

Confidence Before God

Our text for this morning's message is 1 John chapter 3 and verses 19-24. 1 John 3:19-24.

Last Sunday we explored the passage right before this that has to do with loving one another. And when we examined what God means when He tells us to love each other, the bar got raised rather high. To love well is to relate with a self-less, self-sacrificing spirit, by giving of our possessions and time and energy, and by doing specific actions to specific people with specific needs. That's a pretty tall order, if you ask me.

For me, pondering the command to love one another causes two reactions in me. First, it *inspires* me to want to love others well. Reading about and hearing about this kind of profound love motivates me to want to be the kind of person who loves like this. To relate to people like this sounds so freeing and so fulfilling, so beautiful. But the other reaction in me is to *cringe* because I see how little and how poorly I love others. When I see how beautiful and powerful true godly love is, in comparison many of my attempts at love seem wimpy and pathetic.

And one of the tendencies in my heart is to start beating myself up when I see how lousy I love people. I have these critical conversations with myself. "You call yourself a Christian? Look how poorly you treated that person. Do you even know how to love?" And the kicker is when I say to myself, "You know, maybe I'm not even a Christian. Christians love. Christians treat others well. Maybe I'm fooling myself thinking that I know God."

The apostle John anticipates that response. And so he writes this brief section to counsel us if and when those times of self-condemnation come.

And he places this advice right after raising the bar on how to treat other people. I believe he knows that many of us will see the bar that he has raised about what love really is and then we'll examine our hearts and we may wrestle with the awareness that we often fall short of that standard.

New Testament scholar **I. Howard Marshall** writes: "It may happen that when a person engages in . . . self-examination he is alarmed by the result. He considers his life and can only conclude that he falls short of the divine standard. He does not love his brothers as fully as he should. He cannot claim that freedom from sin of which John spoke earlier. How can he possibly belong to the truth when he feels that his actions belie it?" (p. 197)

Another scholar, **Robert Law**, put it this way: "We believed that we had passed from death into life (3:14); but to ourselves this has become almost or altogether doubtful. When conscience summons us to the tribunal within, it declares us guilty. We have failed in doing the

'righteousness' of the children of God (3:10), or our faith has faltered—our vision of the Truth has become dim. The evidence of our union with Christ is obscured by the consciousness of inconsistencies which, regarded in themselves, compel us to question whether we are 'of the truth' or have been self-deceived" (*Tests of Life*, p. 282)

We **are** to examine our lives and our hearts to see if, in fact, we do know God. That's the overall thrust of 1 John and other passages of Scripture. But on the other hand, if we are truly vitally connected to God through Jesus Christ, there is the danger of being so critical of ourselves that we lose our confidence about our relationship with God. And that's what I'm convinced John is turning to now. Doubts like this can wreck havoc in our souls. They can devastate our lives, if we let them run free.

When doubts about our relationship with God begin to creep into the soul, great damage is often done. The biggest damage I believe is that we lose confidence in God's work in our lives. And when we lose confidence we lose energy, we lose passion for God, and energy for His kingdom begins to droop. If I doubt God's work in my heart and life, then I wonder "why try?"

So, directed by the Holy Spirit, John inserts this section here to help us if and when these doubts begin to take hold. And the direction he takes us in is surprising to me. He doesn't advise us in the direction I naturally would take. Which is good because my sinful nature, my flesh (as the Bible speaks of it), is contrary to the Spirit of God. So I need to hear. I need to listen to what God has to say to me here. And you need to hear it also.

Listen as I read the Word of God.

By this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our heart before him; ²⁰ for whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything. ²¹ Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God; ²² and whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him. ²³ And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. ²⁴ Whoever keeps his commandments abides in God, and God in him. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit whom he has given us.

Before I plunge into what I believe these verses are saying, I want to acknowledge up front that this is a difficult passage. Godly, brilliant men have different conclusions about what John is saying here. One New Testament scholar (Dodd) called this section (3:19-24) "a series of loosely connected statements, set forth briefly and baldly, almost as if the author had made notes which he found no time to work up."

Another scholar (Brown, *The Epistles of John*, 453) writes: "We have already seen that the epistolary author is singularly inept in constructing clear sentences, but in these verses he is at his worst." And he quotes another commentator (Loisy) who "dubs [this passage] 'gibberish'."

I have a higher view of Scripture than that, but the reason I mention this is because I want you to be aware that some Scripture is difficult and tough-sledding. But we need to dig as deep as we can and pray that God will illuminate our minds and hearts. Having dug as deeply as this past week would allow and having prayed repeatedly for divine help, here is what I understand John to be teaching us.

WHERE TO TURN WHEN THERE IS SELF-CONDEMNATION

I believe John is telling us, that when we examine our hearts and our lives and self-condemnation swells up in our hearts, we must ultimately look to God and not to ourselves.

You see, our tendency is to look at our failure. My tendency, when I see that I don't measure up to the standard, is to get disgusted with myself and then to redouble my efforts. I exhort myself, "Come on, Norman, try harder." I whip myself internally for falling short. And then I grit my teeth and determine to work really hard to do what God wants, to love well. There's a desire in me to see evidence that I'm born again so all my energy is focused on shaping up.

John exhorts us here to instead look to God. He writes, "*whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything.*"

Our heart can act as the ultimate judge. And the self-condemnation can be blistering. But we must persuade our hearts that there is a greater judge. We must instruct our hearts that God is greater. And so even if my heart sees evidence that I'm not measuring up, I must defer to the One who knows everything, to the One who is omniscient.

At first, that might sound really scary. If God knows everything, then He knows even better than I do how lousy I am at righteousness and at loving others. So, John, you're telling me to defer to God's judgment of me? Then, I don't stand a chance!

Yes, God has an incredibly higher standard than we do. Yes, God sees and He hates my sin more than I do. But, if I am a believer in Jesus Christ, if I trust and treasure Jesus, God has already judged my sins. My sins were judged, they were condemned, in Christ on the Cross. And God has pronounced me justified. Because of what Christ has done on the Cross, God has already declared me righteous. Jesus took my sins and He has given me His righteousness.

Now I can state what Romans 8:1 states: “*There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.*”

Even more specifically, what John is urging us to do when our hearts fill up with self-condemnation is to look to the grace of God.

Listen to **John MacArthur** about this passage: “So where do you go when your conscience is accusing you? You go back to the position of gratitude for the grace of God.”

Instead of focusing on my failures and my inabilities and trying harder, John counsels us to run to God’s grace. God is greater than my heart. He knows everything, and yet He still loves me. He still looks upon me with favor because of Christ. God’s grace is greater than my failures and my sins.

James Boice says that what John means here is that “. . . whatever our hearts may say, God knows us better than even we ourselves do and, nevertheless, has acquitted us. Therefore, we should reassure ourselves by His judgment, which alone is trustworthy, and refuse to trust our own” (p. 125).

There’s an old hymn that is called “**Grace Greater than Our Sin.**”

*Marvelous grace of our loving Lord,
Grace that exceeds our sin and our guilt!
Yonder on Calvary's mount outpoured,
There where the blood of the Lamb was spilled.*

*Chorus: Grace, grace, God's grace
Grace that will pardon and cleanse within
Grace, grace, God's grace
Grace that is greater than all our sin!*

I believe John is saying the same thing that the apostle Paul states in Romans 8, beginning with verse 33:

Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. 34 Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.

In other words, even my own condemnation of myself doesn’t stick, IF I am trusting, resting in the grace of God.

John isn't excusing our sin. He's not making light of our sin. He's wanting to make sure we keep our eyes on God and are ultimately trusting God and His grace for our relationship with Him and not our own efforts.

I believe it was **Robert Murray McCheyne** who said, "For every look at self take ten looks at Christ."

Nancy Leigh DeMoss wrote these words: "Every time we are tempted to be discouraged by our own disappointing performance, we must look to our Savior whose perfect performance has been credited to us."

THE BLESSINGS OF RESTING IN GOD'S GRACE

In the rest of this section of Scripture John helps us to see what happens when we do, in fact, turn to God and His grace instead of our hearts. There are some amazing blessings that we enjoy when our hearts are resting in the grace of God alone.

1) Confidence before God

Look at verse 21:

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

If you trust God and not your own efforts, your own abilities, and so don't succumb to your heart's condemnation, the result is confidence before God. And that is so important.

Where this confidence shows up, John says, is in **prayer**. He goes on: *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.*

When we are banking on God's grace alone for our relationship with Him, there is a confidence, a boldness, about talking to God.

There is a story of a Roman emperor who was parading through the streets of the capital in a victory celebration. Roman soldiers were lined along the parade route in order to keep back the cheering people. At one point along the route there was a small platform where the royal family was sitting. As the emperor approached, his youngest son, who was just a little boy, jumped down, burrowed through the crowd, and tried to run out to meet him. One of the guards stopped him and said, "You can't do that! Don't you know who that is? That's the emperor!" But the boy quickly replied, "He may be your emperor, but he's my father!" (from 'Our Daily Bread', July, 1977)

When we bank on God's grace we develop a confidence that God is our Father. He has given us eternal life and has adopted us into His family. So we can run to Him at any time and talk directly to Him.

Not only can I run to Him at any time, but I can talk to Him about anything and everything. The word that John uses here translated "confidence" literally means "**boldness, freedom in speaking, unreservedness in speech**". It means being able to speak to God openly, plainly, boldly.

It's rare, but every-once-in-awhile someone finds a friend in which they can share anything: struggles, pain, fears, joys, darkness, simple pleasures, etc. John encourages us by saying that God is like that, only perfectly. When we rest in His grace alone, we develop a boldness to be completely real with God. Because His favor is not dependent on our performance.

2) Answers to Prayer

The second blessing that John mentions is answers to prayer. In verse 22 he writes:

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

He's echoing what Jesus said (John 14:13-14) to His disciples in the Upper Room: *"Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it."*

I don't fully understand this promise, but I don't think Jesus or John is giving us a blank check that we can cash in on our greedy selfish desires. Rather I believe John is saying that when we rest in God's grace alone there will be a deepening desire to match up to God's desires. We will want to obey, to keep God's commandments. And as we walk in obedience God delights in answering our prayers.

There are a number of places in the New Testament which speak of conditions for answered prayer.

- Later in 1 John 5, we're going to read *"if we ask anything according to his will he hears us."*
- In John 15, Jesus said *"If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you."*
- And in chapter 16 of John, Jesus adds: *"whatever you ask of the Father in my name, he will give it to you."*

So it's not a blank check, but it is an incentive to draw close to God and to ask. The common denominator is "Ask". Keep on asking. Obey and ask.

It seems the sequence is significant here. Focus on God and rest in His grace. Develop a genuine boldness in His presence. Obey and ask and receive.

3) The Abiding Spirit

There's one more blessing that John mentions. He discusses the abiding Spirit. Verse 23:

And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. ²⁴ Whoever keeps his commandments abides in God, and God in him. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit whom he has given us.

As we rest in God's wonderful grace, in Jesus' saving work for us on the Cross, we grow in belief and we grow in keeping His commandments. That's how we grow in abiding in God and God in us.

We grow in delighting in being in God's presence. We grow in answered prayers. And we also grow in experiencing the Spirit's indwelling. We see His presence in us manifested. We see His work in and through us.

The place to begin and to stay for all of us is the grace of God. On what are you resting for abundant life? On what are you relying for confidence with God? Is it on your measuring up to the incredibly high standard? Or is it on the incredible grace of God?

We look for evidence of God's work in our lives. In order to be confident that I know God I need see if there is the fruit of Jesus' new life in me. But I can't bank on that fruit. I can't rely on any righteousness or any love that I might see. I must rely solely on God, on His undeserved favor through Jesus Christ.

I hope and pray that's where you're at this morning. If you're not there, repent—turn from your sin and from your self-efforts—and believe Christ, trust His saving work on your behalf. Accept and rest in His grace.

This morning it's our privilege to celebrate the Lord's Supper together. When He was here on earth, Jesus told us to do this in order to remember. We need to remember what is the basis for our new life. It's only in what Jesus Christ has accomplished on the Cross. It's only His dying in my place that gives me eternal life.

Hebrews 13:9-15. ". . . it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace . . ."