

1 JOHN 3:19-24

INTRODUCTION

I have become increasingly aware as we have been going through this series that although this series is designed to give us assurance of salvation it is possible as we have listened to these sermons that we have experienced a real lack of assurance perhaps in some cases for the first time.

Perhaps as we have tested ourselves with the various tests that John gives us we have become increasingly uneasy and have begun to ask the question if we are really Christians. There are two different types of people that are very difficult to deal with pastorally. The first person is the person who thinks that he is a Christian when it is obvious he is not. The other person is the person who is a Christian but has genuine doubts and in fact might even say that they don't think they are.

It is by far much easier to deal with people who are either Christians and they know it or are not Christians and they know it. However life is not that simple and I would be very surprised if we all did not have real doubts about our salvation at some stage in our Christian experience. John highlights two problems that might cause us to have a lack of assurance.

1. THE PROBLEM OF A CONDEMNING HEART (vs. 19-22).

I have to confess that as I have been studying this letter I have found myself asking the question on more than one occasion if I have made any progress in my Christian faith. This letter as I have said was written to bring us assurance but it also shows how unlike the Lord Jesus we are and how many failings and shortcomings we do display in our lives. We find that our hearts so often condemn us.

Our hearts are like a judge passing sentence on a criminal, it exposes and condemns our sins. We alone know our inner motives and how often we love sin instead of hating it and being anti sin. We know how often our love for our fellow Christian has fallen short to what it should be.

We know that our love for one particular Christian falls well short from what you would expect from normal Christian love. Our hearts know things about ourselves that no one else knows about us not even our nearest and dearest. Therefore we can find our own hearts condemning us.

John's answer to such a problem is not to deny that our hearts and motives fall short from what they should be. We cannot shrug off the promptings of our heart or conscience but what we must do is to understand that God knows more than even our own hearts, for he is greater than our hearts and he knows everything (v 20). It is not that God lessens or disregards our failures; in fact he knows them better than we do, for he sees and understands us even more deeply than we can ever know ourselves.

God knows exactly where we stand spiritually and how much or how little progress we have made. He knows our strengths and weaknesses, our successes and

failures. However this is a comfort to us for God knows how much we really do hate sin or how much we really do love Jesus.

He knows that the evidence that he finds there clearly shows that the Holy Spirit dwells in our hearts and that we have been born of God. We might not hate sin as much as we should we might not love Jesus as much as we ought to but God who knows everything is the true judge of our hearts.

We are a long way from being perfect and yes we do sin more often than we ought to but God knows that in our hearts there is also a cry for a consistent Christ like love. There is a longing to hate sin more and to love our fellow Christians more. The very fact that we are concerned about our lack of love or our lack of hate for sin is actually clear evidence that we do belong to God. No unbeliever cares about sin in his or her life and they do not care about their lack of love for others. Those questions are not even on their minds. So if we are having doubts about our salvation because of our failure to measure up to these tests remember that God is greater than our hearts he knows all things and he knows that our concern about our failures is evidence that we do belong to God.

C. H. Spurgeon was once counselling a lady who doubted her salvation. He wrote on a piece of paper I do not love the Lord Jesus and asked her to sign it. She could not do so. That was a sign that she did belong to God.

It is this truth that God is greater than our hearts and knows everything that is the ground for our assurance (v 19). This is how we know we belong to the truth; this is how we find peace in our own hearts, be confident that God knows our hearts and knows that although there is much there that does not please him there is life there for the Holy Spirit dwells there. Once we have this sort of confidence and assurance then no matter how often our hearts condemn us we can come boldly before the Lord in prayer (v 21).

I do not think that what John is saying in verse 21 is that some Christians never have condemning hearts but it seems to me that his meaning is that when we deal with our condemning heart on the grounds of God's character and truth then we can be sure that God accepts us in spite of all our failings. The result of this confidence before God is that we can come before him in prayer.

Assurance is essential for bold praying. How can we pray if we are not sure our prayers will be heard never mind answered? But because God does accept us we can pour out our hearts to him, being completely open with him about our doubts and fears and about our failures because we know that He knows the true state of our hearts. It is so easy for us to be hard on ourselves especially if we are of an introspective nature, and we can be so obsessed with our failures that it strangles our whole prayer life.

If however we know that God truly knows our hearts and even though our heart condemns us from time to time for our failures we can be confident that our concern about our failures is a sure sign that we are born of God and a sure sign that we belong to the truth. Therefore no matter how we feel about our spiritual state we can

still come boldly to God with confidence knowing that we will receive from him anything we ask (v 22).

The very answering of our prayers is another sign of being born of God for in doing so God is treating us as his children; for he only listens to the prayers of those who are truly his people. Now John addresses another problem about assurance in this section

2. THE PROBLEM OF AN IMPERFECT AND INCONSISTENT OBEDIENCE (vs. 22b-24).

As we read verse 22 it seems that it is saying that answers to our prayers is dependant on obedience to God (note the word 'because'). If that is the case how can we ever have confidence to pray? We know that our obedience is always imperfect our hearts tell us that constantly. If that is so then we will not have our prayers answered and if we are not having our prayers answered how do we even know that God accepts our prayers.

The matter of assurance is at stake here. So how do we deal with this difficult verse? Well we must not avoid the logic of John's argument here. How can we receive God's answer to our prayers unless we pray for things that are in accordance with his will. God has revealed his will to us in the Scriptures and so we must remember that we cannot truly pray unless we are obeying God's will revealed to us in Scripture.

But we know we do not obey God perfectly, our obedience is very imperfect but what John is concerned with here is our pattern of obedience. Yes we are inconsistent in our obedience but the question concerns our general pattern of obedience. Are we seeking to understand God's will as revealed to us in the Scriptures. Are we as a result seeking to live in accordance with that will; even though we might fail often are we under God; seeking to live in a manner pleasing to him. Are we seeking to pray for things that we know please God and are in accordance with His will.

When we are seeking to do that then we can come boldly before God in prayer and expect God to answer our prayers that are in accordance with his will (5:14). So when we feel less than Christian and when are hearts condemn us because of our imperfect obedience to Jesus we must ask ourselves about our general pattern of obedience. Are we concerned to know and do his will? If the answer is yes; that is a mark that we are Christians for no unbeliever is concerned about that.

So the consequence of that is that we can come before the Lord in prayer and enjoy our relationship with our Father as we pour out our hearts including our imperfect and inconsistent obedience to Him. As we seek to live in a way that is pleasing to God our desires will become moulded to his.

We therefore will want his will in our own lives and in the lives of others, rather than perusing our own selfish desires. So if a mark of assurance is our general desire to obey and our actual obedience to the will of God then how do we know what that will entail for us. What are the commands that we are to obey? Well John takes the many commands that we need to obey and combines all that pleases God into one

great statement (v 23). All that pleases God is summed up in two key truths. Belief and love.

The Greek verb for 'believe' is in what is known as an aorist tense indicating a definite action at a specific point in time, we believed. The verb for to love is in a continuous tense because love is our constant expression of the truth in which we believed. We believe in Christ and all that he has done, we commit ourselves to him and the outworking of that commitment is our love for others. Faith in Jesus Christ and love must always go together.

Now the construction of the sentence in the Greek is not so much thinking about belief in the sense of commitment to Jesus Christ although that is obviously implied, but it is more to do with believing the right things. John once again is thinking of the false teachers who did not believe the right doctrines about Jesus Christ and therefore by implication are not true Christians.

The churches that John is writing to were tempted to wonder if the false teaches were right and whether the doctrines taught by the church were actually wrong. But John is assuring the church that right doctrine is important for only by right belief will one walk in a way pleasing to the Lord and only those who do so can expect to have their prayers answered and have an assurance of salvation. So to be absolutely clear here, a true Christian is one who obeys both the commands to believe and to love. Our obedience to both these commands will always be less than perfect and tainted with sin, but our continuance in them is an important mark of genuine Christianity.

John tells us this in the final verse of this chapter (v 24). Having right belief in Jesus and having love for our fellow Christians is clear evidence that we live in him. That means that we are connected to Jesus Christ that we are in a relationship with him. But John goes even further than this because he says that obedience to his commands is clear evidence that he lives in us by his Holy Spirit. This is exactly what the Lord Jesus promised in John's gospel (14:23).

As we see the evidences that we are obeying God's commands even allowing for the fact that our obedience is often inconsistent and imperfect, then the Spirit assures us of the genuineness of our Christianity, for our obedience is evidence that we live in him and he lives in us by the Holy Spirit. We have what Paul calls the inner witness of the Spirit (Romans 8:16) bearing witness to our spirit that we belong to God. It's the Spirit that points the evidence out to us and then assures us that we live in him and he in us.

Therefore as we finish let's remember these truths, they will help us in our assurance of salvation. God is all knowing he knows our hearts and sees the work of the Spirit. Even if our life is full of inconsistencies and imperfect obedience he reads our hearts and knows whether our general direction in life is one of belief in Jesus and love for our fellow Christians. If that is the case then let us be assured that we live in God and he lives in us by his Holy Spirit.

Amen