

First John(13) - Justifiable Assurance

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[0 : 00] Let's turn together now to John's first letter, the first letter of John, and chapter 3, tonight looking at verses 19 to 24. So the final part of John, 1st John, and chapter 3, we'll read from verse 19.

By this we shall know that we are of the truth, and we assure our heart before him. For whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything. Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God, and whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him. 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. Whoever keeps his commandments abides in him, and he in them.

And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit whom he has given us. We'll leave the final verse, till God willing, next time, because it flows straight into what he says in the next part of the letter, in the beginning of chapter 4, about the spirits and testing the spirits.

[1 : 16] From verse 19, down as far as verse 23, we'll look at that this evening. Now we saw previously that John, while he's setting out those great themes of what we are to believe, how we are to behave, and also how we are in relation to each other, and how all of these kind of interact and connect together, we saw that he took a couple of digressions.

In chapter 2, where he has a digression about the church, in verses 12 to 17, and also where you have a digression following that, verses 15 to 17, about the world.

So he took these two sidesteps, if you like, to deal with these topics, and then he came back to the three main topics, again covering them in turn. And he's taking another sidestep here, he's coming to take another digression, in these verses 19 to 24, and this time it's a digression that's to do with assurance, or reassurance.

Assurance of faith, assurance of salvation, assurance of being saved, however we put it, it's that assurance, or reassurance, that he's dealing with in this digression, or in this sidestep, until he comes back again to deal with his main theme.

And of course they're very much related to his main theme as well, and it's evidence, isn't it, that you find him taking this sidestep here, because assurance of salvation is actually the very main purpose of his writing this letter.

[2 : 50] If you look ahead to chapter 5 and verse 13, He says, 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.

So this is really the main purpose of John writing this letter to these Christians that he's writing to, facing all this false teaching, and trying to take them away from their grounding in Christ, and faith in Christ.

I'm writing to you so that you may know that you have eternal life. And that's always an important and significant point for us to apply to our own lives as well.

And it's really a sign here of John being such a sensitive and dedicated pastor in his teaching, that he's taking this time just to cover this particular area of teaching for them, because he knew, as we ourselves know, that many, if not most, Christians lack assurance, or at least lack assurance from time to time anyway, if not all the time.

Many of us know what it's like to lack assurance, not to have the assurance that we'd want to have, or maybe the assurance that sometimes we did have, or had in the beginning of our Christian walk.

[4 : 06] And so he proceeds to give directions in regard to this assurance, and how we indeed should look at lack of assurance, and come back to have assurance, or where we should focus if we lack that assurance.

Now, is that not what you and I tonight would really want to have? It's one thing to have God as our God, and Jesus as our Savior, and that's the most important thing of all.

But it's also important to know that you have that, to be assured that you have that, because it adds this dimension to your life that John's going on to speak about, this confidence that we would have before God, in our relationship with God, and with other people as well, in our service for God.

All of that is really added to, or reinforced, if you like, by knowing that we have eternal life, as well as just possessing it.

So it's so important for us tonight, isn't it, that we would know that we have eternal life. First of all, that we do have it, that we have come to possess it, through faith in Christ, through repentance from sin, through all the things the Bible tells us, are the avenues towards having, and possessing that eternal life.

[5 : 25] But also to really have it, and to know it in an assured way, that this is in fact where we are spiritually, that we have this in relation to God.

And so there are two things in the verses before us tonight, that we want to use as summary points. First of all, he's dealing here with what he calls a condemning heart. This heart that condemns us, verse 20, whenever our heart condemns us, and when he uses the word heart here, he's really dealing specifically with conscience.

Heart often means our inner part, our souls, sometimes it means the whole of our soul, every faculty of our soul, our mind, emotions, conscience, will.

But here he's talking about condemning, and the heart condemning is pretty much the matter of the conscience, our conscience condemning us, and bringing a sense of condemnation to us.

And that's what he's really dealing with here, the condemning heart, and what to do about it. That's the first point, and we'll see a number of things under that. The second point is, the confidence that comes from an uncondemning heart.

[6 : 36] He says, Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God, and whatever we ask, we receive from Him, and so on. So he deals with a condemning heart, and how to deal with it, and a non-condemning heart, and the benefits of the confidence, especially, that comes from that.

So what exactly does all that entail? What does he mean by this uncondemning heart? What does he mean by this, if your heart condemns you? First of all, who is he referring to? Who is he dealing with?

Well, he's not dealing with those who are not converted, with those who are unsaved. The heart does condemn us when we're in an unsaved condition.

Most of us know that very well, if not all of us, that when we come to be confronted with the truth of God, when God confronts us with the reality of sin, with the reality of guilt, with the reality of our relation to Him, and our answerableness to Him, and with the reality of His judgment, and of His looking into our lives, and of His assessment of us, we come to know our heart condemning us, our conscience condemns us.

That's at least how it ought to be. It presses the guilt of our souls upon us. It presses the guilt of our persons upon our minds. And you need to ask yourself tonight, and I need to ask myself before we go on any further, is that what I have?

[8 : 03] Have you moved on beyond that? Or have you even come to that itself? We can't actually go on without asking that question, without pressing that question.

How is it with your own heart tonight? Is your heart the heart that's still unsaved? Is your heart the heart that still has not received or accepted Jesus on His own terms?

That's come to bow obediently before Him, and receive Him as He's offered in the Gospel? This great Saviour, this great King, this One whom God has set apart to be the Saviour of sinners?

Have you accepted this Jesus? Are you still just formally acquainted with Him in the Gospel, in the record of God's Word, which is itself a very good thing? But as you well know, as is emphasized so often in the preaching of the Gospel, faith in Christ is no mere formality.

It's a personal relationship. It's an acceptance of His person, as He's offered and described in the Gospel. So that's the first question we need to ask ourselves.

[9 : 10] And if you're tonight in that position where you know that you haven't yet given your life to Christ, that you haven't yet received Him, or accepted Him, or welcomed Him into your heart, well, that's the first thing you need to deal with before you go any further.

You cannot receive assurance or reassurance that you're saved if you're not yet saved. You need to actually see to that very basic point first of all.

So I hope tonight that all of us have come to that point and moved on beyond that point, because that's really the purpose of why God has given us the Gospel, so that we would come to be saved, and then build on that, the knowledge of and the assurance that we are, in fact, saved.

We're not going to go further into that, but it's an important point before we move on. So He's not actually addressing these points to people who are not saved. He's addressing this to Christians, to people who've come to know the Lord, who have become themselves disciples of Christ, who have come to confess Him, and know that He has indeed saved them, or believe that He has saved them.

They've come to trust in Him, to believe in Him. And Christians, as John well knew, very often struggle with their faith, struggle with this matter of assurance especially, and at many times find things in their lives that causes them perhaps to doubt and to reflect negatively upon where they are in their relation with God.

[10:39] And struggling with assurance and with confidence is something that most, if not all of us, are familiar with. And so it's important just to stop and note that God, in His kindness, as John here was writing to these recipients of his letter, so it's God in His kindness that has given us His Word and given us the teaching of His Word so that we can apply that to this as well as to every other point.

Wherever we struggle with assurance, we're not going to deal with it properly unless we're taking a point of departure and direction from God's own teaching, from God's own truth.

I came across an illustration that I think is very graphic and very helpful. It's in the work of the Christian in Complete Armour by William Gurnall, that passage in the New Testament, in Ephesians, dealing with the armour of God that He gives to His people.

And one of the places among many, many wonderful sayings and illustrations here, He says, Faith places us in the ark. Just like Noah and the family in the ark in the Old Testament, faith places us in the ark.

And the ark, He means, of course, is Jesus as the Savior. Faith places us in the ark. But He said, that does not mean we will not be many times seasick on the journey.

[12:04] We are at times seasick in our faith. Our faith sometimes, as it's assaulted by various things, we come at times to struggle with assurance and confidence, even the reality of faith itself.

There are times of seasickness in this great vessel that's taking us onwards to heaven, we trust. God has not at all given us a guarantee that that will not be the case.

There are sometimes very rough seas for Christians to traverse, to cross, on the journey that's home. And even though we know God is with us, and that God's assurances are there in His Word, sometimes we ourselves find that we have allowed some of something of that sea of doubt and that sea of lack of confidence to come into our lives.

And it's helpful, I think, to ask, what is the cause or what are the causes of this lack of confidence, this lack of assurance? Where does this come from? What is it that gives rise to it?

And it's in this kind of situation that we find we're thankful for the Westminster Confession of Faith among many other documents, but in chapter 18, which deals with assurance, and paragraph 4, we have a number of things mentioned as how our assurance can come to be shaken.

[13:36] Now that means that please don't think that the likes of the Confession of Faith or your catechisms, particularly the Confession of Faith, is just a document that has heavy theology in it, and it's a very formal document, and it's got lots of passages dealing with the theology that arises out of God's Word.

There is that. But it is a marvelously pastoral document, because virtually every single chapter of it and every paragraph of it almost has something to do with our personal experience, our relationship with God, and such things as assurance or lack of assurance.

So don't hesitate to use the Confession of Faith. Don't think that you're not going to be able to understand it because it's an old document in old language and dealing with theological matters. Here's what it says, chapter 18, and paragraph 4. True believers may have the assurance of their salvation diverse ways shaken, diminished, and intermitted.

You know what it's saying? May have their faith, the assurance of their salvation, rather, diverse ways, various ways, shaken, diminished, and intermitted.

[14 : 51] But it doesn't leave it at that. It goes on then to give four ways in which that can be brought about. Firstly, as by negligence in preserving of it. Now, we've all been there, those of us who know the Lord, those of us who are following the Lord, even after many years, we still know this is something we actually fall into doing.

We are negligent sometimes in preserving our assurance in looking after it. We allow other things to interfere with it. We allow something of our own sinful hearts to come to affect how we see Christ and see our relationship with Him.

And secondly, by falling into some special sin which wounds the conscience and grieves the Spirit. Most, if not all of us, have been there. Things we know we've done that have caused God's displeasure to be known by us.

And we come to His Word and realize what we've done. Well, He's specified that we shouldn't have done that. We shouldn't have thought that way. We shouldn't have spoken that way. We shouldn't have gone on in that way. Sometimes it can be over a process of time leading even to backsliding. But what it says here is, by falling into some special sin which wounds the conscience and grieves the Spirit. Thirdly, by some sudden or vehement temptation.

[16 : 10] Something that comes upon us that's unexpected, some providence or other, similar to what we saw this morning with Plesiastes. In fact, there's quite a lot of connections really with that on this evening.

But sometimes a sudden or vehement temptation. Something happens that you see in the world in your own life or in the life of somebody else and it causes you to be shaken. It causes your assurance to be shaken.

You call into question perhaps some aspects of God's own truth. How can this be? And fourthly, by God's withdrawing the light of his countenance and suffering even such as fear him to walk in darkness and have no light.

Well, that's maybe not such a common one but it does happen. It happened, for example, in the case of Job. When you look at Job, this very righteous, this holy man and yet God withdrew the light of his countenance.

He wasn't able to find God the way he once used to. He wasn't as near God as he once was aware of and he began questioning and sometimes he began even elements of doubt about his relation to God and so on.

[17 : 22] So these are ways the confession tells us that our faith can be diminished, shaken. Not our faith, our assurance of salvation can be.

Although faith is very much keyed in with that. So, these are things which actually are causes of our assurance being affected or coming to lack of assurance.

But you do notice, if I just read that passage again, it begins, true believers may have the assurance of their salvation shaken, diminished, intermitted.

It's important that it says in the pastoral wisdom of those who drew up the confession, true believers may have that. In other words, it's really emphasizing for us, tonight if you lack assurance, don't say lack of assurance equals lack of faith.

Lack of assurance is not itself evidence of lacking faith. A very genuine and a very sincere faith and a faith that's been there for many years may sometimes come through these things we've mentioned from the confession to be shaken and diminished.

[18 : 36] And we may lose our assurance. We may come to have a lack of assurance. So what do we do about it? Well, he's saying here by this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our heart before him.

For whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart and he knows everything. What do we do about it?

We reflect. We go back to basic things in our relationship with God. We go back to basic theological points, not so as to just study theology, but to see how it relates to our practical way of life.

What he's saying is by this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our heart before him. What does he mean by this? What's he talking about?

Well, some commentators say that means what he's going to immediately say after that in the following verses. Others say it's what he means is what he has said just before this in the previous verses.

[19 : 39] And I think that's the best way to take it. By this. Where he says let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth. Where he said already in verse 14 we know that we have passed out of death into life because we love the brothers.

In other words when you have a sincerity of love when you have a genuineness of love when you've come to love the people of God even though at times such as in the New Testament that was a very particularly dangerous thing to do.

It's itself evidence that the love that's in your heart sincerely for them genuinely for them is itself an evidence that you're a believer that you've passed from death to life that you're no longer under the dominance of death or of sin but under the grace of God and the spirit of God.

What he means is when our heart condemns us when we lack that assurance when we've come to a conclusion that we don't actually have salvation after all when we love in truth when we genuinely and sincerely love then God is greater than our heart if our heart condemns us.

In other words he reads our sincerity he reads what we are in reality even though sometimes we may be afraid ourselves at times that we're something else.

[21 : 01] and when our heart therefore condemns us God is greater than our heart.

He reads our sincerity. Remember and I don't say that John is reflecting on this particularly but there is an incident recorded in the Gospel of John which he wrote which really helps us I think understand what he's saying here about God is greater than our heart.

Remember that Jesus interviewed Peter after Peter had grievously sinned against him and denied him and denied that he was his disciple denied that he had never wanted anything to do with him and so Jesus met him after his resurrection he came and met Jesus and three times he questioned him about his love and he said Simon son of John do you love me more than these?

He said yes Lord you know that I love you second time he said Simon son of John do you love me? He said yes Lord you know that I love you and he said to him the third time Simon son of John do you love me?

Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time do you love me? And he said to him Lord you know everything you know that I love you in other words Peter is really pointing to God being greater than himself to Jesus being greater than himself and when Jesus asked him the question do you really love me?

[22 : 36] Do you sincerely love me? Is it true that you love me? Look at what you've done in your life look at this recent incident do you love me indeed? And Peter is grieved that he asked him the third time that he had to answer this question again so where did he go?

Where did he go for his final answer he went to Christ knowledge and it's as if Peter and this is really what's at the heart of what he's saying this is what's behind his words where he's saying to Jesus Lord I know I've done wrong and you know I've done wrong but you know that that's not the tenor of my life that was a blip that was a serious blip that was something I should not have done you know that but you know that deep down you know in my heart you know that despite that you know that beyond that I do love you and you know sometimes that's what you need to go back to you need to go back to the Lord's knowledge if our heart condemns us God is greater than our heart and he knows everything he comes to reassure you by bringing your mind to the knowledge that he has of you the world may say you're a fraud you may sometimes say of your own heart that it's a fraud you may sometimes come to doubt whether you've indeed come to be saved or not but deep down as you search as you look into your heart and as you see and you come to this conviction

I do love the Lord Lord you know that I love you and you see you're leaving the matter with God being greater than your heart greater than perhaps you yourself at that moment are willing to say of yourself by this we know that we are of the truth and we assure our heart before him for whenever our heart condemns us God is greater than our heart and he knows everything Psalm 46 is a psalm that we're all very familiar with Psalm of great upheavals Psalm of gigantic movements in the creation as it pictures really the psalm his own heart and the psalm his own experience where he says that though mountains be removed and though the seas roar and all of these great upheavals in the creation as they're symbolic of the storms that meet the psalmist especially from his enemies point of view the heathen rage tumultuously the kingdoms were moved the Lord God uttered his voice the earth melted for fear what does he then say or what does

God say be still and know that I am God that's exactly what John is saying because the word here reassure in verse 19 we shall know and reassure our heart before him you see before him is

important in the presence of God you deal with it as God himself would have you deal with it not by pretending it's not a problem to have lack of assurance but by bringing it before him by looking at his promises by looking at his word by looking at the sincerity of your love for him and for God's people that word really means literally pacify by this we shall know that we are of the truth and shall pacify our heart before him it's like the stilling of the storm it's like the calm that Jesus brings it's like this reassurance is like the be still and know that I am

God take my word for it God is saying not your own thoughts at times a condemning heart and what to do about it maybe not explained that very well I'm sure I haven't but the main point is that if we come to a lack of assurance and are aware of that lack of assurance we bring it to God we go over the things that God has been actively engaged in in our lives such as our love or our fellow Christians and then we come to the conclusion that would not be the case if I wasn't saved if I wasn't changed if I didn't have that new outlook that God has given me and so secondly he's dealing with the confidence of an uncondemning heart he says if our heart does not condemn us in verse 21 we have confidence before God in other words he's moving really from if our heart condemns us what do we do we go to God with it and by this we know we have reassured we pacify our hearts by looking at what God has done what he has enabled us to continue to do and that moves us into the heart that doesn't condemn us and if we don't have that condemning heart we have a confidence before

[27 : 48] God and whatever we ask we receive from him because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him in other words he's referring to our relationship with God in terms of communion prayer fellowship with God awareness of God in our life taking the truth of God at his face value all of that in our relationship with God about heart does not condemn us we have confidence before God see a condemning heart a heart that still has a measure of perhaps guilt at times and a measure of lack of assurance that's going to be a hesitant heart if you know you've done something that's wrong you haven't had it properly dealt with if your heart is condemning you then that causes the relationship with God to stutter doesn't it from your point of view you don't have the confidence to come before God as you ought there's a hesitancy you come with prayer but you're afraid that

God perhaps will not answer you don't have the same boldness as before all of that is tied up with this lack of assurance but when our heart does not condemn us we have confidence before God no we're never perfect in this regard I'm sure I certainly have never been perfect coming before God and being able to say Lord there is absolutely nothing in my mind in my memory in my heart that comes between me and you or has ever come between me and you there's always that there's always going to be the imperfection you come back to the sincerity you come back to the reality of your faith and how God himself has provided for everything that we have in terms of our need and of our lack we come with prayer and we come with a knowledge that God will receive us whatever we ask we receive from him because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him you see disobedience destroys confidence and when we know we've been disobedient we can't then expect to have the confidence in prayer and communion with God that we would want to have we have to deal with the sin we have to deal with the disobedience we have to deal with that which comes between us and

God for the confidence to be restored for God to reassure us for God to pacify our hearts this is very much Christian experience Christian development Christian growth this is something the Bible brings us to acknowledge our need of to know these great truths of scripture so that we can progress in our spiritual life that we can actually build on what's already gone that we can actually know the parameters of a relationship with God in different ways as John brings it before us here and then he says and this is his commandment see how easily John flows as it were from what we believe into what we are to do 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 and it's interesting that it's a singular he's using this is his commandment and yet he goes on to speak about two things a commandment if you like that's two-sided it's one commandment but it contains firstly that we believe in the name of his son

Jesus Christ now you don't often find Jesus described in such a complete and full way as that that we believe in the name of his son Jesus Christ why is he giving such a complete name or definition to Jesus well so that we will actually in reading that that we would say it's the whole Christ that gives me confidence it's the whole Christ that my life is to be based on it's the whole Christ that I

must believe in and that's why he says in the name of his son Jesus Christ because whenever you read the name it means the character it means the revealed person it means Jesus as he's revealed to us in the Bible not as some people say it should be revealed to us not as some people say nowadays we ought to believe it's as it's here in God's word the Jesus that's revealed to us in the Bible is the

Jesus we have to believe in that's the name that's been revealed to us every aspect of Christ that's revealed to us in scripture is there for our believing in and in fact the word literally is believing on the name of his son Jesus Christ that would be literally how we should translate it believe on the name not just in the name but on in the sense of when you come to think about what faith is many things but it is this at the very bottom at the very heart of it that is this coming to build your life or to deposit your life upon Jesus upon himself you based your life upon him you have him as your foundation that's what gives your life stability and structure and confidence not in your own faith by which you come to rest upon him but on himself as the foundation on which your faith rests so he's saying this is his commandment that we believe on the name on the character on the person of

[33 : 45] Jesus Christ and also that we love one another let's say what we had right through the chapter previously and we mentioned many aspects of what John teaches by way of loving one another we saw it in the previous passage as well it's important you see that John is linking here love and belief because all too often they're detached aren't they by nowadays you can read and hear people saying even people who are Christians or claim to be Christians love is everything love is everything it's not what I believe it's not really how I behave otherwise love is everything if I love this person or that person or these people that's all that matters really is it all that matters no John is saying it's not all that matters yes love is important love is exceedingly important loving one another is exceedingly important but is never detached or divorced from what you believe and the person you believe in and obedience to the person you believe in man that has joined together let's not fall into the trap of thinking well if my love is genuine that's about all that's required of me no that's not all that's required of you all of me we're required to repent of our sin we're required to believe in the

Christ that's revealed in scripture as he is revealed we're required to believe in all aspects of God's character attributes including the very difficult ones including the ones that really shake us up his anger his wrath his judgment his holiness these are not side issues they're not outdated modes of thinking that God as he is as he's revealed himself to us so we believe in the name of his son and we love one another just as he has commanded us so tonight let's look at our hearts let's look into our souls let's look into our conscience as our conscience come to know the redeeming touch of Christ the blood of

Christ applied to it in other words have we come to accept Jesus as the answer to a guilty conscience to an unsaved life am I still without that have I not yet come to do that see I don't trust in the teachings of the church or the church itself whatever denomination we may be of that's not the basis of my confidence that's not the ground on which God accepts me that I believe something just because the church says it just because the church session says it just because the minister says it my acceptance with God is entirely on the ground of Christ and what he is and his righteousness is that what I've received is that what I'm building my hope on is that in my heart tonight is he enthroned in my heart is my life his have I given it to him am I holding it back from him am I saved and if

I am saved is assurance of salvation important to me yes of course it is and if I lack it well I go to things that God has already done I go to the great immovable things of God himself and God's work and God's being God's redeeming love but I also go to what he's given me the privilege of knowing and exercising my love for my fellow Christians my regard for them my remembrance of them my prayers for them my delight in being with them because we know that we have passed from death into life because we love the brothers and if our heart condemns us as at times it will when we've strayed when we've gone aside when we've been shaken as the confession says diminished and intermitted in our assurance well God is greater than our heart and we can as sincere believers go to him and say

Lord I know there are many things wrong in my life forgive me for all of that continue to bless me despite of that but deep down in my heart you know that I love you you know that I wouldn't give you away for anything you know that I would not choose you instead of the world the whole world the whole universe that's what you mean to me that's why I'm saying that I believe and that I believe in this Christ let's pray Lord our God our Father in heaven we thank you tonight for your word of

truth and for its reassurance to your people that when you have saved them they cannot actually ever be lost but Lord we know that we can bring upon ourselves as well as in the wisdom and sovereignty of your providence matters which cause that our assurance of salvation is indeed shaken or diminished or interrupted forgive us we pray for the times that we bring this upon ourselves and when we do find our assurance lacking when we find

[39 : 53] Lord that we have not followed that right path as we should have that maintains our assurance of your salvation Lord help us we pray to look back to re-examine and to come again before you so that we will come to take our encouragement and our assurance from those things that your word commends we ask that you would teach us day by day how to grow in grace and how to grow in assurance that we may be all the more robust and the more stable in our spiritual lives receive we pray our worship once again and pardon us for Christ's sake Amen Amen