuine and who is truly heaven-bound will be characterized by a heart that loves. He says it like this. **"Whoever says he is in the light and hates his brother is still in darkness. Whoever loves his brother abides in the light"** (2:9-10). Let's attempt to get at what he means by exploring the oldness and newness of the love command. John seems to contradict himself when he describes the love command as an old command and not a new one. But then he says that it is a new command. Obviously, he means that it is both old and new.

In what sense is the command to love an old command? It was present in the Old Testament, and its meaning was clear from the beginning. So when John says that the love command is an old command, I believe he means that it has been around since God began dealing with people, and its meaning has been clear from God's dealings. One of the great Old Testament words for love is the Hebrew word *hesed*. It is often used of God's love for his people. It combines the idea of a feeling of love with the idea of loyalty. Americans are good at the feeling part of love, but not so good at the loyalty part. There is a Disney love narrative that holds out the promise of finding just the right person and living happily ever after with that person. So if you start down a path that you think will lead to happily ever after love, but it then turns out differently than you expect, you exit that relationship and go in search of another. In other words, there is no loyalty to the end. In his book, *A Loving Life*, Paul Miller calls *hesed* love "love without an exit strategy."

This is the love that is beautifully portrayed in the book of Ruth. It makes its first appearance with Naomi. Do you remember the story? Naomi and her family move to Moab following a drought and famine in Israel. There her two

sons meet Moabite women and marry them. But then all the men in her life die, in a culture where connection with a man was the source of one's economic survival. Naomi decides to return to Israel, and the first words recorded of her in the book are a command she speaks to her Moabite daughters-in-law. **“Go, return each of you to her mother's house. May the Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me”** (Ruth 1:8). She is giving an order. In ordering them to return, she is giving up that which was most precious to her, what family she has remaining, for their well-being. We see in this the heart of biblical love, a willingness to be committed to another to the very end, even to death itself. The heart of biblical love is death. We see it later in the book of Ruth with Ruth herself, as she attaches herself to Naomi out of the same *hesed* love, even though she is attaching herself to someone with miserable prospects. It is love without an exit strategy. When loving others brings suffering to us, we tend to want to withdraw, either physically or emotionally. But biblical love stays in, even at great cost to the one loving. That's the way God loves, and it's the way his people are commanded to love. This has been true since the beginning.

But there is also a sense in which the love command is new. John locates the newness of love in the fact that **“the true light is already shining”** (2:8). There is no doubt that he is referring to Jesus here as the true light. So what he means is that with Jesus there is a newness to love. In Jesus we have a lived-out illustration of God's love, and in Jesus we have a new power to love with this *hesed* love. In Jesus we see things clearly, because he is the true light. We see that life is not all about satisfying self, but sacrificing self for others. Those still in the darkness think that's crazy. We were discussing this at our staff meeting this week, and someone mentioned how some non-Christian relatives thought it was crazy to give up things like leisurely Sunday mornings for something like religion. Better to satisfy self than to sacrifice self. Such an attitude comes out of darkness. But those who have seen the light in Jesus have been loved by Jesus. They have been the beneficiaries of his life. He has given himself for us, dying in our place. To receive that love from Jesus inevitably results in beginning to love others with that same sacrificial love. Do you see any of that love in your own life? If not, John's explanation is that the darkness has blinded your eyes.

III. A Reassurance about Gospel Truth – v. 12-14

There is a change of tone beginning in verse 12. John was a wise pastor, and he knew that there was a danger that those whose faith was genuine might be sent into doubts about their own salvation from these strong warnings. So he gives some reassurances to them from some foundational gospel truth. The danger here is that the wrong person hears the wrong part. The genuine Christian can hear only the warnings and be sent into doubt, while the

nominal Christian will hear only the reassurance and be confirmed in a false assurance. Only the Holy Spirit can help with this by helping us hear what we need to hear.

There is comfort and encouragement in these words. John mentions three groups here, described as children, young men and fathers. I don't think he is speaking literally, but rather about three different maturity levels. The little children are the young Christians, the young men the more mature who are in the midst of spiritual battles, and the fathers the older, mature believers who are nearing the end of their earthly lives. Our assurance lies in believing the three truths he outlines for each of these groups.

He speaks first to the children about forgiveness of their sins. **“I am writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven for his name's sake”** (v. 12). He wants us to have assurance of the forgiveness of sins. Do you know that your sins are forgiven? Martin Lloyd-Jones says, “If you are uncertain about the forgiveness of your sins, that in itself is sin.” As he has done previously, John grounds this forgiveness in God himself. Your sins are forgiven “for his name's sake.” Your sins are forgiven, no matter how great they might be, because it is a matter of the honor of Jesus. He has paid sin's penalty for any who trust him and give their sin to him. For us to doubt the effectiveness of this is to doubt the honor and the promise of God.

The reassurance given to the young men is that of victory. **“I am writing to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one”** (v. 13). Note the tense of the verb. He doesn't say that they are going to overcome, but that they already have overcome. Victory is assured in the victory of Jesus. There is something strongly encouraging in knowing that all the enemies we face have already been defeated. They are paper tigers who may look scary, but which have already been defeated by Jesus. Notice the source of strength for these young men. **“You are strong, and the word of God abides in you”** (v. 14).

The fathers are those who have walked with the Lord for many years and are coming to the end. The end takes them back to the beginning. **“I am writing to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning.”** After much experience in walking with God, their testimony is that the greatest thing in all the world is to know God. They finish their lives with no regrets. If they could, they would follow Jesus all over again and give even more to him. There is nothing that surpasses knowing God.

CONCLUSION:

May God give us ears to hear what we need to hear among these warnings and reassurances!