

Confident before God

1 John 3:19-24

If you've been at Faith very long you might remember me talking about Dave Simmons, a mentor of mine throughout my 20s. Dave owned the camp where Brenda and I worked for three years after graduating from college. Dave's father was a very harsh and demanding man. One Christmas when they were stationed at Ft. Riley (in the 40s) Dave got a bicycle that came unassembled. Even though Dave was too young to read, his dad told him that if he wanted to ride that bike he would have to put it together. Dave did the best he could but he eventually got so frustrated that he started crying. His dad's response was to knock him aside, saying, "Get away, stupid, I knew you couldn't do it" (*Dad the Family Coach*, p. 33). His dad's nickname for him eventually became "Stoop" which was short for stupid.

Not surprisingly, when Dave got older, he took every chance he got to disrespect his dad. When it was time to decide where to go to college, he had full scholarship offers to play football at his dad's two favorite schools: LSU and West Point. But instead he went to Georgia Tech in Atlanta because it was 1,500 miles away from his dad.

When I knew Dave, he had been an all-American linebacker at Georgia Tech, had played pro football for the Saints, Cardinals, and Cowboys, had built a youth camp from the ground up, written books, and had spoken to crowds all over the world. Even though Dave was successful and brilliant in many ways, he had a hard time not thinking of himself as stupid. Dave wasn't loved well by his dad; consequently Dave didn't feel loved and wanted and secure in his family growing up. That lack of love showed up decades later. That scenario is rather common.

But there is another scenario that explains why other kids don't feel loved and wanted and secure in their families . . . I could tell you stories about fantastic dads and moms, parents who loved their kids well and who sacrificed for them. . . but whose kids basically treated them like dirt. No parents are perfect, but sometimes it's the kids who don't want the relationship and the guidance and the protection of their parents. For whatever reason, the kids wrongly think that their parents are controlling and oppressive when they're really not. Like Dave, they disrespect dad and mom. And they are often very unkind to their siblings. A false perception of their parents is what keeps them from experiencing love and security in their family.

Here's the point I want to make: In the household of God, if we don't feel loved and wanted and secure, it is always the second scenario that is playing out. It's that we are misperceiving the motives and the heart of our heavenly Father. Many Scriptures reveal and explain that God is a fantastic Father who loves his children well - protecting them, disciplining them, showering them with good gifts, and reassuring them that they are wanted.

This is the context for today's passage. John wants us to have confidence before God, reassured that we are loved and wanted as his children. Let me remind you of John's overarching reason for writing this letter. In 1 John 5:13 John wrote this:

13 I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life.

John wanted those who believe in Jesus to **know** that they have eternal life. Throughout 1 John he uses a number of expressions to describe those who have eternal life: knowing Jesus Christ (2:3), being in Christ (2:5), being in the light (2:9), knowing God the Father (2:13, 4:7), becoming children of God (3:1-2), being born of God (3:9, 4:7, 5:1), being from God (4:4, 5:19), and being of the truth (3:19). If you are a believer, God wants you to have the assurance that you are his child, loved and wanted. Today's passage explains that such assurance is the byproduct of what we believe and how we behave. Let's see how John develops this truth.

Our love reassures our hearts that we know God. (1 John 3:19-22) The premise behind verse 19 is that the new birth is such a miraculous event that it progressively makes you like God. For John (and the other NT writers) it's inconceivable that being born of God would not affect our behavior. So he writes:

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

"By this" refers to what he described in the previous paragraph about loving one another "in deed and **truth**." If our love for one another is expressed in action and in truth, we know that we are "of the truth"; we know that we belong to Jesus who is "the way, **the truth**, and the life" (John 14:6).

As we've seen throughout this letter, John is very nuanced in the way he expresses himself. He doesn't say that our love is the basis of our salvation; we don't earn a place in God's family by loving one another. Rather, our love is evidence of our salvation; it demonstrates that God has made us his children because we bear the family resemblance (God is love).

When we love one another in deed and truth, we also "reassure our heart before him" (before God). It's as if our hearts breathe a sign of relief, "Ah, I do see the evidence that I am of the truth, that I know God, that I am his child." When we love each other the way Christ has loved us, we experience an internal confirmation that we know him. As Brian said last week, "Love proves we have life."

In verses 20-22 John addresses two conditions of the heart in relation to our assurance of salvation: when our hearts condemn us (v. 20) and when our hearts do not condemn us (vv. 21-22).

When our heart condemns us. (1 John 3:20) In verse 20 John acknowledges that our love for one another is imperfect and that our hearts are **not** always "reassured." Sometimes our hearts do "condemn us" and make us question whether or not we have eternal life.

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

The context helps us understand what John is talking about here. In the next two verses John will address when “our heart **does not** condemn us” because we’ve been obedient to the love command. So in this verse I think John is addressing those times when “our heart [**does**] condemn us” because of our disobedience or partial obedience to the command to love one another.

When we’re healthy spiritually, when we realize that our love is deficient in some way, our hearts are convicted and humble; our hearts prompt us to confess our sin to him, and experience a fresh cleansing. But there may be times when our hearts aren’t so kind. Instead of conviction we experience condemnation. And sometimes we haven’t done anything wrong and we experience false guilt and shame. Our hearts condemn us with accusations like, “How can you even call yourself a believer? You don’t love in deed and truth. . . you only care about yourself. . .”

When that happens, John wants us to remember, first of all, that “God is greater than our heart.” Our hearts are sovereign or infallible; our hearts get things wrong all the time (our hearts are often anxious and troubled for no good reason). But God is greater than our hearts: He is sovereign and infallible in everything he thinks and does.

Second, John mentions that “he knows everything,” meaning that he knows our relationship with him better than our hearts do. In 2 Timothy 2:19 Paul wrote that “The Lord knows those who are his.” Therefore, if and when our hearts condemn us, we trust in God’s mercy and grace instead of wallowing in self-condemnation. [In 1 Corinthians 4:1-5 Paul expressed how others’ accusations don’t mean you’re guilty and a clean conscience doesn’t mean you’re innocent; ultimately only God knows what’s true about our hearts. If you’re a believer, that should be very comforting.]

When our heart does not condemn us. (1 John 3:21-22) In verses 21 and 22 John loops back to when our heart reassures us before God:

21 Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God;

When we’ve loved others well our hearts don’t condemn us; as we saw in verse 19, our hearts are reassured and “have confidence before God.” This confidence is the deep, abiding sense that we are loved and wanted and secure in God’s presence. Specifically, John mentions that such confidence influences our prayer life (verse 22).

22 and whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him.

Throughout the Bible, prayer is conditional. Certain conditions have to be met before God will give us the things we ask in prayer. Here in verse 22 the condition John mentions involves “keeping his commandments and doing what pleases him.” John will explain what he means by “keeping his commandments” in the next couple of verses

(believing and loving). We need to think relationally about prayer, not transactionally. When we pray, we are asking our heavenly Father for a favor; we aren't engaging in a transaction in which we earn or merit anything.

The Bible itself talks about prayer in very relational terms. In 1 Peter 3:7, for example, Peter tells believing husbands to honor their believing wives "as fellow heirs of the grace of life *so that your prayers may not be hindered.*" Men, if your wife is a believer, she will one day inherit everything Jesus secured for her by his death and resurrection. Peter tells you to treat your wife in light of who she is (God's daughter) and what she will inherit (unfathomable glory and blessing in the presence of God). Peter says that if you don't honor your wife, your prayers will be hindered. God hears our prayers in light of how we treat his daughter. Think of God as your father-in-law. If my daughters' husbands aren't treating them well, it will certainly hinder any petitions they might bring to me. The converse is also true: if they're treating my daughters well, I'm very inclined to do whatever they want from me.

When it comes to confidence before God and confidence in prayer, this relational dynamic is at play. When we keep his commands (even imperfectly) and do what pleases him, our lives are aligned with his. We want what he wants. Our food is to do the will of God. For starters, we pray very differently than the person who is indifferent about obedience and what pleases God. And second, "whatever we ask we receive from him." In other words we can be confident in our petitions (although there are complexities to prayer that are beyond our comprehension). [We'll talk about this more in 5:14-15.]

Our love for one another reassures our hearts that we know God.

Our love and our faith go hand-in-hand. (1 John 3:23-24) In verse 23 John makes clear what he means when he speaks about "keeping his commandments" in verse 22. He has in mind two things: the doctrinal test and the moral test.

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.

Believing in Jesus and loving one another go hand in hand; in biblical Christianity, you don't have one without the other. The first commandment is "believing in the **name** of Jesus Christ." The name of Jesus stands for everything Jesus is, everything Jesus has done, and everything Jesus is doing. In this letter John emphasizes that Jesus has come in the flesh (4:2), that Jesus is the sacrifice for our sins (2:2), that Jesus is God himself (5:20). When we believe in the name of Jesus we put our confidence in Jesus in a comprehensive sense. Believing comes first.

Behavior comes second: "love one another, just as Jesus commanded us." This means laying down our lives for one another in tangible, sacrificial ways (as we saw last week - see 3:16-18). It's not merely having warm feelings about each other; loving one another translates into deeds.

In verse 24 John returns to the issue of **knowing** (assurance) that we're rightly related to God.

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.

As we believe and love, we experience a mutual abiding with God: we abide in God and God abides in us. In other words we experience a closeness to God that we otherwise wouldn't.

In the second sentence in verse 24 John uses the same expression he used at the beginning of this paragraph in verse 19: ". . . **by this we know. . .**" - meaning this is how we have assurance/confidence before God. ". . . by the Spirit whom he has given us." As we believe in Jesus and love one another, the Holy Spirit confirms to us that **God abides in us**. The indwelling Holy Spirit gives us the internal confirmation that **God is with us and in us** in the best possible sense: He is a wise and compassionate Father who leads us through this life and brings us home. In Romans 8:16 Paul wrote that "the Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God." The Spirit reassures our hearts and gives us confidence before God.

I would encourage you to experience **the Lord's Supper** this morning in the context of the passage we've just discussed. How is your confidence before God?

- * If you believe in Jesus and walk in love, invite the indwelling Holy Spirit to testify to your spirit that you are genuinely a child of God. Let the bread and the cup remind you that Jesus died on the cross for you. The God who sent his Son on your behalf surely wants to give you assurance and confidence in your relationship with him. Of course, confess any sins/failures that come to mind and experience God's cleansing.
- * If you are not yet a believer in Christ, please know that God loves you more than you can fathom. God wants a relationship with you. Simply believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.