

The Unconverted “Believer” (19): Assurance of Salvation (3)

Several weeks ago we gave attention to 1 John 5:13, in which the Apostle John gave the reason for having written his epistle. It reads, “These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you may continue to believe in the name of the Son of God” (1 John 5:13). We had expressed then that by “these things” John was referring to his entire epistle of 1 John, not just the immediate, local context of this verse. The purpose for which John wrote was so that his readers may be assured of their salvation, they had legitimate claim to know God through Jesus Christ and that they possessed eternal life through Him. We may thank God that He would have us enjoy a sound and settled assurance of our salvation, that we have eternal life through Jesus Christ. Today I would like us to consider in some detail the various “things” that John wrote by which true Christians may be assured of their salvation. But before delving into these, let us review several matters of importance in order to reinforce the Christian’s certain assurance of possessing salvation that can never be lost or forfeited.

I. Several matters in review of what the Bible teaches regarding the soul’s assurance of salvation

A. Three major assertions regarding the Bible’s teaching regarding assurance of salvation

First, we affirm that the Word of God teaches us that assurance is possible for Christians in this life. This possibility of settled certainty, therefore, repudiates Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox teaching that it is not possible, nor even desirable, to have assurance of salvation in this life. It also shows that the teaching generally held and promoted by Arminianism is error. Sadly there are many Christians who are in non-reformed churches who are taught that though they presently possess salvation, through their own neglect or failure they can lose their salvation and be damned eternally. This is terrible error and shows itself in many troubled hearts of those who have fallen into this error. The Word of God teaches clearly and repeatedly that assurance of salvation is possible and desirable for the true Christian. Consider these few verses of affirmation:

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. (Rom. 8:38)

For this reason I also suffer these things; nevertheless I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that He is able to keep what I have committed to Him until that Day. (2 Tim. 1:12)

Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. (1 John 2:3)

We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love his brother abides in death. (1 John 3:14)

These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you may continue to believe in the name of the Son of God. (1 John 5:13)

Second, we affirm that though true Christians may have assurance of their salvation, there are many in this world that possess a false assurance, in that they believe themselves to be true Christians, but they fail the tests of Scripture. Through their presumption, bolstered by fallen false teachers, led about by the devil, “many” are deceived respecting the salvation of their souls. And so, we take to heart the warning of the apostle to professing Christians,

“Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you fail to meet the test! (2 Cor. 13:5)

The Lord Jesus Himself spoke frequently and directly against the presumptuous and the hypocrite about their false assurance that they stood in favor of God. Our whole series, “The Unconverted ‘Believer’”, has been our effort to expose this error and through the grace of the Lord Jesus turn some to true salvation through Jesus Christ. May the Lord awaken the churches to this most important matter.

Third, we affirm that true Christians may struggle with obtaining or retaining their assurance of salvation. There are a number of possible reasons for this, which we have attempted to identify and clarify. There is a classic book of a Puritan writer, **Thomas Hooker** (1586–1647), who wrote, *The Poor Doubting Christian Drawn to Christ*, in which he addressed many of the issues of these struggling Christians.¹ One matter he addressed that commonly arises in struggling Christians is when they think that their sins are so great that they are beyond the point of God saving them. This happens when a Christian who has been introspective of his heart or life has become so aware of the presence and the wickedness of his sin that he despairs of any hope for himself. These people see their sin clearly, but they do not see the grace of God and the satisfaction of Christ’s life and death as sufficient to save them from their sin. Here is an excerpt from Hooker that addressed this spiritual problem:

So here you have the first ground to stir up hope, your sins are pardonable. There is more power in God to show mercy to you, than power in sin to destroy you.

The Lord Jesus Christ came to seek and to save that which was lost. It was the scope of His coming. Now says the broken and humble sinner, “I am lost. Did Christ come to save sinners? Then Christ must fail of his end, or I of my comfort. God says, come to me all ye that are weary and heavy laden: I am weary; unless the Lord intended good to me, why did He invite me, and bid me come? Surely He means to show mercy to me.”

Oh take heed of despair. Question your estate; you may; you must; but to cast away all hope is very heinous in the eyes of the Lord. Cast away all carnal confidence you must, and yet you must hope. “Let Israel hope in the Lord: for with the Lord there is mercy, and with him is plenteous redemption” (Psa. 130:7).

The Lord takes this very ill at our hands. You go to the deep dungeon of your corruption, and there you say “these sins can never be pardoned: I am still proud, and more stubborn: this distress God sees not, God succors not, His hand cannot reach, His mercy cannot save.” Now mark what the prophet says to such a perplexed soul, Isaiah 40:27, “Why sayest you, my way is hid from the Lord!” The Lord says, “why do you say so? The young men shall faint and be weary, but they that wait on the Lord shall renew their strength.” Is any thing too hard for the Lord? You wrong God exceedingly: You think it is matter of humility, to count yourself so vile. Can God pardon such a wretch’s sin as mine? Mark that place of the Psalmist, they spake against the Lord, “can the Lord prepare a table in the wilderness?” (Ps. 78:19). They spake not against themselves, but against the Lord. So we speak against God, and charge God himself. “It is true,” says the soul, “Manasseh was pardoned, Paul was converted, God’s saints have been received to mercy, but can my sin be pardoned? Can my soul be quickened? No, no, my sins are greater than can be pardoned,” says the despairing soul. Consider how injurious this is to God, to make the power of sin greater to condemn you, than the power of God to save you, to make the power of satan stronger to ruin you than the power of God to relieve you and succor you. And what can you say more? And what can you do more against the Lord? Is not this to make God an underling to satan and to sin? This is just as to say, “the Almightiness of God is weaker than the weakness of sin, the sufficiency of God is weaker than the malice of satan.” It is so, poor humble sinners many times will make bitter complaints this way, and they think they speak against themselves. No, no, they speak against the Lord. They spake against the Lord, when they said, “can the Lord prepare a table in the wilderness?” So you speak in this desperate manner: “why truth, Lord, this proud heart will never be humbled if any thing would have wrought, it would have been done before this day. How many sermons, how many mercies, how many judgments,

¹ I have this book in a digital file that I am able to email to anyone interested in receiving and reading it.

how many prayers? And yet this proud heart, this stubborn heart will not be reformed.” You think you speak against yourselves now; no, no, you speak against the Lord. And know, this is one of the greatest sins you commit, to say your sins cannot be forgiven.

Answer two: As this sin is injurious to God, so it is dangerous to your own soul. It is that which removes the bridge, and cuts off all passages, and there can no spiritual comfort or consolation come into the soul of a poor sinner, Luke 3:5,6, “Every valley (or ditch) shall be filled, and then all flesh shall see the salvation of the Lord.” What are these ditches? Why nothing else but those deep gulfs and ditches of despair: and unless they be filled, no man can see the Lord Jesus Christ. The truth is, this despair of the soul is that which cuts the sinews of man’s comfort, and takes off the power and edge of all the means of grace, daunts all a man’s endeavors, nay, it plucks up endeavors by the very roots; for that which a man despairs of, he will never labor after. It is here, as with a man in the pangs of death; unto such a man, as all things are unavailable for his good, his bed will not ease him, meat will not refresh him, chafing will not revive him, at last we say he is gone, he is a dead man. Friends leave him, physicians leave him. They may go and pray for him, and mourn for him, but they cannot recover him. So this despair of soul makes a man cast off all hope, and lie down in a forlorn condition, expecting no good to come. “Alas,” says the poor soul, “what skills for a man to pray? What profits it a man to read? What benefit in all the means of grace? The truth is that the stone is rolled upon me, and my condemnation is sealed forever, and therefore I will never look after Christ, grace and salvation any more.” Let him come to hear the word, and mark how he casts off the benefit of it. It was marvelous, seasonable and profitable, it was the good word of God unto such as have share therein: why then may not you expect benefit therefrom? “No” says the soul, “the time of grace is past, the day is gone.” If ministers would pray for him, and good people pray for him, he bids them save their labor, for hell is his portion, and his condemnation is sealed in heaven. See now and consider what desperate danger despair brings to a poor heart, and carries him beyond the reach of mercy. That’s a sweet passage of David’s, Psalm 77:7, “Will the Lord cast off forever? I said this is my infirmity.” The word in the original, this is my sickness, as who shall say, “this would be my death; what, is mercy gone for ever? Then my life is gone, then is all my comfort gone, my hope gone.” Therefore take heed of this, it takes off the edge of all our endeavors and God’s ordinances that might do us good.

Another excellent book available on assurance of salvation was written by **Thomas Brooks** (1608-1680). It is entitled, *Heaven On Earth; A Treatise on Christian Assurance*.² I recommend it to you. For your benefit, there is included the detailed Table of Contents of this book at the end of these notes. Just be reading the subjects that he treats that touch on the matter of assurance suggests that we have not touched on this matter very extensively.

The nature and degrees of assurance vary from person to person. Some Christians enjoy great degrees of peace of mind that they are secure in Christ. But there are other Christians who may rarely or perhaps never in this life attain to a great level of peace about the eternal well-being of their souls. People are different, they have different life experiences that contribute in various ways to their thinking and their emotions, and God may vary in the degree of grace that He imparts to the soul so as to give peace. But thankfully, our security in the Lord is not based upon the degree of assurance we might profess, for our salvation is secured by the grace of God through Jesus Christ alone. **Charles Spurgeon** (1834-1892) wrote of the varied experience of Christians regarding their assurance:

Many persons are greatly disquieted in mind because their experience of conviction or comfort has not been like that of others. They fancy that they cannot have come to Christ aright because they have not felt precisely the same joys or expressions as certain saints of whom they have read. Now, should these good people be so troubled? We think not. Uniformity is not God’s rule of working either in nature or in grace. No two human faces display exactly the same lineaments; sons of the same mother, born at the same birth, may be as different as Jacob and Esau. Not even in leagues of forest will two leaves be found

² Thomas Brooks, **Heaven on Earth** (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1961, orig. 1654), 320 pp. I also have this book in a PDF file if anyone is interested in reading this.

in all respects alike. Diversity is the rule of nature, and let us rest assured that variety is the rule of grace. (Spurgeon)

B. Three major ways in which God imparts assurance of salvation to His people.

How may a person come to have a sound, biblical assurance of salvation? The Holy Scriptures teach us that assurance of our salvation may be given to us from God in three ways. *First, assurance is possible through believing God's promises in His Word.* Ultimately all struggles with assurance of the Christian is due to a weakness of faith in what God has promised in His Word. For example, consider the promise of Jesus: "All that the Father gives me shall come to me; and him that comes to me I will in *no wise cast out*" (John 6:37). And so, we are to believe the promise. You have come to Him in repentance and faith. You would not have done so apart from His work of grace in your soul. Now you are to take Him at His Word. To fail or refuse to believe Him itself is sin. He has promised you that He will not cast you away from Him.

Second, God may give assurance of salvation to His people through grace imparted directly to the soul by the Holy Spirit. This is a *subjective* basis of assurance that is unverifiable by others. There is an assurance that God Himself gives to His own, an assurance that is produced and sustained, and renewed in those times of personal spiritual decline and hardening. It is a personal, spiritual sense of peace or well-being that the Holy Spirit gives to the soul. Several verses may be cited that speak to this.

1 Thessalonians 1:2-5. "We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you in our prayers, ³remembering without ceasing your work of faith, labor of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the sight of our God and Father, ⁴knowing, beloved brethren, your election by God. ⁵For our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power, *and in the Holy Spirit and in much assurance*, as you know what kind of men we were among you for your sake."

Romans 8:12-17. "Therefore, brethren, we are debtors -- not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. ¹³For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. ¹⁴For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God. ¹⁵*For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, 'Abba, Father.'* ¹⁶*The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God,* ¹⁷and if children, then heirs -- heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together. "

The 20th century reformed and evangelical leader, **D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones**, believed that this was the highest and most convincing manner of possessing assurance of salvation. After addressing the first two ways to have assurance of salvation, he wrote of the third based on Romans 8. He wrote:

But there is yet another and higher form of assurance: "The Spirit beareth witness with our spirits that we are the children of God." The first two I have mentioned refer to our spirits; but the Spirit Himself also beareth witness 'with' our spirits that we are the children of God. This is the highest and the most glorious assurance of all and it is 'given' to us and is not the result of our deductions from the Scriptures. Goodwin, and Owen, and Bolton, John Preston, John Howe and many others of the Puritans, as well as Jonathan Edwards and indeed John Wesley have eloquent teaching concerning this."

Third, assurance may be secured through passing the tests of Scripture. These may be classified or categorized into three kinds of tests, all of which may be read in 1 John. We will give our attention to these shortly.

Others have identified more than three ways by which God gives His people assurance of their salvation. **Robert Reymond** (1932-2013) wrote of five ways:

Such assurance of salvation and of eternal life springs from (1) an intelligent understanding of the nature of salvation (2 Pet. 1:2, 3, 5-6, 8; 3:18), (2) the recognition of the immutability of the gifts and

calling of God (Rom. 11:29), (3) obedience to the commandments of God (1 John 2:3), (4) self-examination (2 Cor. 13:5), (5) and the inward witness of the Holy Spirit who “Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God” (Rom. 8:15-16; Gal. 4:6).³

Reymond also wrote of the difficulty of some Christians to retain their assurance of salvation. This is largely due to their own issues. We have already addressed some of these matters, but here are his words regarding this matter:

It is the duty of every Christian to cultivate such assurance through “the right use of ordinary means [of grace]” (Westminster Confession of Faith, XVIII. iii). Peter urges Christians to “be all the more diligent to make certain about his calling and choosing you” (2 Pet. 1:10). But either because of immaturity in understanding the nature of their salvation or because of the weakness of faith due to negligence in cultivating their faith or to the disobedience to the commandments of God, worldliness, prayerlessness, or some other sin, some “true believers may have the assurance of their salvation divers ways shaken, diminished, and intermitted” (Westminster Confession of Faith, XVIII. iv). In other words, God will not permit *true* believers to persist in their immaturity or their sin and at the same time to continue to enjoy unabated peace of conscience and joy in the Holy Spirit (see Psa. 32:4; 38:2; 51:12). He will chasten His “true children” (Heb. 12:6-8), and “His hand of conviction” will grow ever heavier upon them. In the words of the Westminster Confession of Faith, they will “incur God’s displeasure...come to be deprived of some measure of comforts...and bring temporal judgments upon themselves (XVII, iii). If they persist in their waywardness, He will even remove the light of His countenance from them and permit them to lose their *assurance* of salvation...⁴

Thomas Brooks, who was mentioned above, did not state specifically the ways in which God gives assurance of salvation to His people, but he did identify the things that Christians should do in order to gain “well-grounded assurance.” In chapter 5 of his work, he listed nine activities to which Christians should give themselves if they desired to obtain assurance of their salvation. They include the following”

1. Be active in exercising grace
2. Assurance is obtained by obedience
3. Follow diligently the instructions of the Holy Spirit
4. Be diligent in attendance upon ordinances
5. Pay particular attention to the scope of God’s promises of mercy
6. Six matters in which Christ’s followers are distinguished from all others
7. Seek to grow in grace
8. Seek assurance when the soul is in its best frames
9. Ascertain whether you have the things that accompany salvation; notably knowledge, faith, repentance, obedience, love, prayer, perseverance, and hope⁵

Let us next consider in detail the three tests of 1 John that we had mentioned earlier.

III. Three major tests of 1 John whereby we may be assured of our salvation.

Thankfully God has provided us tests by which we may perform a self-examination. [We had made note of these two weeks ago toward the end of our sermon, but because of the time, we were unable to address these matters in detail. We will do so now.] The three tests in the epistle of 1 John and may be categorized under three headings.

1. The test of the faith – This has to do with what you believe.

³ Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998), p. 792.

⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 792f.

⁵ Thomas Brooks, *Heaven on Earth*, pp 150ff.

2. The test of fellowship – This concerns whom you love.
3. The test of life – This is the matter of how you live.

You will recall the problem that had led to the Apostle John to write the epistle of 1 John. There were numbers of people in that region of Asia Minor who had professed to have become Christians, but they had retained some very serious beliefs and practices from the Greek mystery religions of the day. They twisted and distorted the Christian message and the nature of the Christian life, even while they joined themselves to Christian churches. John wrote this epistle to help the churches identify and distinguish true Christians from these false Christians, while giving reasons that true Christians may have assurance of their salvation. The apostle set forth that true Christians had a legitimate basis for assurance, even as he exposed the heretics as ones who had no ground of assurance of their salvation. Those people were condemned, for their beliefs and practice showed that they did not know the Lord savingly. And so, through John's inspired response and instruction to this historic setting, the Lord has given us this epistle as one of the clearest and fullest treatments of assurance of salvation that is contained in the Holy Scriptures.

Each of the three tests would reveal those who espoused an aberrant faith. Failure in any one of these three tests would be fatal to a sound hope of salvation. False assurance is bolstered by either not submitting to examination, or not submitting to thorough examination. Let us consider each of these in more detail.

A. The test of faith – What do you believe?

There are some truths taught in the Word of God that must be believed in order to be a recipient of God's grace in salvation have salvation. Every child of God must be able to pass this test of the faith, of what you believe. An example of this inquiry is 1 John 2:22f, which reads,

Who is a liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? He is antichrist who denies the Father and the Son. Whoever denies the Son does not have the Father either; he who acknowledges the Son has the Father also.

The false teaching that had infiltrated many of the churches was a refusal to believe in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, that Jesus was the eternal Son of God who had assumed in addition to His divine nature a human nature. Jesus Christ is both truly God and truly man. But these heretical members of churches denied this cardinal truth. They did not believe that God, who is a pure and holy spirit being, could indwell a human, physical body. Some of these heretics denied Jesus' deity, that He was not of the same essence as God the Father. But at this time in this place there were more of these heretics who denied our Savior's humanity. He had only been an apparition while on earth in that people thought that He was a man, but was not. The manner in which the Apostle John had opened this epistle repudiated this false teaching. John had declared that he and the other apostles had both seen and "handled" the body of the Lord Jesus. He was indeed both God and man. John had written of Jesus:

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life—²the life was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness, and declare to you that eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us—³that which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ. (1 John 1:1-3)

Anyone who failed this test of the faith regarding the true identity and nature of Jesus Christ as God and man, neither knew God the Father or His Son. They were not true Christians.

Apparently there had been some in their churches who had earlier confessed that they had believed and confessed the truth about Jesus Christ, but who had later come under the influence of the heretical teachers and they had adopted these perverted views of the person of Jesus Christ. John wrote that these heretics had never been true Christians, for if they had been, they would have never departed from the truth about Jesus Christ. We read this in 1 John 2:19f:

Little children, it is the last hour; and as you have heard that the Antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come, by which we know that it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but they went out that they might be made manifest, that none of them were of us.

The true Christians had refused to adopt this false teaching, for God had preserved them. He had equipped them with His Spirit so that they could never be deceived and drawn away from their true understanding of the person of Jesus Christ. John wrote of these true Christians:

²²But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and you know all things. ²¹I have not written to you because you do not know the truth, but because you know it, and that no lie is of the truth. (1 John 2:20f)

We may conclude from this epistle of 1 John that in order to be assured of one's salvation, there are some biblical truths that are essential to understand and believe in order to receive the gift of eternal life. Now we do not have the time or desire to set before us every essential truth that must be believed, but I might propose a short list for our consideration. In order to be assured of one's salvation the following scriptural truths must be understood and believed wholly:

1. There is one and only one true God who is the Creator and the Ruler of all things and He has revealed Himself and His will through the inspired Holy Scriptures--the Bible.
2. This one God is manifest from eternity in three persons—God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Believing in the Holy Trinity is an essential biblical doctrine and apart from believing this salvation is not possible.
3. All mankind are sinners who have fallen from the favor and blessing of God and they all are under His wrath unless God Himself acts to save them from their sin. Due to their sin they are unable and unwilling to acknowledge and submit to Him as their God. God moves them by His grace to desire and seek Him.
4. God sent His eternal Son into this world to assume our nature (a human body and soul) in order to save us from our sin through His sinless life, sacrificial death on the cross, resurrection from the dead, and ascension to His throne in heaven as the enthroned King, the Lord of all humanity.
5. Salvation is granted freely to those God saves by His grace by bringing them to see and turn from their sin (repentance), which is essentially their selfish and stubborn insistence to govern their own lives contrary to the laws of God, and to believe and submit wholly to Jesus Christ as the only Savior and Lord.
6. The true believer believes that through God's grace alone through his faith alone in Jesus Christ alone that God has forgiven him of his sin and had declared him to be righteous whereby he is promised exoneration on the future day of judgment of the world.
7. The true believer confesses with His mouth and through his baptism his faith in Jesus Christ as His Lord and Savior, as he moves to join with the Lord's people, whom he has come to know and love.
8. He continues to live his life in faith, obedience, and fellowship with His Lord and Savior and His people as he awaits his future inheritance promised in Jesus Christ to him at his own death and resurrection.
9. He may be assured that He will escape condemnation on the Day of Judgment through Jesus Christ who has saved Him from the wrath of God on his sin, and he awaits the promise of inheriting eternal life that he will enjoy in the presence of God and His people.

This is probably a "short list", which may be incomplete. But it serves our purpose in underscoring that there are essential truths that must be believed by the sinner in order to be assured that he is the object of God's saving grace in Jesus Christ. The test of the faith is essential to a sound assurance of salvation. If you pass the test of what it is you believe, you prove that you are not a *heretic*. But there are two other tests of equal importance. All three tests must be successfully passed.

B. The test of fellowship – Who do you love?

There is a second test that may be employed to assess and differentiate between the true Christian and the nominal or false Christian. This is a test of fellowship, in other words, this is a self-examination as to who you love, and with whom you desire and enjoy to be with. Now some would say this test should be whether or not you love God or His Son. And, yes, obviously we should ask ourselves whether or not we love God. And we should ask ourselves if God truly loves us! But even these false Christians in the churches that John was addressing claimed to love God and that He loved them. But John declared that in reality they did not love God because they failed the test of loving true Christians, God's own people.

The way you test yourself if you truly love God is if you truly love God's people. Those who had abandoned the true doctrine of Christ did not love the true brethren who maintained their belief and love for the true Jesus Christ. One goes with the other. When someone comes to love God, he at the same time comes to love others who love God. But these heretics had separated from them. God Himself teaches His people to love one another. Paul wrote to the church at Thessalonica telling them this truth.

But concerning brotherly love you have no need that I should write to you, ***for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another***; ¹⁰and indeed you do so toward all the brethren who are in all Macedonia. But we urge you, brethren, that you increase more and more..." (1 Thess. 4:9)

Whenever Paul had heard of some in some place who had become Christians, he looked for two evidences of the legitimacy of their profession. He indicated this in several of his letters. To the church at Ephesus he wrote, "

"Therefore I also, after I heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus ***and your love for all the saints***, do not cease to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers" (Eph. 1:15)

And to the church at Colossae he wrote,

We give thanks to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you, ⁴since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus ***and of your love for all the saints***; ⁵because of the hope which is laid up for you in heaven, of which you heard before in the word of the truth of the gospel, ⁶which has come to you, as it has also in all the world, and is bringing forth fruit, as it is also among you since the day you heard and knew the grace of God in truth; (Col. 1:3-6)

It was with this truth of salvation in mind that John wrote in his first epistle these words:

If someone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen? And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God must love his brother also. (1 John 4:21f)

Here are several more related verses:

He who loves his brother abides in the light, and there is no cause for stumbling in him. (1 John 2:10)

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. (1 John 4:7)

Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who loves Him who begot also loves him who is begotten of Him. (1 John 5:1)

There are many who claim to be Christian who would say that they have assurance of salvation, but they have no interest or desire to be with or among the people of God. Back in 2011, ten years ago, when radio station WVNE approached me to produce our radio program for them, they told me they wanted local church programming for they determined that upwards to a third of their regular listeners were unaffiliated with a local church. There is a terrible deficiency in someone who claims to love God but who does not love others

who love God. John wrote that this is one sure way to identify and distinguish true Christians from those who were Christian in name only—nominal Christians.

C. The test of life – How do you live?

Let us turn to read all of **1 John 3:1-10**.

Behold that manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God! Therefore the world does not know us, because it did not know Him. ²Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. ³And *everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself*, just as He is pure.

⁴Whoever commits sin also commits lawlessness, and sin is lawlessness. ⁵And you know that *He was manifested to take away our sins*, and in Him there is no sin. ⁶*Whoever abides in Him does not sin*. Whoever sins has neither seen Him nor known Him. ⁷Little children, let no one deceive you. *He who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous*. ⁸He who sins is of the devil, for the devil has sinned from the beginning. *For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that He might destroy the works of the devil*. ⁹*Whoever has been born of God does not sin, for His seed remains in him; and he cannot sin, because he has been born of God*. ¹⁰In this the children of God and the children of the devil are manifest: *Whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God*, nor is he who does not love his brother.

God tells us in His Word that we should be an introspective people. We are to be ones who take inventory of our lives in order to validate our claim that we are Christians. Those who pass the tests have their assurance grounded upon God's Word. They may be assured that they are the objects and recipients of God's saving grace. They are the inheritors of God's promises in Christ, for they are His children. This passage that we read sets forth this third test by which we may be assured that we have salvation from sin, that we are indeed the children of God, that we will most assuredly escape condemnation on the Day of Judgment and will enter into eternal life with our Lord and His people.

Two paragraphs are before us.⁶ The first exclaims the glory of the fact that we are children of God and that we are therefore essentially different from the people of this fallen world. The second distinguishes the difference between us and them. Let us consider these briefly.

A. The wonder that we could be so blessed to have been the objects of God's love! (3:1-3)

John opens with an exclamation: *"Behold that manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God!"* How could this be! When you consider who we were outside of Jesus Christ and who we are and what we have in Jesus Christ, how could this be! What a glorious and wondrous thing that God has done for us sinners who are in Jesus Christ!

Just consider the manner of love that the Father bestowed upon us when you consider our former condition. We were formerly the children of the devil. There was a time when the Lord could say of us as He had said of those Pharisees before Him: "You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do" (John 8:44). But now He says of us, "Here am I and the children whom God has given Me" (Heb. 2:13).

John describes those former days of alienation from God are over. Because of the *manner of love the Father has bestowed on us*, we are no longer ones doing the will of our father the devil; rather, *we are the*

⁶ In the NKJV verse 10 begins a new paragraph. In the ESV, verse 10 is the concluding sentence of the paragraph that begins with verse 4. I believe that this is to be preferred. Although it is true that verse 10 introduces a new subject—love of the brethren, it seems better to be viewed as a summary and concluding statement of the previous paragraph that bridges to the new subject, to which the new paragraph addresses directly. This seems to be John's style. The same method may be seen in the paragraph that precedes verse 1. 1 John 2:28f provide a concluding statement of the theme, abiding in Him, but they also introduce the theme under consideration in 3:1-10.

children of God! We, therefore, now do the will of our Father in heaven. We are no longer like our former father the devil, seeking to be our own god, doing our own will. Now we are like our Father, doing His will from the heart.

We are now, therefore, alien to the world from which He has saved us. The world, of which we were formerly apart, is now estranged from us. We are no longer related to it, we are related to God; we are His children. We find ourselves in a world that is foreign to us and hostile toward us. As we read in **verse 1b**, “Therefore the world does not know us, because it did not know Him. We are no longer what we were formerly.

We are not what we were formerly; yet, we are not yet what we will be one day. **Verse 2** reads, “**Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be.**” Now, he is not saying that it has not been revealed *to us*, but rather he is saying it has not yet been *realized* to us what He has promised that we shall be. “But we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.” He is not saying that we will become gods, as the Mormons teach. We must always maintain that infinite distance between the Creator and the creature. This is a statement that declares one day we will be greatly dignified! We shall be holy as He is holy. We will be granted great privilege and power as our Lord was granted before us. We are co-heirs of Jesus Christ, and so as He has inherited all things, so one day we, too, will inherit all things. God has said of believers, “He that overcomes shall inherit all things; and I will be his God, and he shall be my son” (Rev. 21:7).

This is the promise we have. This is what we look forward to. This, therefore, is the basis of our great hope as Christians. Not what we once were, not even what we are now, although that is a basis of our joy and assurance. But our basis of hope is what we will one day be. We will be like God our Father in holiness. We will be saved from our sin in its entirety. We have been saved from sin’s penalty. We are being saved from sin’s power as we live before Him. We will one day be saved from sin’s presence and all of sin’s effects. We shall be perfect(ed), even as our Father in heaven is perfect. Every true child of God has this desire and hope. He does not want to be saved merely from the consequences of sin. He longs to be saved from sin itself. And so, we read in verse 3: “**Everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure.**”

We see that every true Christian is in the business of fighting against sin, seeking to be “pure” even now, in this life. This is our nature. We are children of God. We want to be like our Father and desire to please our Father. We have His nature within us, that is, we love righteousness and hate wickedness. And we hate wickedness most in ourselves. And so, we seek as God enables us to become pure as He is pure. “**Everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure.**” This is so much the case that this aspiration and effort and measure of achievement in living in righteousness are a valid basis of assurance of salvation. The children of God and the children of the devil may be distinguished from one another by the manner in which they live. This leads us to the second paragraph, verses 4-10.

B. True Christians may be distinguished from all others by the way they live (3:4-10)

Before us is what we may describe as “the test of life” as a basis of assurance. Here God sets forth through John’s pen the clear distinction between true Christians and those who are not. Now, let us remember the purpose of this entire letter. It was not John’s intent to cause true Christians to doubt their salvation, but to assure them of their salvation. We read again in 1 John 5:13,

These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you may continue to believe in the name of the Son of God.

When you consider the nature of the aspirations and efforts and results of those efforts of people who claim to be Christian, the true Christian will stand apart and may be confirmed in his assurance. He is a child of God because He is different from the world. He is in fact being saved from sin, for he is no longer in a life of sin as he was formerly. He is in the process of purifying himself, and his progress, though never what he wants it to be, is evident to him and others. He, therefore, may be further assured by this that he is a child of God.

John first gives the statement in **verse 4**, “**Whoever commits sin also commits lawlessness, and sin is lawlessness.**” This is a premise, a statement of fact or definition. A formal argument is being set before us.

Now, in order to better understand precisely what is being said it is important to define a few words clearly.⁷ There are three words in this paragraph of great importance which must be understood as to their meaning. These words are “*sin*”, “*lawlessness*” and “*righteousness*.” We may say in short that *sin and lawlessness are one and the same. Righteousness is law keeping*. When we say that Jesus Christ was fully righteous in all of His life, we are saying that He was without sin; moreover, we are saying that He kept God’s law perfectly. Sin is lawlessness; righteousness is law-keeping.

Whenever you sin, the reason that it is sin is not simply that it is a moral standard that people have come to accept or advocate, it is because you have committed an action against God and His authority, for He had set the bounds which you have broken through or He had set the standard which you failed or refused to meet. And so, we sin when we fail to do what God commands us—sins of omission. And we sin when we do what God forbids—sins of commission.

Sin is a violation or a transgression; it is a going beyond one’s bounds. The moral law is to keep us within the bounds of duty to God. Sin is going beyond our bounds. (Thomas Watson)

Verse 4 sets forth the first of two premises. In **verse 5** we have the second premise of the argument. “And you know that *He was manifested to take away our sins*, and in Him there is no sin.” Notice, John did not say, “Jesus Christ was manifested to forgive us *in* our sins.” That is what antinomians believe.⁸ No, the reason that God sent His Son into the world was to save us *from* our sins; He was sent to take away our sinning from us. In Him there is no sin. In us there was all manner of sinning. So He came “to take away our sin.” This is a given. It is a statement of fact.

Now that premise one and two have been given, he sets forth his irrefutable conclusions in verses 6-10. First, he states, whoever abides in Him does not sin. Secondly we read, whoever sins has neither seen Him nor has he known Him.

When the Holy Spirit moved John to write this epistle in its original Greek form, He used the present tense form of the verb. This is very important. What he was conveying is that characteristic or behavior in general. He is not saying that Christians do not sin. He stated earlier that anyone who says he is without sin deceives himself and the truth is not in him (1 John 1:8). He is saying here that someone who has a relationship with God as his Father and he as His child—he who abides in Him—does not live in sin. This kind of life is incongruent, even impossible for a child of God to do. Whoever it is that lives a life of lawlessness, of sin, a life in defiance of God’s law, “has neither seen Him nor known Him.”

Here, then, we have the test by which we may assess ourselves and assess others. There was a woman some years ago who told me that she had become a Christian 25 years before when a local pastor led her to ask Jesus into her heart, but she was expressing thanksgiving that she had been off of cocaine for the three previous weeks. She was no Christian. She thought she was. But I knew that she was not, for “Whoever *practices sin* has neither seen Him nor has he known Him.”

There will be people that will want to deceive you in this. The devil himself will want to deceive you in this. But **verse 7** says,

Little children, let no one deceive you. *He who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous.*

Now notice closely what is stated. Two great doctrinal truths are referenced here in verse 7. The expression, “*practices righteousness*”, refers to *the believer’s sanctification by God*. This describes the *behaviour* of a person as God is working in him to make him more and more like Jesus Christ. But the expression, “*is*

⁷ The way to discuss or “debate” issues with people influenced by our post-modern world is to bring to the debate the precise definition of words. This confounds them, for they on the one hand argue that words have no real intrinsic meaning, “it is whatever you think they mean”, but this itself is meaningless--nonsensical. But they argue thus to dismiss or discredit your logic when they have no answer for you. And so, ask them to define what they mean. Thereafter hold them to it. It will result in them painting themselves into a corner from which they cannot escape reasonably without making a mess of their argument, which will be clear to them and others.

⁸ An antinomian claims that people have salvation through faith even though they may live in flagrant sin.

righteous”, speaks of the believer’s *justification before God*. This describes his *position* before God as one of God’s people. What God is saying to us through John is this: the way that you determine that a person has been justified by God is if they are living righteously before God. The evidence that a person has been justified by God is if they are being sanctified by God.

There are people who “believe” the truth of the gospel. They could perhaps tell you that they have taught others the way in which God justifies the sinner by God’s grace through faith alone, which is a glorious gospel truth. They may believe themselves to have been justified through faith alone. But if they are living in sin in defiance of God, they are not justified before God. They have not known God. Christians are essentially different kind of people. God has brought new life to them. They are being changed from the inside out. What you see manifested on the outside is due to a work of God’s grace having been wrought on the inside.

But the one who is living according to his own law, his own will, disregarding the laws of God, living to please himself, indulge himself, is not of God. He has been and remains of the devil. As **verse 8** clearly states: **“He who sins is of the devil, for the devil has sinned from the beginning.”** Again, the present tense of the verb is used. This is speaking of the manner of the person’s life. Look at how he lives! Does his life reflect the nature of God and God’s desires for Him? Does he show some evidence of the life that God gives to His people? If his life more reflects the devil’s than God’s it is because his nature is still the same as that of the devil’s. He would do his own will always. He has done so from the beginning and is doing so until now.

But we know that God sent His Son to change all this in respect to His people. **Verse 8**, **“For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that He might destroy the works of the devil.** God sent His Son to destroy the work of the devil in the lives of His people. He has come to take away our sinning from us. Therefore, verse 9 declares, **“Whoever has been born of God does not sin, for His seed remains in him; and he cannot sin, because he has been born of God.”** The one born of God is like his Father who had brought spiritual life to him.

This verse speaks of the life that God has imparted to His people. In other places of the New Testament, particularly in Paul and Peter’s writings, eternal life is seen in its unending duration, a gift that we will one day receive or inherit after a life of faith in our Lord and Savior. But in John’s writings, eternal life is the spiritual life that God has already imparted to those who had been formerly spiritually dead in sin. Here, John speaks of the life that God imparts to His people that makes it impossible for them to live as they formerly did or to return permanently to their former way of life. They have a principle of spiritual life, the “seed” of God in their soul. And it is there, germinating, growing, and manifesting itself in the life. This life principle makes it impossible for a true child of God to order his life in rebellion to God to any great degree or for any length of time. This life principle will be effectual in leading the Christian to do the will of God. This truth of God’s resolve and means to keep His own in a life of righteousness is why Paul could write of the Christians in the church of Thessalonica,

And we have confidence in the Lord concerning you, both that you do and will do the things we command you. Now may the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God and into the patience of Christ. (2 Thess. 3:4f).

In the light of these givens, John could conclude with this statement in verse 10, “In this the children of God and the children of the devil are manifest: **Whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God**, nor is he who does not love his brother.” This is the test by which you can determine whether or not someone’s claim to be a Christian is valid-- the test of the life; the test of righteousness.

Let each of us take these three tests that we have rehearsed today and examine ourselves accordingly. If we find our self in doubt, flee again to Jesus Christ in humble confession and submission, trusting yourself to Him as a sinner, in need of His grace operative in your life. Believe on Him, for He receives joyfully every humble, repentant sinner that comes unto Him.

From Chapter One of
The Poor Doubting Christian Drawn to Christ
Thomas Hooker (1586–1647)

So here you have the first ground to stir up hope, your sins are pardonable. There is more power in God to show mercy to you, than power in sin to destroy you.

The Lord Jesus Christ came to seek and to save that which was lost. It was the scope of His coming. Now says the broken and humble sinner, “I am lost. Did Christ come to save sinners? Then Christ must fail of his end, or I of my comfort. God says, come to me all ye that are weary and heavy laden: I am weary; unless the Lord intended good to me, why did He invite me, and bid me come? Surely He means to show mercy to me.”

Oh take heed of despair. Question your estate; you may; you must; but to cast away all hope is very heinous in the eyes of the Lord. Cast away all carnal confidence you must, and yet you must hope. “Let Israel hope in the Lord: for with the Lord there is mercy, and with him is plenteous redemption” (Psa. 130:7).

The Lord takes this very ill at our hands. You go to the deep dungeon of your corruption, and there you say “these sins can never be pardoned: I am still proud, and more stubborn: this distress God sees not, God succors not, His hand cannot reach, His mercy cannot save.” Now mark what the prophet says to such a perplexed soul, Isaiah 40:27, “Why sayest you, my way is hid from the Lord!” The Lord says, “why do you say so? The young men shall faint and be weary, but they that wait on the Lord shall renew their strength.” Is any thing too hard for the Lord? You wrong God exceedingly: You think it is matter of humility, to count yourself so vile. Can God pardon such a wretch’s sin as mine? Mark that place of the Psalmist, they spake against the Lord, “can the Lord prepare a table in the wilderness?” (Ps. 78:19). They spake not against themselves, but against the Lord. So we speak against God, and charge God himself. “It is true,” says the soul, “Manasseh was pardoned, Paul was converted, God’s saints have been received to mercy, but can my sin be pardoned? Can my soul be quickened? No, no, my sins are greater than can be pardoned,” says the despairing soul. Consider how injurious this is to God, to make the power of sin greater to condemn you, than the power of God to save you, to make the power of Satan stronger to ruin you than the power of God to relieve you and succor you. And what can you say more? And what can you do more against the Lord? Is not this to make God an underling to Satan and to sin? This is just as to say, “the Almightyness of God is weaker than the weakness of sin, the sufficiency of God is weaker than the malice of Satan.” It is so, poor humble sinners many times will make bitter complaints this way, and they think they speak against themselves. No, no, they speak against the Lord. They spake against the Lord, when they said, “can the Lord prepare a table in the wilderness?” So you speak in this desperate manner: “why truth, Lord, this proud heart will never be humbled if any thing would have wrought, it would have been done before this day. How many sermons, how many mercies, how many judgments, how many prayers? And yet this proud heart, this stubborn heart will not be reformed.” You think you speak against yourselves now; no, no, you speak against the Lord. And know, this is one of the greatest sins you commit, to say your sins cannot be forgiven.

Answer two: As this sin is injurious to God, so it is dangerous to your own soul. It is that which removes the bridge, and cuts off all passages, and there can no spiritual comfort or consolation come into the soul of a poor sinner, Luke 3:5,6, “Every valley (or ditch) shall be filled, and then all flesh shall see the salvation of the Lord.” What are these ditches? Why nothing else but those deep gulfs and ditches of despair: and unless they be filled, no man can see the Lord Jesus Christ. The truth is, this despair of the soul is that which cuts the sinews of man’s comfort, and takes off the power and edge of all the means of grace, daunts all a man’s endeavors, nay, it plucks up endeavors by the very roots; for that which a man despairs of, he will never labor after. It is here, as with a man in the pangs of death; unto such a man, as all things are unavailable for his good, his bed will not ease him, meat will not refresh him, chafing will not revive him, at last we say he is gone, he is a dead man. Friends leave him, physicians leave him. They may go and pray for him, and mourn for him, but they cannot recover him. So this despair of soul makes a man cast off all hope, and lie down in a forlorn condition, expecting no good to come. “Alas,” says the poor soul, “what skills for a man to pray? What profits it a man to read? What benefit in all the means of grace? The truth is that the stone is rolled upon me, and my condemnation is sealed forever, and therefore I will never look after Christ, grace and salvation any more.” Let him come to hear the word, and mark how he casts off the benefit of it. It was marvelous, seasonable and profitable, it was the good word of God unto such as have share therein: why then may not you expect benefit therefrom? “No” says the soul, “the time of grace is past, the day is gone.” If ministers would pray for him, and good people pray for him, he bids them save their labor, for hell is his portion, and his condemnation is sealed in heaven. See now and consider what desperate danger despair brings to a poor heart, and carries him beyond the reach of mercy. That’s a sweet passage of David’s, Psalm 77:7, “Will the Lord cast off forever? I said this is my infirmity.” The word in the original, this is my sickness, as who shall say, “this would be my death; what, is mercy gone for ever? then my life is gone, then is all my comfort gone, my hope gone.” Therefore take heed of this, it takes off the edge of all our endeavors and God’s ordinances that might do us good.

Answer three: This marvelously condemns that great sin of presumption, a sin more frequent, and if it be possible, more dangerous, the presumption of carnal hypocrites that bolster themselves up with marvelous boldness in their course. It is as true here, and I beseech you observe it, as they said, "Saul has slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands"; despair has slain his thousands, but presumption his ten thousands, that men may swear, and lie and cozen (cheat), and break all commands, and yet hope to be saved. They hope grace will save them, and yet resist grace. They hope Jesus Christ will save them, and yet oppose Christ. This is that which has slain many thousands among us, and they are few that have not split upon this rock. And therefore I say, this serves to reprove the baseness of such hypocrites as boast themselves, and compare their hopes with the hopes of the saints. "It is true," say they, "I cannot walk so freely, I cannot repeat a sermon, I have not those parts that they have, yet I hope to be saved as well as they." This is that which has slain so many thousands of souls that are now roaring in hell they may thank presumption for it.

Now this hope is not the hope of the saints. The hope of the saints is a grounded hope, but these hopes hang upon some idle pleas and foolish pretenses, and some carnal reasons. But I tell you they will fall, and sink into the bottomless pit before they are aware. It is the command and counsel of Peter, that every man should be ready to give an account of his faith and hope that is in him (1 Peter 3:15). Look to the reasons that carry you, and to the arguments that persuade you, see they be not groundless and foolish hopes. You hope to be saved, and you hope to go to heaven, and you hope to see the face of God with comfort. Look about, I say, good hope has good reason, grounded hope grounded reason.

Answer four: The saints of God many times are deprived of comfort, not because God withholds it, but because they put it from themselves, and will not have it, though he offered it, as David in Psalm 77:2, "My soul refused to be comforted." He was a sullen child that will not eat his milk, because he cannot have it in the golden dish. So sometimes, and because God does not for us what we would, we will have nothing at all. These are the main hindrances, and I might add many more, for carnal reason is very fruitful this way and we through our own folly, and the devil's craft, are apt to abuse things, and to make them hindrances in our way to happiness eternal.

HEAVEN ON EARTH

A serious discourse concerning a well-grounded assurance.

by

Thomas Brooks (1667)

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