

Series: 1 John

Title: Be Sure of Your Salvation

Text: 1 John 3:19-24

Date: April 25, 2021

Verse 19

In verse 19, John transitioned from talking about love to provide the genuine Christians amongst his readership with assurance of their salvation. He said, "This is how we will know that you belong to the truth and will reassure our hearts before him" (1 John 3:19). The word "this" referred back to the content of verse 18, a verse that called believers to love "in action and in truth." According to John, the manifestation of such love would provide his readers with assurance of their salvation.

Such assurance was an ongoing theme in his letter. In 1 John 5:13, he would later identify it as one of the major purposes of his writing, saying, "I have written these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life." Why did the apostle feel compelled to write so frequently on the topic of assurance? He knew the false teachers of Asia Minor were wreaking havoc on congregations by causing many to doubt themselves spiritually. The Gnostics placed many in spiritual bondage through their assertion that a secret knowledge was necessary for salvation.

John sought to clarify matters by encouraging his hearers to look at the fruit of their lives. If they manifested a spiritual change on the outside, they could be assured they had been transformed on the inside. Such reasoning was in alignment with the teaching of Jesus who said, "So you'll recognize them by their fruit" (Matthew 7:20). When one is forgiven of sin and receives the Spirit of God, a dramatic change occurs (2 Corinthians 5:17). Regeneration produces new desires and a new disposition within the soul (John 3:3). Such change on the inside results in a change on the outside (Mark 7:20-23). One who is born again cannot help but show an external display of transformation (Ephesians 2:10). Spiritual fruit will adorn the lives of those who possess the Spirit of God (Galatians 5:22).

Love is one of the foremost changes that will mark the lives of those who are truly Christians. Jesus said, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:35). When writing to the Romans, Paul revealed that the Holy Spirit of God endows believers with a special capacity to love as God loves (Romans 5:5). Given these realities, true Christians should exhibit true love.

When believers are tempted to doubt their salvation, they only need to look at the fruit of their lives. If they exhibit Christian virtue, like love, they can gain a degree of assurance regarding their standing before God. John used a similar argument back in 1 John 3:14. He repeated his reasoning in our current verse for emphasis. In doing so, he spoke of the way in which believers can "reassure" their hearts before the Lord. The word translated "reassure" is one that meant "to pacify" or "to appease." In the context of John's letter, it depicted one having a conscience that was at rest.¹ Those who have struggled with assurance of salvation know the turbulent restlessness that often accompanies doubt. According to John, such worries can be assuaged by inspecting the fruit of Christian virtue in one's life.

Verse 20

John continued his discussion on assurance in verse 20 by saying, "Whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows all things" (1 John 3:20). The apostle's words picturesquely described the experience of spiritual doubt. The word translated "condemn" was a compound word in the original language. It was made up of two words that literally meant "to know against."² It depicted one harboring a fault against another. Applied to

¹ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 597.

² Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 597.

John's audience, the word carried the idea of a "detection of evil in oneself."³ Because of the erroneous teaching in Asia Minor, some were questioning their own spiritual standing. They were doubting they were saved. Fixated on their faults and failures, and insecure because they didn't measure up to the Gnostics' claims, many condemned themselves. Their consciences tricked them and convinced them that they weren't true believers.

John sought to reorient his readers with truth by saying, "God is greater than our hearts." The word "hearts" was used as a synonym for the human conscience. The believers in Asia Minor were conflicted because of the claims of the Gnostics. In the interior part of their nature, they were doubting whether or not they were truly of God. John's words revealed that the conscience, though it is a powerful gift from God (Romans 2:14-15), can sometimes be misleading. When consistently programmed with the wrong information, it can cause one to stray from the Lord's realities (Romans 1:28). One has rightly said, "Our conscience is by no means infallible."⁴

John wanted his readers to be liberated from deception. He shared truth to cure their troubled consciences, saying, "God is greater than our hearts, and he knows all things." Christians may sometimes be plagued by self-doubt and unnecessary guilt. On occasion, they may live under religious condemnation imposed by others. In such situations, they can be assured that God is bigger than their feelings. Though their emotions may beckon them to believe they are insufficient or inferior, the truth and love of God can triumph.

The reality is that God "knows all things." He is omniscient. The Psalmist declared, "You know when I sit down and when I stand up; you understand my thoughts from far away. You observe my travels and my rest; you are aware of all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue, you know all about it, Lord" (Psalm 139:2-4). The Lord sees into the interior of men and women, discerning their thoughts and intentions (Mark 2:8). Though the Gnostics made others feel condemned, John wanted the true believers to take heart. God was the only one who really perceived the secret state of their souls. The Gnostics weren't the ultimate judges of their souls. The Lord was. He is the one who "knows all things, including our secret motives and deepest resolves, and, it is implied, He will be more merciful toward us than our own heart."⁵

Verse 21

John continued his commentary on the human conscience in verse 21 by saying, "Dear friends, if our hearts don't condemn us, we have confidence before God." The apostle intended to reveal the real source of the condemnation the true believers were experiencing. It didn't come from their "hearts." It came from the false teachers. The claims of special knowledge had some doubting, but such doubts weren't generated by the Holy Spirit. The true believers were living under a sense of false guilt and shame. Their conscience was conflicted because of the expectations of others, not because of the conviction of the Holy Spirit.

When one walks with the Lord and stays free of sin and deception, one will experience a sense of liberty and freedom. He or she will enjoy what we often call a "clean conscience." John spoke of this reality by saying, "if our hearts don't condemn us." Though Christians will not be fully perfected until the end of all things (1 John 3:1-2), they can experience peace that comes from an undefiled conscience. John's readers did indeed have clean consciences, but they lacked "confidence before God." Their lack of confidence came from the work of the Gnostic heretics, not the Holy Spirit.

John wanted the true believers to gain a sense of spiritual "confidence." The original language of the text used a word that referred to a "joyful sense of freedom." It conveyed an

³ Friberg, Friberg, and Miller, [CD-Rom].

⁴ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 597.

⁵ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 597.

attitude marked by a lack of fear and a boldness to be outspoken.⁶ Some of John's readers were struggling to embody such confidence. The false teachers were causing insecurity in the church. John wanted true believers to know they could have confidence in Jesus. Paul used the same language from our text in his letter to the Ephesians to encourage a similar frame of mind, saying, "In him we have boldness and confident access through faith in him" (Ephesians 3:12).

Based on John's words, believers should live with an ongoing mindset of boldness and confidence. Because of what Jesus did at the cross, no Christian needs to live in an insecure state. The threats and criticisms of others shouldn't make them lose heart. The righteousness of Jesus can give God's children a continual courage throughout life (Proverbs 28:1 and 1 John 2:28).

Verse 22

In verse 22, John continued his discussion regarding assurance of salvation by talking about another source of confidence believers possess. Those who are in Christ can have boldness in life because of the promise of answered prayer. John said, "And receive whatever we ask from him because we keep his commands and do what is pleasing in his sight" (1 John 3:22). The word "ask" was undoubtedly a reference to prayer. According to Matthew 7:7, prayer is fundamentally an act of asking things of God. John knew that, so he spoke of prayer in the way he did.

Though John spoke of prayer as the act of asking, his main focus was on the way in which prayer could provide assurance of salvation. In particular, He proposed that the experience of answered prayer could serve as a confirmation that one was truly a Christian. Answered prayer, however, doesn't occur in a vacuum. True believers experience answers to their prayers because of obedience to God's Word. John said Christians receive answers to their prayers "because we keep his commands and do what is pleasing in his sight." Instead of espousing a merit-based approach to prayer, John simply meant to convey an unalterable reality.

Obedying the Lord's commands is not a means of simply getting what one wants; rather, it reveals that one is more likely to pray the types of prayers to which God will respond positively. When believers live lives of obedience to the Father's will, they cultivate desires and aspirations in alignment with His will. As a result, they ask for things in accordance with His will; thus, the Lord answers their prayers. Jesus spoke of this reality in John's gospel, saying, "If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it" (John 14:14). God answers prayers that reflect His nature. He grants requests that agree with His name and will. The only prayers He does not grant are ones grounded in "wrong motives" (James 4:3).

John knew many of his readers had experiences of answered prayer. He used such experiences as a platform to encourage them. The Gnostics were causing many to doubt their standing before the Lord. As he had done earlier in his letter, John attempted to provide his readers with proof of their salvation. Though some made them feel spiritually insecure, they could be strengthened by remembering the way in which the Lord had responded to their prayers. Answered prayers were an evidence of obedience and obedience was an evidence of salvation. The claims and criticisms of the Gnostics were ungrounded and unsubstantiated.

Verse 23

While verse 22 focused on the need to obey Christ's "commands" in order to experience answered prayer, verse 23 shared which commands one should follow in order to have one's prayers answered. John said, "Now this is his command: that we believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and love one another as he commanded us" (1 John 3:23). Two commands were at the heart of John's appeal — a command to believe and a command to love. The former referred to the faith required for salvation and sanctification (Romans 1:17 and

⁶ Friberg, Friberg, and Miller, [CD-Rom].

Ephesians 2:8). The latter dealt with the Lord's Great Commandment (Matthew 22:37-40).

John meant to say that true believers exhibit both faith and love (1 Corinthians 13:13). If one doesn't exhibit the two virtues, it is doubtful one is a true believer. The meaning was clear — the Gnostic heretics were false professors. Though they maligned the genuine Christians in the church, they lacked real faith and real love. The real believers in Asia Minor could be encouraged. Though they were being intimidated by others, they could receive comfort by looking at the fruit of salvation in their lives. Their obedience in the areas of faith and love provided proof that they were really in Christ.

Verse 24

In verse 24, John attempted to further assure true believers of their salvation by saying, "The one who keeps his commands remains in him, and he in him. And the way we know that he remains in us is from the Spirit he has given us" (1 John 3:24). The apostle's words aimed at providing assurance by speaking of two truths. First, John spoke of commandment keeping as a mark of a true disciple. He upheld the same idea earlier in his epistle (1 John 3:4-10). The Gnostics made room for sexual sin and unloving behavior. All along, they cast aspersions on true believers, boasting of secret, special knowledge. Combatting the claims of the heretics, John reminded the church that the one who "keeps" the "commands" of Jesus is one who possesses true spiritual life.

John used the word translated "remains" to depicted the state of being saved. The term meant "to be at home with." Though the same Greek term was used of sanctification in John 15:4-5, John seemed to use it in our current text in relation to salvation. In doing so, he metaphorically depicted true Christians as having a family-like relationship with Jesus. They remained in Jesus in that their souls had found an abode in Him. If one was truly in an abiding relationship with Jesus, one would keep the Lord's commands. Their obedience would provide proof of salvation. John's assertion was in alignment with the words of Jesus. In John's gospel, Jesus said, "If anyone loves me, he will keep my word. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him" (John 14:23).

In verse 24, John promoted assurance of salvation through a second means. He focused on truth related to the indwelling of the Spirit. He said, "the way we know that he remains in us is from the Spirit he has given us." Jesus used language similar to John's in John 14:17 to speak of the way in which the Spirit inhabits disciples.

When one is born again, an unmistakable change occurs. The Spirit of God takes up residence in the believer's soul (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). Such an indwelling presence should be discernible. The one who is born again should be able to perceive that God's Spirit is with him or her. John's words were in agreement with Paul's words in Romans 8:16 — "The Spirit himself testifies together with our spirit that we are God's children." The invasion of God's Spirit within one's soul brings new desires and a new outlook in life (2 Corinthians 5:17). Though the real believers in Asia Minor were being made to doubt their salvation, they could have confidence. By remembering the work of the Spirit in their lives, they could be assured that they were real believers.