

**Reading:** 1 John 3:11-24

**Theme:** Comforting Assurance.

John's aim as he wrote to hurting and confused believers was to encourage, to establish them in their faith and all they had been taught. He is repeating a cycle of tests so that they could see and examine both their lives and the lives of those who were trying to deceive them. We've seen the test of obedience in 2: 28-3:10, the test of love in v11-18 and now, as he did in his 1<sup>st</sup> cycle of tests, John goes off on a digression before moving on to the doctrinal test. This time the digression is about assurance in the light of their condemning hearts. The cycles of tests are very searching, very blunt and penetrating. As they probed and searched it could have been that some of John's 1<sup>st</sup> readers were wounded in their own consciences, hearts and felt failures, felt write-offs as Christians and even that there was no hope for them.

If we are honest, we will have to own that we all have had problems with assurance at some stage of our Christian life - doubts, fears and a sense of unworthiness, even it being unlikely or impossible for us to be a Christian because of... I feel that John the apostle was aware of how his writing could have had an adverse effect on true believers. That is why he, the experienced, sensitive apostle of the love of God, now breaks off in this digression to deal with challenges or threats regarding our assurance, about belonging to God's family and having eternal life. Actually, this is a good principle to note for all who would teach and preach. It's not always blasting away as "sons of thunder" (*Jesus' nickname for John and James his brother*), but there is, even with difficult and searching things to say, a right place for pastoral care, gentleness and encouragement. I need to remember this and work it out in my ministry as pastor and hopefully in preaching on such verses designed for

encouragement, as here, but also throughout Scripture and not blast people.

There are times when we can sing and it thrills us to do so “*Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine:*” [MP 59], but at other times our hearts and lives are shot through with doubts and may question “*Is that really true of me?*” Pastorally it is difficult to deal with people who think that they are Christians, but are not; or those who doubt whether they are Christians and yet appear to be so! It is much easier to deal with those who are Christians and know they are, or those who are not Christians and readily acknowledge they are not!

Here John in the short digression away from the 3 tests, and yet it includes all 3, says much to encourage and comfort these hurting, struggling and confused Christians. My desire and prayer in my preparation and delivery of this message is that we would all also be encouraged and comforted concerning our own Christian life and even stirred up to make this salvation ours if we are not sure we know that we are not Christians. In v19-24 there are 3 areas I want us to note: Assurance of Heart, Confidence in Prayer and the Presence of God with Us. We will only look at the 1<sup>st</sup> area this evening:

### **1. Assurance.** (v19-20)

The section v19-24 begins an end with the words “*this is how we know*” - the force is *how we continually know and keep on knowing*. John wants believers to know, to be assured of their faith and its reality. In a sense the whole letter was written with the idea and theme of assurance in view - to assure them of things they had been taught at the beginning and they were true and reliable still and needed to know these things even though they were under attack.

John has been speaking of loving the brethren, this being a practical active matter involving self-sacrificial love for the good of others and to prevent harm to them. It has to be real and not just hot air love “*words or tongue*”, but real in “*actions and in truth*” (v18). Such love costs us and we may wonder if it is worth it, but it is! The by-products of this love more than make up for any cost. It does not mean we “love” others because of what we’ll get out of it - that is selfishness and not love, but God links our loving believers with benefits to ourselves. That is why John wrote v19 “*This then...*”, “*By this...*”, “*Hereby...*”

What John wrote in v19ff is connected to truly loving and actively showing such love to our brothers and sisters, which is in itself connected to our living obediently and are followed on by the need for right belief - all are related and interconnected. We are not to think we can have a loose or false belief and have the assurance, confidence and presence of God. We are not to think we can live immorally or loosely and have them either; we are not to presume we can harbour hatred in our heart or resentment against another - whether believer or unbeliever and we know such. We will be deluding ourselves.

**A. Dangers:** There is also the danger of those who are really God’s child that they, by circumstances, by feeling their own weaknesses and failures, by disposition of mind or temperament, that they constantly feel useless, a failure, feel they are a pathetic Christian, they may not even accept themselves or accept that God accepts them. They have a heart that condemns them, or we may say a conscience that condemns them. We are to realise the devil is a cunning boxer and he would use even our right sensitivity, our gentle and sensitive nature to turn it against us by using it in his

service to accuse us, to browbeat us down to cause us to think we and all we do is useless and we are unworthy; to cause us to have a morbid, introverted kind of self-examination coupled with self-condemnation of an unbiblically ruthless kind. We may find ourselves left in darkness and despair by such and not benefited by that which should have been such spiritual and beneficial exercise of honest examination before God. The devil can twist and corrupt such and we are left in darkness, despair and even spiritual depression, with a sense of condemnation filling our lives.

The devil would bring us low and leave there. Yet the Holy Spirit in His work can bring us low, but He will always point us to our Saviour. As we sang earlier (MP 975 v2) *“When Satan tempts me to despair, and tells me of the guilt within, upward I look, and see Him there who made an end of all my sin. Because the sinless Saviour died, my sinful soul is counted free; for God the Just is satisfied to look on Him, and pardon me.”* We are to remember that nobody is perfect. While we would all acknowledge that, we to realise that is a hypocrite’s bed of ease and sadly a believer’s bed of thorns. People, even believers can go to the one extreme or the other - sin doesn’t matter, it doesn’t matter how I live or love or what I believe; while other people are not just sensitive, but oversensitive and imagine they are not worthy, or they are useless, or are written off, or almost written off!

**B. Comfort:** Can we have an assurance that we are a Christian, an assurance that puts our hearts at rest? Yes, we can! The word of God says this here *“this then is how we know we belong to the truth”*. Many Bible passengers have this word “know” e.g. *“for I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day.”* (2 Timothy 1:12 AV) This series of tests are designed to give us the

evidence that we are God's and in the truth. If we ignore such, then sooner or later our nonbiblical lifestyle will expose us or be exposed in us. It is not enough to have only an intellectual assent to the truth, or to only say the right things, but these must be lived out in our lives else our hearts will truly and rightly condemn us and no matter what cover-ups we hide behind in our public or private lives, God knows us because He is greater than our hearts.

Commentators are divided in their opinion here in v20 and question is John sounding a warning or an encouragement when he wrote that verse. One writer says it is a warning and then goes on to write of its encouragement!! Personally, as I've looked at this section, I see v20 primarily as an encouragement, for it is in the context of a section full of encouragement to those who are hurting because of false teaching and promoting false lifestyles. Yes it also sounds a clear warning to those who presume they are fine, who live carelessly and indifferent to God and who pay no attention to their hearts and consciences. It declares that they're not to delude themselves for God knows each one of us inside out and He will not be silenced by us trying to ignore and stifle our consciences.

If we are Christian, seeking to live out the truth we know and are trying to show who we are in Christ, then we will have a love for our brothers and sisters, we will be trying to live righteously. These are done not to earn or to merit our salvation, but because we are so grateful to God for all He has done for us in saving us and we find that we gratefully and joyfully live in this manner, indeed we are enabled and helped to live in such a way.

How can we know a heart free from condemnation? If we are Christian, then we are going to honestly want to know the condition of our lives and heart and so we pray as did David in

Psalm 139:23-24 *“Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.”* Or as Francis Bottome said in one of his hymns *“Search all my sense and know my heart, who only canst make known, and let the deep, the hidden part, to me be fully shown. Throw light into the darkened cells where passions reign within; quicken my conscience till it feels the loathsomeness of sin.”*

If we are not a Christian, we will not want God to do that, we would not want our sins and failures shown us, but as a believer we may not want it either, as it will be painful and we will not like what is shown to us, because it is painful for God to search us and to show us ourselves. As the Lord would do that, we would want to hide, or to excuse our sin and shortcomings, but then we are to remember God - remember His character and Being. That may seem a daunting prospect as God is so awesome, holy and knows us thoroughly; but we are also to remember He is abounding in love, grace and mercy. There are times when we need to be reminded of His awesomeness, but other times we need to focus on His awesome mercy, grace and love, especially when we have a condemning heart. At such times the word of God and the Holy Spirit will point us to such graciousness e.g. Romans 8:31-32 which says *“What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all—how will He not also, along with Him, graciously give us all things?”*

We are not to fool ourselves. God sees past all our masks and veneers; He has better than x-ray vision and knowledge, yet if we are His child, He also sees our grief for such failures, our pain at such things as we let Him down and He wants us to be aware of His love. We may forget what our hearts were like before

conversion, but He knows. He also knows our desire to live obediently and to love our brothers and sisters. He knows our struggles, efforts and our practice of doing such and He sees them as the evidences of His new life in us. We are, by His grace and the work of His Spirit, to be able to recognise the evidence of His grace and working in us also. As we apply those grace evidences we are to quiet, sooth our accusing heart. In effect we say to our accusing heart *“Shut up - look here is grace at work, His grace at work there, here is grace at work yet again!”* We are to build a case against our accusing heart and we are sure, reassure, set our hearts at rest before Him.

It is not making out what we are not, but it is applying the evidences of the reality of the things John has already written of in these tests and we say that there is evidence of God’s grace. It may not be as it should be, not as we’d want it to be, but there is evidence of the new life of God - obedience and love shed abroad in our heart. The puritan Richard Baxter wrote *“He that wants assurance must not stand still, but exercise his graces till his doubts vanish.”* In other words, live out the Christian life from a heart right with God. Another puritan, John Owen, said *“Take heed of spending time in complaints when vigorous actings of grace is your duty.”* There is a place for Christian duty, even if and when we don’t feel like it - we still have a duty to live righteously, to love the Saviour as commanded and to love other believers. Self-pity will not nurture assurance, but only nurture dejection and dark thoughts. Moping is no substitute for walking with our God and Saviour.

**C. Progress:** Assurance is not a complacent heart and spirit before God, but **a clear one** and that may come to us over a long period of time as God deals with us. It is not necessarily an instantaneous thing. Sometimes it can be and some are converted and have an

assurance and the joy of the Lord it brings and some believers may know that sweet experience in their conversion. Perhaps later they may sink into doubts and dark times and have a need of that sense of assurance again. The devil cannot rob us of our salvation, but, he will, if we let him, make us miserable and we will fail to enjoy the wonders and assurance of being God's child and the joy of our salvation.

God wants us to know, to be assured we are His. We are to work out and live out the tests and see that we apply God's grace evidences to our condemning heart. We are even to be willing to be searched by Him, to allow Him to put our hearts to rest by His grace and then with a sense of assurance of His love for us, we can have confidence in prayer and be aware of the delights of His presence.

Our God is a lovely God and the Lord Jesus is a lovely Saviour. My prayer and desire for us all is that this assurance, confidence and His presence be known in our ongoing Christian lives until we enter into the fullness of joy when we will no longer have need to walk by faith, but then we will see Him as He is and we shall be like Him.