

“Reassurance for the Tender Conscience”

1 John 3:19-4:6

August 3, 2014

INTRODUCTION:

John’s stated purpose in writing is that those **“who believe in the name of the Son of God... may know that [they] have eternal life”** (5:13). He wants his readers to be full of joy by having an assurance of their salvation. There are two parts to his effort to give such assurance. He wants to undermine the false assurance of those who think they are saved when they’re not, and strengthen the assurance of those whose faith is genuine and whose salvation is real. This is often expressed as afflicting the comfortable and comforting the afflicted. Christianity seeks to do both of those. Because Satan is such a liar, we live in a world that is grossly distorted. It is often the case that those who are most guilty feel the least amount of guilt and those who are true victims are filled with false guilt. That is common, for example, in the area of sexual abuse. The abuser suffers no guilt at all, while his victim is filled with false guilt and self-blame. As destructive as this distortion is in the area of sexual abuse, it is even more so in the matter of one’s eternal welfare. The person with false assurance feels nothing but confidence about his salvation as he walks a road leading to hell, while the genuine Christian is riddled with doubts and insecurities.

John addresses the first of these problems, false assurance, through some strong warnings. One of his favorite warnings is to accuse this group of lying. For example, he says that those who claim to have fellowship with God but still walk in darkness are liars who do not practice the truth (1:6). John also seeks to undermine the false assurance of some by giving them some tests of genuine faith, and one of his most common tests is the test of love. That’s what he has just been talking about in the passage just prior to where we are starting today. So he has just said, **“If anyone has the world’s goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God’s love abide in him?”** (3:17).

This is where things get a little tricky. If John speaks too powerfully in this attempt to undermine the false assurance of some, he runs the risk of undermining the faith of Christians with tender consciences. This would be especially easy to happen when it comes to this test of love. Because we all still have a sin nature, all of us act selfishly instead of lovingly from time to time. So it would be easy for someone with a tender conscience to conclude wrongly that she doesn’t have true faith in Jesus and is not really saved, when that is in fact not the case. In today’s passage, John interrupts his discussion of love for one another to address this situation. Three commands are given to those of tender conscience, with all three intended to bring encouragement and assurance.

I. Pray with Confidence

The central point of these first few verses is expressed in verse 21. **“Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God.”** The same idea appears in verse 19 in the phrase, **“reassure our heart before him.”** Confidence is a major theme in John’s letter, appearing in every chapter except the first one. John wants us to have confidence. Every parent recognizes the benefits of raising children who meet the world with a certain measure of confidence. The kind of insecurity that comes when we lack confidence leads to a variety of problems. For some, insecurity takes the form of withdrawal, just giving up in the effort to compete. For others, insecurity takes the form of compensating for it by putting on an outward attitude of boldness. I was riding my bike the other day when a young boy who looked to be about ten or eleven years old was standing on the side of the road with a woman who I assumed to be his mother and two or three other boys and girls roughly his age. As I passed, he greeted me in a voice loud enough to be heard a quarter mile away, “Hey, wasup man?” It was obvious that he was covering for some feeling of insecurity. A more common adult form of that is to seek refuge within a confidence bubble, never venturing outside of the few areas in life where we may have attained a measure of competence. Such a person lives in fear, never taking any risks. A confident person doesn’t have to withdraw or compensate. He or she can meet the world as it is, addressing whatever situation arises without losing heart.

Where does such confidence come from? It comes from surviving the encounter spoken of in the first three verses of our text. It is an encounter with the living God in which at first our hearts condemn us, and then we move to the place where the heart doesn’t condemn us. Did you notice that the phrase “before him” or “before God” occurs twice in these verses? In verse 19, the phrase “before him” is given emphasis. Why is it that most people don’t want to talk about God? Why do the majority of people in our society dislike being alone with nothing but their thoughts for even short periods of time? Because God tends to intrude in those times, resulting in a noisy conscience. We are like Adam and Eve after they sinned and they heard the sound of the Lord walking in the Garden. In fear, they hid from God. Our hearts need reassurance when they condemn us. That’s what happens by verse 21, where we read these words about our hearts not condemning us so that we can have confidence before God.

What is it that led to this transition from a condemning heart to one that doesn’t condemn? It’s the statement in the middle. **“God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything”** (v. 20). What does this mean and how does it move us from a condemning heart to a reassured heart? The commentators are divided on the proper interpretation of this verse, with some interpreting it

to refer to the greatness of God's judgment and others to the greatness of his mercy. Given the context of reassurance, I think it refers to the greatness of God's mercy. Here's how I interpret this verse. God is great in that he knows everything. He knows everything about me, including every sin in my life, even the ones I don't see. He knows all the deepest motives of my heart. No sin is hidden from his gaze, and still he has loved me. The power and extent of my sin may surprise me, but it won't surprise God. He knows it all, and loves me still. To be at the same time both fully known and fully loved by the most glorious Being in the universe, indeed the Creator of all things living and inanimate, is the only sufficient answer to a condemning heart. It leads to a confidence before God, and the person who is confident before God will be confident before all lesser beings.

John applies this confidence to the area of prayer. **“Whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him”** (v. 22). In prayer, we come before God and boldly make requests of him. You cannot ask boldly without a clear conscience. John is not saying that our obedience earns answered prayer, as if we put God in our debt through our obedience, so that he is obligated to answer our prayers. Rather, he is saying that the same faith that produces confidence and a clear conscience leading to answered prayer, also produces obedience to God. John's linking of prayer and confidence leads to an application. The way to increase your confidence is through prayer. In prayer, we come as sinners before a holy God. As Christians, we come through Jesus' merits and find that God's heart toward us is friendly and loving. Let me challenge you each day to undertake this kind of bold prayer. You may ask, “How long should I pray?” An answer I have found helpful is simply to pray until you pray, that is, until you have a sense that you have met with your holy and loving Father.

II. Keep His Commandment

Notice that the word “commandment” is singular, even though John names two things. **“And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another”** (v. 23). The reason for the singular is simply that these two things always appear together. It is impossible to separate them. It is an easy thing to get confused in life, so God makes it easy for us. The one thing God requires of us is simply to cling to Jesus in faith. It is as we do this that our hearts are changed and everything else God requires follows, including the central command to love one another. This simplicity is especially needed by those whose consciences easily accuse them. We are to remember that the main thing is to cling to Jesus in faith.

Since we so easily forget this, let's remember what it means to obey this central command to “believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ.” It means

first, as the hymnwriter has expressed it, that you acknowledge that your greatest need is to feel your need of him. John Piper says it like this: “The difference between Uncle Sam and Jesus Christ is that Uncle Sam won’t enlist you in his service unless you are healthy and Jesus won’t enlist you unless you are sick.” Again, Piper says, “What is God looking for in the world? Assistants? No. The gospel is not a help-wanted ad. God is not looking for people to work for Him but people who let Him work mightily in and through them.”

But then it means that we seek refuge in Jesus alone from the wrath of God deserved by our sins. We don’t seek it in accomplishments, appearance, acquisitions or approval by others, but only in Jesus and his work on our behalf. As we forsake these things we trust in outside of Jesus, we find a wonderful freedom to give ourselves wholly and completely to Jesus.

The result of believing in this way is that we abide in God and God abides in us. That is the goal of the gospel. The goal is not our forgiveness, as marvelous as that is. Nor is it that we might experience emotional health and feel good about ourselves, though God gives us these things freely. It is not even the removal of God’s wrath. The gospel brings all these things and more. But the pinnacle of the good news, the thing about which we can say, “It doesn’t get any better than this,” is that we abide in God and he abides in us through his Spirit. To abide means to live or dwell with God. God welcomes blood-bought sinners into the most glorious inner circle in the universe, the inner circle of the Trinity. We don’t become divine ourselves, but we are welcomed in and given fellowship with our glorious God. The glory of God refers to the beauty of God. Through faith in Jesus, we don’t just visit the central place of all beauty, much like someone might visit the White House in Washington. No, we get to live there.

III. Test the Spirits

John is not yet done. Before returning to his topic of love for one another in 4:7, he has one more command for those of tender conscience. They need to **“test the spirits.”** John assumes that spirits are at work behind the prophets and teachers, inspiring and directing their teaching. Contrary to the assumptions of our modern age, every Bible teacher is inspired either by the Spirit of God or by an evil spirit. So John wants his readers to test these spirits. A test is designed to reveal what would otherwise not be knowable. A teacher can’t tell what a student is learning by looking at the student. Tests must be administered to reveal that. A doctor can’t tell her patient’s condition by looking at her outside. No doctor would say, “She’s stylishly dressed and quaffed—she must be healthy.” No, the doctor will interview her patient about the symptoms she is experiencing and decide on the proper tests to reveal what could not otherwise be known.

We are to do the same with teachers. It's amazing to me how often this command is ignored, to the great danger of those ignoring it. Bible teachers are often judged by external appearances. "He sure is smart and knows a lot, so he must be a good Bible teacher." Or, what's worse, "He's funny" or "He's handsome." These are not the standards to be used in deciding whether to submit yourself to a particular Bible teacher.

What are the standards John recommends for the testing of Bible teachers? He mentions two. The first one is stated in verse 2. **"By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God."** There's a great deal in that statement that we don't have time to unpack. But it means essentially that Jesus is the Messiah and Savior. Or we might say, teachers who are inspired by the Holy Spirit lift up and exalt Jesus. They don't do what so many do today and exalt the listener. So much Bible teaching today makes the listener central, not Jesus. A sermon whose highest goal is to help people live successful lives through teaching principles out of the Bible is a sermon exalting people rather than Jesus. A sermon that is designed only to entertain or to make people feel better is not one that is Christ-centered. The Spirit of God exalts Jesus, and all teachers that are inspired by God's Spirit and not some evil spirit will do the same.

The second test is to take note of who listens to various teachers. John says of the false teachers, **"They are from the world, therefore they speak from the world, and the world listens to them"** (4:5). Not so with John and those who faithfully teach the doctrine taught by the apostles. Speaking of that apostolic doctrine, he says, **"We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us, whoever is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error"** (4:6). This test requires that we pay attention to the kinds of people who are in the pews. If they are a humble, faithful people, that's a good indication that the one teaching God's word to them is faithful and filled with the Holy Spirit. If they are proud hypocrites, you may want to keep looking for another church.

CONCLUSION:

God wants his people to experience the security of knowing for certain that that they are saved. One of the common biblical images for faith is when a chick takes refuge under the wings of its mother. Several geese live on the lake behind our house, and I can tell you that you don't want to come near goslings when the mother is around. She will fiercely protect her young against all threats. God does the same for his children. We rest secure under his wings, and this security gives us confidence in all of life.