Abiding in Christ—Part 4
“Blessed Assurance”
1 John 3:19-24

Introduction: Our last study focused on the differences between God’s children and Satan’s children and it hinged on the presence of God’s abiding love. A regenerate heart, filled with God’s love, naturally exudes righteousness, shares love for others, and sacrifices for others’ sakes. But those hearts devoid of God’s love are gripped by the darkness of Satan and his world system; and therefore, can only exude evil, hating everyone who opposes them, as they grow ever more prideful and self-centered.

The thrust of John’s argument is based on the logical conclusion that a person’s heart will affect the way that person actually lives. The heart of a lost person will cause him to act like his father, the devil, and the heart of a saved person will cause him to act like His Father, the Lord Jesus Christ. However, in the last century a new philosophy developed that has permeated a great deal of evangelical thinking. It is often called “no-lordship” or “Free Grace,” and it teaches that there is no necessary connection between justification and sanctification. I’m sure that those who espouse this belief have the best of intentions, probably not wanting anyone to ever doubt their salvation, but it simply doesn’t stand the biblical test. Scripture is replete with both Jesus’ and His disciples’ teachings that “you will know them by their fruits” (Matt. 7:20) and “faith without works is dead” (James 2:26).

Today’s passage takes the imagery of last week’s verses of the presence and outpouring of God’s abiding love and builds a series of three reasons why we should feel God’s Blessed Assurance: Abiding in Christ’s Love, Abiding in Christ’s Commandments, and Abiding in Christ’s Name. In sharing these truths, I believe that John also opens the opportunity for a discussion on our consciences and the part guilt plays in the Christians walk.

I. Abiding in Christ’s Love Gives Us Blessed Assurance: We will know by this that we are of the truth, and will assure our heart before Him in whatever our heart condemns us; for God is greater than our heart and knows all things. (v. 19-20)
   a. When John says that we will know by this, the this he is referring to is the description in the preceding verses of God’s abiding love… “Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth.” (3:18)
   b. Many can fake a brotherly love for a time, but only a heart that has been supernaturally regenerated can share the sacrificial love of verses 14-18, because it flows from the submissive obedience described in verses 4-12, which can only be empowered by the Holy Spirit.
   c. The what that we will know is that we are of the truth. John was saying that the fruit of God’s love in our lives is a blessed assurance of our salvation.
      i. It isn’t that we once prayed a prayer, walked an isle, signed a card, or even that we “got wet”. Assurance is instead found in the daily walk of the redeemed, experiencing the truth of God’s promises and the fruits of His Spirit.
      ii. “Believers enjoy an assurance based not only on what Scripture promises to those who believe (Ps. 4:3; Phil. 1:6; 2 Tim. 1:12), but, on a practical level, based on the presence of a serving love for fellow believers (cf. vv. 13-18) and a desire to live in holiness (cf. vv. 4-12).” (MacArthur)
   d. The Conscience: Paul tells us, in his letter to the Romans that everyone is created with a conscience: “For when Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them” (Rom. 2:14-15)
      i. What is it?
1. “The conscience is defined as that part of the human psyche that induces mental anguish and feelings of guilt when we violate it and feelings of pleasure and well-being when our actions, thoughts and words are in conformity to our value systems” (http://www.gotquestions.org)

2. It is a part of the human heart that God created with a basic understanding of right and wrong, but it is not a perfect guide or barometer (smoke detector?)

3. It can be:
   a. **Weak**—“7 However not all men have this knowledge; but some, being accustomed to the idol until now, eat food as if it were sacrificed to an idol; and their conscience being weak is defiled.” (1 Cor. 8:7)
   b. **Strong**—“8 But food will not commend us to God; we are neither the worse if we do not eat, nor the better if we do eat. 9 But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak.” (1 Cor. 8:8-9)
   c. **Wounded**—“10 For if someone sees you, who have knowledge, dining in an idol’s temple, will not his conscience, if he is weak, be strengthened to eat things sacrificed to idols? 11 For through your knowledge he who is weak is ruined, the brother for whose sake Christ died. 12 And so, by sinning against the brethren and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ.” (1 Cor. 8:10-12)
   d. **Seared**—“But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons, 2 by means of the hypocrisy of liars seared in their own conscience as with a branding iron” (1 Tim. 4:1-2)
   e. **Strengthened**—“Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. 2 And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.” (Rom. 12:1-2)

4. “Ironically, a weak conscience is more likely to accuse than a strong conscience. Scripture calls this a weak conscience because it is **too easily wounded**. People with weak consciences tend to fret about things that should not provoke guilt in a mature Christian.” (MacArthur)

   e. With that understanding of our conscience, it is probably wise to discuss the two types of guilt: **bad** guilt, which drives us away from God (Judas) and **good** guilt, which drives us closer (Peter).

   i. **Good Guilt**: An important function of the believer’s conscience, what John calls here our heart, is that the power of the Holy Spirit convicts us of our sin, so we can confess it and have the Lord draw us ever deeper into our love relationship with Him (Peter in John 18:25-27 & 21:15-17)

   ii. **Bad Guilt**: Unfortunately, sometimes Satan and/or own conscience can bring upon us a guilt that falsely **condemns us** and tries to convince us that our sin is not forgivable, which then drives us further away from the forgiveness of Christ (Judas in Matt. 26:14-16 & 27:1-5)

   1. But the blessed assurance we receive by abiding in Christ’s love tells us that Satan is a liar and that God **is greater than our heart and that He knows all things**, chiefly that “there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” (Rom. 8:1).
2. “Sometimes our heart condemns us, but, in doing so, it gives a wrong verdict, and then we have the satisfaction of being able to take the case into a higher court, for ‘God is greater than our heart, and knoweth all things.’” (Spurgeon)

II. Abiding in Christ’s Commandments Gives Us Blessed Assurance: 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 the things that are pleasing in His sight. (v. 21-22)

a. Although a Christian will never stop being convicted of his sin, he can reach a point where his heart has been so rightly conditioned by experiencing God through the Bible, prayer, circumstances, and fellow believers that his heart does not condemn him.
   i. “If we have confidence, it is not because of our proud confidence is this: the testimony of our conscience, that in holiness and godly sincerity, not in fleshly wisdom but in the grace of God, we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially toward you.” (2 Cor. 1:12)
   ii. “I am telling the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience testifies with me in the Holy Spirit,” (Rom. 9:1; cf. )

b. This healthy conscience and right relationship through Christ, gives the believer confidence before God. The Greek term for confidence (Parrhesia / par-ray-see’-ah) “stood in ancient Greece for the most valued right of a citizen of a free state, the right to ‘speak his mind’ . . . unhampered by fear or shame” (Barker citing Dodd). Because of what Christ did, we no longer have to be ashamed or fear the wrath of God. We no longer need a temple veil or an earthly priest to separate us from His presence. We now have the blessed confidence that we are welcome, anytime, all the time, to sit at His feet and bask in the glory of the Creator God.

c. This right relationship also brings the confidence that whatever we ask we receive from Him. Many people have struggled with promises like this in Scripture and they have given rise to many false doctrines and many broken hearts. The entire health, wealth, and prosperity heresy is based on a mutilation of God’s promises.
   i. God is not bound by our prayers, but when we walk in the kind of obedience and love that John has been describing, we will begin to pray truly “in the name of Christ,” which literally means that we are asking God to do what Jesus would do if He were here at this moment (and course He is, in us!).
   ii. To pray in His name is to ask what He would want, and to minister in His name is to serve others on His behalf (cf. John 14:13-14). The only way to know what Jesus would ask for and what He would do is to keep His commandments and do the things that are pleasing in His sight.
   iii. “Obedience is the indispensable condition, not the meritorious cause, of answered prayer.” (John R. W. Stott)
   iv. “John’s emphasis then is on true, heartfelt obedience (motivated by love) as opposed to a false, external legalism (motivated by selfish ambition and pride)...Throughout the New Testament, the necessity that believers keep His commandments is explicitly or implicitly indicated by every command given to them (e.g., Matt. 7:21; 16:24; John 14:15; James 1:22). Doing the things that are pleasing in His sight should motivate everything Christians do.” (MacArthur)

1. “Now the God of peace, who brought up from the dead the great Shepherd of the sheep through the blood of the eternal covenant, even Jesus our Lord, equip you in every good thing to do His will, working in us that which is pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.” (Heb. 13:20-21).
d. For when we Abide in Christ’s commandments, we have the Blessed Assurance that we have been redeemed and transformed...by the power of God which brought up from the dead the great Shepherd of the sheep through the blood of the eternal covenant and that we are being equipped by His Word and that same power for every good thing to do His will, working in us that which is pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

III. Abiding in Christ’s Name Gives Us Blessed Assurance: This is His commandment, that we believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, just as He commanded us. The one who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him. We know by this that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us. (v. 23-24)

a. John restates Jesus’ pronouncement of the greatest commandments that we believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, which Jesus said, “On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets” (Matt. 22:37-40). These are the two foundational elements on which all Christians’ assurance of faith that saves is built.

i. Believing in the name of Jesus does not mean believing in the literal five-letter “name” of Jesus.

1. As we’ve discussed numerous times, many people believe in a god of their own creation, that they have given the name of Jesus, such as the Mormons and the Jehovah’s Witnesses.

2. But, believing in the name of His Son Jesus Christ, means believing everything about the person and the work of Jesus the Christ that we know from His Word. It means knowing that every man is totally lost and incapable of saving himself. It is knowing that is why God had to send His only begotten Son to be the propitiation for our sins. It is knowing that trust in the atoning work of the cross has once and for all paid the price for our eternal lives.

   a. “This is not simply believing that Jesus is, or even believing that He did certain things such as die on a cross. To believe on the name of Jesus means to put your belief on Jesus in the sense of trusting in Him, relying on Him, and clinging to Jesus. It isn’t about intellectual knowledge or understanding, it is about trust.” (David Guzik)

ii. It is that saving faith, which through the power of the Holy Spirit, transforms our dark hearts and makes them capable of having God’s love for one another.

b. John’s passion is revealed in his imperative statement that the one who keeps His commandments (specifically the two foundational ones he has just mentioned) has living proof that he abides in Him and He in him. In other words, we are only able to keep His commandments if we are indwelt with the power of the Holy Spirit, so if someone does keep His commandments, he has the blessed testimony of the Holy Spirit that he has been saved. That is why John could say that we know by this that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us and why Paul could say that “The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God” (Rom. 8:16).

i. “This Spirit of God works a change; in all true Christians it changes from the power of Satan to the power of God. Consider, believer, how it changes thy heart. Dost not thou long for peace with God? Wouldst thou not forego all the world for it? No profit, pleasure, or preferment shall hinder thee from following Christ. This salvation is built upon Divine testimony, even the Spirit of God.” (Matthew Henry)
IV. The Last Word:

a. I recall a conversation that Pam and I had regarding an apologetics program she heard, where a man broken-heartedly share the account of his daughter, who had made a profession of faith and been very active in her youth group until going off to college. They were initially very excited about her acceptance into UNC Chapel Hill, until they received a call after her 4th week there announcing that one of her professors had convinced her that the Bible is full of inaccuracies and that she no longer believed in God.

b. Unfortunately, this sad story is born out in statistics from Barna Research and Youth Transition Network, which show that up to 88% of youth who attended church activities in their high school years “fall away” from the faith in their college years.

c. Many people attempt to deflect the horror of these statistics and personal accounts by asserting “they will come back when they have kids” or “well at least they made a profession of faith” or “boys will be boys”.

d. The reality is though, that the years of watering down the gospel, so either the lost will not be offended or the redeemed will not feel uncomfortable, instead of declaring the full counsel of God and letting it convict and transform the redeemed or convert and redeem the lost, has created a deadly tolerance for sin our churches.

e. Which is playing out in the church’s apparent lack of impact on the culture, the lost, and it’s self!

f. For the last century, we have wrongfully tried to convince ourselves that salvation can take place without transformation. We have sown tolerance for sin and reaped the whirlwind of lost assurance. Our churches are full of members, leaders, and even sadly pastors that David Guzik calls the “barely saved” and the “almost saved.” With the same love and passion as John, it is my prayer that the bride of Christ will look into the mirror of His Word and seek His Blessed Assurance!!!