

**First Baptist Church Merritt Island**

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**So That Your Joy May Be Complete – a study of First John**

**God Is Greater Than Our Hearts**

**1 John 3:19-24**

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Before Em and I were married, I bought a car that had been in an accident. The entire back end was destroyed. So, I bought the back end of a car that had been wrecked in the front and paid a guy to cut them in half and weld them together to make one new car. It cost a fraction of what that car was worth – at least the accident-free version of it.

It looked great and it drove great...except for one, small detail. When it was welded together, it wasn't perfectly straight. You couldn't tell from looking at it, but it was bent. As a result, anytime I stepped on the gas or pressed on the brake, it would pull hard toward the side of the road. And for those of you who have normal, rich people cars, it's hard to drive a car that's constantly trying to wreck you into a ditch or causing you to overcorrect toward the other side of the road.

And whether you know it or not, we are all like that old car of mine. We are bent toward certain extremes. In almost every facet of life, there is a healthy place in the middle of the road that is accompanied by extremes on both sides. For instance, when you talk about money, there's a healthy place in the middle of the road. But, on one side, there's the ditch of materialism, where people see wealth as an idol. On the other side, there's the ditch of asceticism, where people see money as evil. Because all of us have been wrecked by sin, we naturally pull to one of the ditches. Or we overcorrect and head toward the other ditch. And the enemy doesn't care which ditch you find yourself in. Either ditch will do so long as he can keep you from the healthy place that is moving down the road of following Jesus.

I was reminded of that dynamic as I was studying the text for this morning. In this letter, John is confronting a group of false teachers who claimed to be Christians but were just imposters. He lays out a series of tests for how you can distinguish between a genuine follower of Jesus and an imposter. And, like every conversation, this one has two ditches. On one hand, there are people who have a false sense of assurance. They say they are Christians but aren't truly saved. That's the ditch of false assurance. And John's letter is meant to wake those people up to their need for Jesus. But there's another ditch, the ditch of unnecessary doubt. These people are truly saved, but they struggle with doubt and wonder if they really are right with God.

If that's you, our text is written with you in mind. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, John is telling us how we can have assurance that we are right with God and genuine followers of Jesus.

**Big Idea: We can have assurance of our standing before God as we focus on God's grace, greatness, and gifts.**

**1 John 3:19–24**

***By this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our heart before him; 20 for whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything. 21 Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God; 22 and whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him. 23 And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus***

***Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. 24 Whoever keeps his commandments abides in God, and God in him. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit whom he has given us.***

This is easily the most difficult passage in 1 John to interpret. One bible scholar estimates at least 10 variations for how to understand what John is saying throughout this paragraph. So, don't feel badly if you struggle to connect the dots. I'll do my best to focus on the main, plain things about this text and I'm trusting the Holy Spirit will make clear to us what we most need to know for this morning. Let's start with the first part of our big idea.

## WE CAN HAVE ASSURANCE OF OUR STANDING BEFORE GOD

### **1 John 3:19**

***By this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our heart before him;***

John says we can know that we are of the truth and reassure our hearts before God. We don't have to live in perpetual doubt about our relationship with God. We can be assured. But notice why he says we need to reassure our hearts. Look at verse 20

### **1 John 3:20**

***for whenever our heart condemns us,***

John says our hearts will condemn us. Many, if not most of you, know exactly what that means without me explaining it because you live with the regular experience of it. The word "heart" translates the Greek word "kardia." It refers to the source and center of our inner life – our thoughts and emotions. That is a place that condemns us.

Sometimes, it comes in the form of doubt. You doubt that you are saved, or you doubt that you really believe. You might be confused by something you read in the Bible, or you hear a compelling argument against the existence of God that makes you wonder if the bible is true. And you think to yourself, "If you really believed in God, you wouldn't think like that."

Or your mind obsesses over sin – either sin you committed or sin you're afraid you committed and your mind is off to the races. Sometimes it is really difficult to tell the difference between temptation and desire. "If you really had new life in Jesus, you wouldn't live like this or think like this."

Or, you might have a natural disposition to fear and anxiety. You believe the gospel in a way that encourages others to believe and prays for their salvation, but you can't quite believe it's true about you. There are countless ways our hearts might condemn us.

For many, this can become a life-long spiral of doubting their salvation. Some of you live with that recurring terror. If that's you, I've prayed for you this week. I pray God will give you relief this morning and renew your hope in the battle. And it will possibly be a lifelong battle for some of us. But John says we can have assurance. The word translated "reassure" in verse 19 means "to pacify; to set at ease." That verb is active. It's something we do.

John is saying we don't have to live as hostages to our doubtful and condemning hearts. We can fight the doubts about our relationship with God. And in the rest of our text, John gives us three keys to reassure our hearts.

- KEY #1 – LOOK FOR EVIDENCE OF GOD'S GRACE

### **1 John 3:19**

***By this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our heart before him;***

When John says, “by this,” he’s referring to what we talked about last week. Look at verse 18.

### **1 John 3:18**

*Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.*

This is what John is referring to when he says “by this” – when we begin to love others the way Jesus loved us. Not with lip-service but with sacrificial love that cares for people and wants them to know the truth about Jesus. That’s evidence of something...namely God’s grace.

Em and I have been examining our plants recently. Since the week we had the great freeze, almost everything looks dead. Had three new trees planted a few months ago. They are Emily’s favorite – Royal Poincianas. They are the trees that have a canopy full of orangish-red flowers. But right now you can’t tell the difference between them and the wooden stakes that are next to them for support. Are they dead or alive? They look dead as a doornail. So, we’ve been looking them over every week.

Finally, last week, we had some hope. The tiniest little green shoots began to appear. One of the tree is about over 15 feet tall. One day it will have a huge canopy and produce beautiful flowers. But, right now, all we need are little green shoots that are about ¼ inch long. We saw those shoots and danced a jig – “It’s alive!” We named it Lazarus.

And John is saying that the shoot of Christ-like love is evidence of God’s grace at work in us. The reason I say that’s evidence of God’s grace is because of what John says in verse 14.

### **1 John 3:14**

*We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers.*

When we place our faith and trust in Jesus, God graciously raises us up from the spiritual death of our sin that separated us from God to a spiritual life that’s enabled by the resurrection power of Jesus. All of that is a work of God’s grace. We don’t save ourselves and we don’t change ourselves. God graciously saves us and changes us through the work of Jesus.

One day, God will graciously make us into mighty and beautiful royal poincianas – we will be beautiful. We will be like Jesus. Filled with fruit. But we aren’t there yet. Some of us look at our lives at times and feel like we are dead as doornails. But John says the first shoots you need to be looking for are faith and love. Those are the first evidences of His grace.

Practically speaking, that means if you believe that Jesus is who the Bible says He is and saves those who trust in Him, that’s evidence that God has graciously opened your eyes to that truth. If you love others in a way that wants them to be well and to know the truth about Jesus, that’s evidence that God has graciously begun to change your heart and produce His love in you. Faith and love are evidence of God’s grace at work in your life.

So, when your heart begins to condemn you and say that you must not be a true Christian, fight back by looking for the shoots of God’s grace at work in you. Think about the work of Jesus and ask yourself, “Do I believe that Jesus saves those who trust in Him?” Think about the people in your life – your spouse and your kids and your friends - and ask yourself, “Do I care about them in a way that makes me want them to know Jesus?”

If you do, then that's evidence of God's grace in you. That's evidence that you have been raised by Jesus from spiritual death to spiritual life. Fight back against your doubts by pointing to the evidence of God's grace at work in your life and tell yourself the truth. Stop listening to yourself and start talking to yourself. Don't be captive to your thoughts, take your thoughts captive and point to the work God has already begun in you.

That's the first key to living with assurance of your relationship with God. But, John knows what happens in our hearts. He knows that when we start looking at our lives, we won't just see the ways we love others. We will see the ways we don't love others. We will see the ways we don't love God. We see our sin. We see our faults. We see the ways we aren't yet perfected by God's grace. Our hearts know our weaknesses. So, John gives us the next key to assurance.

- KEY #2 – TAKE CONFIDENCE IN GOD'S GREATNESS

**1 John 3:20**

***for whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything.***

This is an awesome verse. Our hearts know our weaknesses and faults. But God is greater than our hearts. He knows everything. He knows all our sin better than we do. He knew every sin we would ever commit before He set His love upon us and sent Jesus to save us. He also knows what He has done for us. He has forgiven us. He has acquitted us. He has already rendered a verdict over us as our Judge and has acquitted us of all our sin.

*Romans 8:33–39*

*Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?...No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

Who will condemn us if we are in Christ? No one! Not even ourselves and our doubts! Nothing. Nothing. Nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. God is greater than our hearts. He knows the verdict He has rendered over us and nothing will change that verdict.

Listen, friend, not everything you think is true. God's thoughts toward you are infinitely greater than your thoughts about yourself. So, learn to doubt your doubts by leaning into God's promises with confidence. If you believe the truth about Jesus and are willing to trust Him as your Lord and Savior, God has put down in writing what He thinks about you.

He loves you. You are His child. You are holy and blameless before Him in Christ. He promises that He will finish every good work He started in you and nothing will ever separate you from His love. If you have sinned, confess it to God, lay it down at Christ's cross, and rest in His forgiveness. God is greater than our hearts and His grace is greater than our sin.

And He hasn't left us to ourselves in this fight. He has given us amazing gifts to help in our fight against doubt. That's the third key to living with assurance.

- KEY #3 – TAKE ADVANTAGE OF GOD'S GIFTS

### **1 John 3:24**

***Whoever keeps his commandments abides in God, and God in him. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit whom he has given us.***

Notice how John bookends this paragraph with the same phrase he started it with – by this we know. And what do we know here? We know that we abide in God and He abides in us. God lives in us. How does God live in us? By the Holy Spirit He has given to us. John is saying you can be assured that you are in a right relationship with God when you have evidence that His Spirit is living and working in you.

And that begs the question: How can we know that the Holy Spirit is living and working in us? John tells us in the first part of this verse: whoever keeps His commandments.

And it's at this point that your condemning heart starts to chime in. "You don't perfectly keep God's commandments. You told a lie the other day. You were jealous of your friend last night. See, you don't keep God's commandments so you must not have God's Spirit in you." Tell your condemning heart to shut it for a second and read verse 23.

### **1 John 3:23**

***And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us.***

John says this is the commandment that reveals whether or not the Spirit is living in us, that we believe in the name of Jesus Christ and love one another. That's faith and love. That's key #1 and evidence of God's grace. If those things are present in your life, they are evidence that God's Spirit is living in you and at work in you.

And then, God's Spirit will empower us to fight our sin and live in alignment with God's word. He will stir our hearts to want to live in a way that is pleasing to God. But we don't have to fear that we are lost when we experience setbacks in our fight against sin. Sinless perfection isn't the indicator that the Spirit indwells us. Faith in Jesus and love for others are the indicators.

That means as your heart condemns you by bringing up the ways you've sinned, don't give in to your doubting heart. Take advantage of the gift of God's Holy Spirit and renew your fight against sin. The whole reason your heart would hate your sin and see it for what it is in the first place is because the Spirit is living in you and revealing those areas of sin so that you can fight them by His power and not your own. That's not God's curse on you; that's God's gift to you. Take advantage of the gift of the Holy Spirit and renew your fight against sin.

But that's not the only gift John mentions in our text. Look at verse 21.

### **1 John 2:21-22**

***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.***

Once we begin to find assurance in our relationship with God, we can live with confidence to enter God's presence in prayer. And John says an amazing thing here. He says we can be confident that we will be given whatever we ask for in prayer.

Now, we will revisit this in more detail when we get to chapter 5, but John isn't throwing this in so we will ask God to give us the Ferrari we've always wanted. He qualifies it by saying that our prayers

must flow from a place that desires to do what please God. In other words, we are asking for things that align with God's will.

And don't rip this out of context. What has he been talking about? He been talking about living with assurance of our relationship with God. So, while there are more applications of this promise, the primary application of this is that when we are fighting for assurance, we can pray and ask God to give it to us – and He will. He will show us evidence of His grace at work in us as we ask Him for that. He will strengthen our confidence in His greatness as we ask Him for that. He will fill us with the power of the Holy Spirit when we ask Him for that.

So, take advantage of the amazing gift of prayer. Christian, you can live with assurance that you are right with God, that heaven is your home and your destiny is secure. You don't have to be a hostage to your doubts and the condemnation of your hearts. You can have assurance of your standing before God as you focus on God's grace, greatness, and gifts.