

THAT YOU MAY KNOW: A STUDY OF FIRST JOHN

LESSON 4: “Assurance and the Obedience of God’s Commands”

TEXT: 1 John 2:3–6

Sinclair Ferguson summarizes the doctrine of assurance well when he writes, “**Assurance is the conscious confidence that we are in a right relationship with God through Christ**” (“The Reformation and Assurance,” 20). Simply stated, the assurance of salvation is the believer’s confidence that his sins have all been forgiven through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, and that he has peace with God and eternal life.

As such, it is important to note that to speak about *assurance* is not the same thing as speaking about *salvation*. One may have one without the other. Jesus taught that there are “many” who are on the broad path “that leads to destruction” (Matt 7:13)—those who will say to Him, “Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?,” but to whom Jesus will say, “Depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness” (7:22–23). Similarly, there are those who lack assurance, but who are genuinely saved. Their lack of confidence in their salvation can be caused by a host of issues, which Joel Beeke (*Knowing and Growing in Assurance of Faith*, 25–41) has helpfully summarized under eleven headings:

- 1) *A history and present experience of sin.* The believer’s increasing recognition of the ugliness of sin, its consequences his life, and his continued moments of failure in living up to God’s righteous standard can lead him to question, “Can God really love me, the wretched sinner I am?”
- 2) *False conceptions of God’s character and His gospel*—A believer’s theology is never perfect, and inadequate study or errant ideas can leave him weak with respect to the power of God and the efficacy of the gospel.
- 3) *A lack of clarity on justification by faith.* Faith is the grasp of Christ’s righteousness—and not one’s own—as the only solution for sin and sinfulness. It is according to this faith in Christ—however weak it may be—that we are declared righteous. But a believer can fail to draw a clear enough line between justification and progressive sanctification, and because that sanctification is still progressing, he can wonder if he has truly been declared righteous.
- 4) *A failure to confess Christ.* A believer can fail at crucial times to confess Jesus Christ publicly, leaving him wondering afterward whether his lack of courage indicates a lack of salvation.
- 5) *Disobedience and periods of sinful habits.* The believer can experience not only moments of sinful disobedience, but whole seasons of disobedience. When he comes to his senses, the conviction he feels or his sin can lead him to doubt whether he was ever saved.
- 6) *Ignorance of the right evidences of salvation.* A believer may be poorly taught and lack the understanding of what constitutes real evidences of his salvation. Not knowing *by what* or *how* to “examine oneself” can lead to a lack of assurance.
- 7) *Possessing a doubting or negative disposition.* Some believers grow up in a context where they have always been doubted, or they struggle with discouragement or a generally fearful disposition. These qualities—which must be “put off” to be sure—can lead to a pessimistic view of one’s standing before Christ.
- 8) *A conversion in early childhood, or a conversion that appeared gradual.* Not being able to claim a radical, “Damascus Road” experience leads some believers to wonder if they have been saved. Those saved at a young age, or those who cannot pinpoint the moment of their conversion, struggle particularly.
- 9) *An expectation of the wrong kind of experiences.* Due to unsound teaching or ill-informed assumptions, some believers expect that they should not experience some kinds of circumstances (sickness, loss) and expect that they must experience other kinds of circumstances (success, prosperity) if they are saved. When those expectations are not met, they doubt their salvation.
- 10) *A lack of acknowledging what God has done.* A believer can get so focused on the commands of Scripture (the “imperatives”) that he fails to meditate on the facts of Scripture (the “indicatives”). By losing sight of the facts of Christ’s ministry on his behalf, the believer can lose sight of the assurance of his salvation.
- 11) *Being Attacked by Satan.* As Beeke states, “Satan’s peculiar design and malicious desire is to vex and molest the saints with the temptations to believe that ‘God is not their God.’ With a variety of devices, Satan strives to undermine our faith, persuading us to doubt our possession of eternal life in Christ” (*Knowing and Growing in Assurance of Faith*, 40).

But out of His great goodness to His children, God has not left us to wander in confusion or doubt. He desires His children to enjoy their privileges as His chosen ones—which includes confident assurance that their sins are forgiven, that they possess eternal life, and that they are forever secure in His hands.

To correct the misconceptions about assurance and cultivate it rightly in the life of the believer, God provided His people with the letter of 1 John—the purpose of which is succinctly stated in **1 John 5:13, “These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life.”** Throughout this letter penned by the apostle John, we find numerous *tests* which function to increase and purify assurance in the true believer. These tests also serve to eliminate assurance in the false believer—with the hope that he will recognize his false profession and turn to Christ to be truly saved. So far, we have considered these tests:

- **1 John 1:1–4 – “Assurance and the Historicity of Christ.”** This study led to the key question, *Do you believe that the biblical testimony about Jesus Christ is true?*
- **1 John 1:5–10 – “Assurance and the Confession of Sin.”** This study led to the key question, *Are you deeply aware of your sin and do you acknowledge it to God?*
- **1 John 2:1–2 – “Assurance and the Sufficiency of Christ.”** This study led to the key question, *Do you believe that the sacrifice of Christ is sufficient for your sin?*

We turn now to a next test revealed by God through the apostle John.

1 John 2:3–6 – “Assurance and the Obedience of God’s Commands”

John now turns directly to the role obedience plays in establishing assurance in the life of the genuine believer. He already stated in brief, “if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship” (1:7), and “My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin” (2:1). But now he addresses the topic in greater detail:

“By this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments. The one who says, ‘I have come to know Him,’ and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him; but whoever keeps His word, in him the love of God has truly been perfected. By this we know that we are in Him: the one who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked.” —1 John 2:3–6

Commentators divide this paragraph in different ways because of its challenging literary structure. But its message is still very clear: ***one of the necessary steps for determining assurance is to examine one’s commitment to obey God’s word.*** Our approach will look at the test John describes here in three stages.

I. The Test Revealed (2:3)

It is important to note that John describes this test using the first-person plural pronoun **“we”** three times in the first sentence. As such, John *includes himself* in the test he is about to explain, indicating that it is not limited to a specific category of Christians but is *universal* in application. This test is to be applied among all of God’s people, in all places, and at all times. There are no exceptions.

John emphasizes the objectivity of this test by beginning with the words, **“By this we know.”** This introductory statement indicates that John believed that the result of this test, identified in the second half of the verse, *was knowable*. He uses the verb **“know”** to refer to confidence in intellectual understanding that has come about through a process of learning. It is the same thing as saying, “By this we can be sure.”

In what can we be sure? John states that this assurance is that **“we have come to know Him.”** John uses the same verb as he just used previously, but with a different nuance in the original tense form (a perfect tense as opposed to the present tense of the previous verb). This sure knowledge is knowledge about another kind of knowledge—a kind of knowledge that is *life-changing*, that results in transformation. That transformative knowledge is nothing less than the knowledge of God—**“Him.”**

Although the pronoun **“Him”** could refer back to “Jesus Christ the Righteous” in the previous paragraph (2:1–2), who will also be the center of attention in a little later in v. 6 (“... as He Himself walked”), it is best to take this pronoun as referring all the way back to 1:5, “This is the message we have heard from Him and announce to you, that **God is Light**, and in Him there is no darkness at all.” This is the One whom John states *can be known* (v. 3). The knowledge that he speaks of here is more than mere mental awareness. **John is speaking of personal knowledge of the God of Light—that is, a salvific relationship.** See John 17:3.

Then John delivers the substance of the test in a simple statement: **“if we keep His commandments.”** To express the intensity of the test, John uses the verb **“to keep”**—a stronger word than the simpler verb “to obey.” The verb “to keep” means “to persist in obedience.” It emphasizes zeal and commitment. As Gary Derickson states, this verb “goes far beyond mere conformity to law. It expresses a zealous desire to adhere to God’s will” (1, 2, & 3 John, 135). Alan Brooke also argues that this verb “denotes sympathetic obedience to the spirit of the command, rather than the rigid carrying out of its letter” (*Johannine Epistles*, 30).

That which is “kept” is **“His commandments.”** It is difficult to identify the specific contents of this term since John leaves it ambiguous. Later in v. 5, John will use an even broader term in parallel to this one: **“His word.”** In the context that follows (v. 7ff), John does narrow this term to refer specifically to the commandment *to love*. But here John leaves it vague, probably to indicate that this test refers to *anything that God has commanded*.

In summary, John states this test in v. 3 as follows: **In order to know that we know God savingly (that is, in order to have assurance of salvation), we must examine our commitment to obedience.** We must ask ourselves, *Am I serious about God’s will for my life as He has revealed it in His Word, and am I zealous to follow it?* This is not the *only* test for assurance, but it is one of the primary ones—as is testified to by its repetition, especially in John’s writings. For example, see: John 14:15, 21–23; 15:10; 1 John 5:3.

II. The Test Related (2:4–5a)

After establishing the test, John then relates the test to two different *categories* of professing Christians.

A. The False Confessors (2:4)

John uses the language of *confession*—**“The one who says”**—to introduce the first category. As he did in 1:6–10 (see vv. 6, 8, and 10), he begins with false confessors first. Those in this camp make the open and bold confession that they **“have come to know Him.”** This is the same language used in v. 3. Thus, it is a claim to *salvation*—to possess saving knowledge of the one true God.

To this claim John applies the test, and he catches them in a lie. John says about this category of professors that they **“do not keep His commandments.”** In other words, despite their bold claim, they do not persist in obedience and are not zealous for God’s commands. At best they go through the motions *externally*, without regard for the spirit of the law.

John’s assessment of them is stark. Such a one **“is a liar.”** The lack of committed obedience indicates that this confessor is not merely deceived or ignorant. He actively advocates what is false—namely, a false *confession* that he is saved. To emphasize this further, John adds that **“the truth is not in him.”** Whereas the previous statement was asserted positively (“he is a liar”), this one is stated as a denial (“the truth is not in him”). Repeating what he said in the test given in 1:5–10 (see esp. vv. 6, 8), John shows there is no ambiguity.

B. The Genuine Confessor (v. 5a)

When John introduces the second category, he doesn’t even mention a confession. Instead, he gets right to the point: **“Whoever keeps His word.”** John uses the verb **“keep”** now for the third time. This category describes those of *committed obedience*. But rather than calling such ones “truth-tellers” (in antithesis to the previous category of liars), John states that in such ones **“the love of God has been truly perfected.”** What is this **“love of God?”** It could be *God’s love for the believer*, but based on parallels in John’s writings, it is best to understand it as *the believer’s love for God*. See John 14:21–23; and especially 1 John 5:3.

This love, John says, **“has been truly perfected,”** or “made complete,” or “brought to maturity.” In other words, committed obedience is the natural, outward manifestation of a heart of love for God. And all this completion happens **“in him”**—in the genuine believer. For the false confessor, “the truth” is not “in him,” but for the true confessor, it is assumed “the truth” is “in him”—but even more, “the love of God” is “in him.” Thus, **the assurance of faith can be considered *true* when it is backed up by a commitment to obedience, for that commitment to obedience naturally manifests real love for God—the fruit of regeneration.**

III. The Test Restated (2:5b–6)

With slightly different language in the closing sentence of the paragraph, John restates the test for assurance which he stated in v. 3. Once again, John states that there are things believers *can know—and know with confidence*. He states, **“By this we know we are in Him” (v. 5b).** In language synonymous with what he stated in v. 3a (“we have come to know Him”), John speaks of salvation—but this time with the nuance of *spiritual union*—**“we are in Him.”** In some ways, the apostle John’s emphases on *union with Christ/God* are similar to those of the apostle Paul. Both are agreed that eternal life is conveyed only through a miraculous, spiritual uniting of the needy sinner with the life of God. See **John 14:20–24.**

John quickly combines this language of *union with God* with another description of salvation: *abiding in Him*—the language of *spiritual dependency*. John is again speaking of a true believer. See **John 15:1–11.** He returns to the language of confession: **“the one who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked” (v. 6).** In the English language, the verb **“ought”** conveys *suggestion*; it is not as strong as it is in the original Greek. In the Greek, the verb means “to be under obligation to meet certain social or moral expectations” (BDAG, 743.2). In other words, John isn’t giving a recommendation or suggestion. He is describing a moral necessity.

The moral necessity of the genuine believer is that he must **“walk”** in a certain way. The verb is drawn from the OT, where *daily habits* or *lifestyle* are described as one’s “walk.” Here in 1 John 2:6, This “walk” must be done according to the standard of another—**“in the same manner as He walked.”** It is clear here that John refers directly to the life and example of Jesus Christ. John’s intent isn’t to suggest that Jesus came *only* to provide an example for His followers to imitate. He came to provide “the propitiation for our sins” (v. 2)—something no one can imitate for his own or anyone else’s benefit. But even though Jesus came for this ultimate purpose, His life had other purposes as well. One of those was to provide the pattern of behavior for those for whom He would atone. See **1 Peter 2:21. One’s growth in imitating this example must serve as a crucial test to determine if one is “in the faith.”**

For Discussion

1. At the beginning of this lesson, eleven causes are listed identifying why a believer can lack assurance. Read that list and identify the causes you have experienced most. Ask for counsel in remedying those causes.
2. Why is it important to define “faith” as the *root* of a tree, and “obedience” as the *fruit* of a tree? What dangerous heresy results when we reverse this analogy?
3. How would you rate your zeal for obedience? How does this commitment manifest itself in your daily life?
4. To obey “God’s commandments,” we must know them. What are you doing to learn God’s word for your life?

For Further Study

1. **Memorize** 1 John 2:3 and John 14:15.
2. **Listen to** the sermon by John MacArthur, “The Triumph of Obedience,” preached March 6, 2024, at the 2024 Shepherds’ Conference, and available at this link: www.gty.org/sermons/SC24-1/the-triumph-of-obedience.
3. **Read** John 13–17 carefully, noting all the times Jesus’ connects our obedience to our love of Him.
4. Make a plan to **read** J. C. Ryle’s classic work, *Holiness: Its Nature, Hindrances, Difficulties, and Roots*. An abridged version of the work (consisting of 288pp, rather than almost 400pp) is available through Moody Publishers.
5. **Sing** “Jesus I My Cross Have Taken” (#394 in *Hymns of Grace*).

Audio, video, and handouts for this session are available at www.gracechurch.org/motw.

Next meeting: October 29, 7pm – “Assurance and the Love of One’s Brother” (Brad Klassen)