



THAT YOU MAY KNOW: A STUDY OF FIRST JOHN

LESSON 13: “Assurance and the Reflection of God’s Love”

TEXT: 1 John 4:11–14

A common assumption is that the assurance of salvation must be fundamental to false religion. After all, how could followers of an errant system keep buying the lies if the system itself provided no assurances. But in reality, the assurance of salvation is typically rejected—even vehemently so—by counterfeit religions. The Roman Catholic Church serves as a case in point.

An example of Roman Catholicism’s rejection of assurance can be found in an early German-language Catholic catechism written by the Franciscan Friar, Kietrich Kolde (1435–1515). Written in 1470, the catechism was entitled *Christenspiegel*, or *The Christian’s Mirror*. It became a widely popular guide for Roman Catholic adherents to prompt self-examination and formal confession. A statement in that catechism reads as follows:

There are three things I know to be true that frequently make my heart heavy. The first troubles my spirit, because I have to die. The second troubles my heart more, because I do not know when. The third troubles me above all: **I do not know where I will go.**

Roman Catholicism’s denial of the Christian’s ability to know *where he will go after he dies* was not explained as a mere consequence of ignorance or weak faith. It was a denial asserted as central to the Christian religion itself. In fact, it was this denial of assurance that Rome used—and continues to use—to keep adherents returning to its system. The fear that one cannot know *where he will go after he dies* drives the person to keep repeating the rituals he does not understand, keep donating in response to the pleas to give more money, keep making the pilgrimages to the empty cathedrals, keep filling the confession booths, keep lighting the candles, all in the hope that somehow the effort will tip the scales in his favor. How? He cannot say. Indeed, withholding assurance is *essential* to false religion.

But for the pioneers of the Protestant Reformation, the doctrine of assurance was a hill to die on. It went hand-in-glove with the recovery of the very gospel itself. For example, the German Reformer Philp Melancthon (1497–1560) stated, **“Assurance is the discriminating line of Christianity from heathenism.”** The Genevan Reformer John Calvin (1509–1564) described it with this conviction:

There was another most pestilential error, which not only occupied the minds of men, but was regarded as one of the principal articles of faith, of which it was impious to doubt: that is, that believers ought to be perpetually in suspense and uncertainty as to their interest in the divine favor. By this suggestion of the devil, the power of faith was completely extinguished, the benefits of Christ’s purchase destroyed, and the salvation of men overthrown. For, as Paul declares, that faith only is Christian faith which inspires our hearts with confidence, and emboldens us to appear in the presence of God (Rom. 5:2). On no other view could his doctrine in another passage be maintained: that is, that ‘we have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father’ (Rom. 8:15). (*The Necessity of Reforming the Church*, 27)

The Protestant Reformers were not merely seeking to establish a contrary position to Rome. They had recovered the Scriptures as their ultimate authority (*sola Scriptura*), and in their recovery of the Scriptures, the Reformers were reintroduced to the precious promises of the biblical gospel—including the promises of God to all who confess Jesus as Lord and believe in Him for the forgiveness of sins. Not only *could they know* that they now belonged to Him and that He abided in them, but they *should know!*

It is 1 John in particular that treats the topic of assurance at length. Although John provides numerous proofs from which he encouraged his readers to draw assurance, he specifically emphasizes the Christian’s *exercise of love* as a powerful indicator of a saving faith. He focuses on this topic in 2:7–11 and 3:11–24 and then deals with it again at length from 4:7–21. It is to this latter section that we now turn, studying it in three sections: vv. 7–10, vv. 11–14, and vv. 15–21. Having looked at the first of these three segments in the previous study, we now turn to the second section, vv. 11–14.

1 John 4:11–14 – “Assurance and the Reflection of God’s Love”

The apostle John writes,

Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has seen God at any time; if we love one another, God abides in us, and His love is perfected in us. By this we know that we abide in Him and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit. We have seen and testify that the Father has sent the Son to be the Savior of the world.

The four sentences of this passage provide another four insights into God’s love and its relationship to assurance. Although much of what John writes here echoes what he just stated in vv. 7–10, there are new emphases that John makes as well, including a wonderful *trinitarian basis* for understanding *love* as a most powerful proof of the possession of eternal life.

I. The Compulsion of Divine Love (4:11)

John begins this segment with a simple exhortation, “**Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another**” (v. 11). The words strongly echo what John said at the beginning of the previous segment, “Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God” (v. 7a). Again, John addresses his readers as “**beloved,**” as those “dearly loved” (see also 2:7; 3:2, 21; 4:1, 7). The address communicates affection and affirmation, demonstrating that John dearly loved those to whom he writes, but that he also recognized that God loved them even more (see 3:1a).

John expresses his exhortation as part of a conditional if/then statement. This rhetorical approach is useful to evoke careful contemplation on the part of the readers. John’s readers were to contemplate this reality: “**if God so loved us.**” The way John expresses this condition in the original Greek language indicates that John did not question it (“maybe God does, maybe he doesn’t”). Rather, John assumed it as settled fact (“If God so loved us . . . and He has!!). The language reflects the same words John wrote in his Gospel when he stated, “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life” (John 3:16). But here, it is personal. It is not the love of God for “the world” that John wants his readers to contemplate. He wants them to contemplate God’s love for “**us**” (1 John 4:11)—for those whom He has saved. The astounding nature of this love John just previously described in vv. 9–10. It was the kind of love manifested in God’s sending of His Son to take on human nature to identify with us (*the incarnation*, v. 9) and to serve as the propitiation for our sin (*the atonement*, v. 10). There is no greater love than that!

Having led his readers to contemplate the amazing love of God demonstrated in the sending of His Son, John then states the “then” portion of the if/then sentence: “**[then] we also ought to love one another.**” The reality

II. The Completion of Divine Love (4:12)

of the condition (v. 11a) leads to an undeniable conclusion (v. 11b). The reality of God’s love *for us* leaves us under obligation. The verb “**ought**” here should be understood as “**under obligation to meet certain social or moral expectations**” (see the verb’s use also in 2:6; 3:16). That which is obliged is “love for one another.” What is this kind of “**love**”? Hiebert defines it well: “**It is a call for a high, unselfish love which freely seeks the true welfare of the one loved**” (*The Epistles of John*, 196–97). That this kind of love is to be expressed between “**one another**” indicates that it is a unique, exclusive, and reciprocal love that is to exist among God’s children—the redeemed. Although called to show concern for the world (e.g., Titus 3:2), believers are to exercise a love for those in the church that *exceeds* that general love for the world (see John 13:34–15).

Having stated the obligation the beloved have to reflect God’s love to other believers, John then explains what happens when the obligation is fulfilled: “**No one has seen God at any time; if we love one another, God abides in us, and His love is perfected in us**” (v. 12).

John appears to deviate from his focus on the demonstration of love by making an assertion about God’s essence—specifically, His *invisibility*: **“No one has seen God at any time.”** The problem is not in understanding *the content* of the assertion, for the biblical writers make this same assertion repeatedly (e.g., Exodus 33:20; 1 Tim 1:17; 6:15–16). John does this especially in his Gospel (see John 1:18; 4:24; 5:37; 6:46; 14:7–11). Instead, the problem is in understanding *the connection* of the assertion to the material around it.

How is this to be solved? The solution is found in following John’s flow of thought. John previously stated that God *manifested* His love through the incarnation (1 John 4:9) and propitiation of Jesus Christ (4:10). In other words, God does not love in word only, but in action. The same thought must be remembered here. Indeed, God is invisible. He is spirit. But He makes His presence known . . . *through love*.

To show this logic, John records another conditional statement. He begins with the “if” portion: **“If we love one another.”** John expresses this condition not as a settled fact (as he did for the condition in the beginning of v. 11), but as a hypothetical. In other words, it’s not a settled fact that this has yet been fulfilled. But the hypothetical isn’t to cast doubt on John’s readers and their spiritual status, for John even includes *himself* in the condition through his use of the pronoun “we.”

Next comes the “then” portion of the statement, expressed in two parts. When believers exercise real love for one another, **“[then] God abides in us.”** Once again, John uses the language of *abiding*—language that describes *spiritual residence* and *life-giving relationship* (John 15:1–11; see 1 John 2:6, 10, 14, 17, 24, 27, 28). When we love, God’s presence is manifest “among us.” Thus, in a unique way, the *invisible* is *made visible*. As Colin Kruse states, “Believers who love one another demonstrate that the unseen God lives in them” (*The Letters of John*, 175). Or as John Stott comments, “The unseen God, who was once revealed in His Son, is now revealed in His people if and when they love one another” (*The Letters of John*, 164).

But there is a second part of this purpose statement: **“and [then] His love is perfected in us.”** John is not suggesting here that God’s love was previously *imperfect* and only reaches the quality of perfection when we exercise it. Nor is John suggesting that when we exercise love that we achieve the state of perfection (that only comes when we see Jesus face-to-face; see 1 John 3:1–3). Rather, John is using the language of *completion* (see 1 John 2:5; 4:17–18). The love of God was manifested in Jesus’s mission (4:9–10) and made tangible in our reflection of it in the Christian life (4:12). When that happens, divine love has hit its target; it has achieved its goal. Through Jesus’ fulfillment of His mission from the Father, selfish sinners are transformed into those who love sacrificially. They imitate their Creator and Redeemer. As Kruse states, **“The circuit of God’s love is completed when we love one another”** (*The Letters of John*, 176).

III. The Confirmation of Divine Love (4:13)

John then adds another statement about God, and an even more perplexing one than the one about God’s invisibility: **“By this we know that we abide in Him and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit”** (v. 13). How does God’s gift of His Spirit fit with the broader focus of loving one another?

It is important to observe first that John is providing another basis for assurance: **“By this we know that we abide in Him and He in us.”** How can we *know* we have a life-giving relationship with God (note how he repeats the verb “abide” from the previous verse)? The answer is found in what follows: **“because He has given us of His Spirit.”** The verb “give” here emphasizes *a one-time gift* that results in a state of *continual possession*. In other words, **God is not a gift-taker**. He does not give in order to take away later. What He has given us is nothing less than that which is **“of His Spirit.”** The language of the phrase **“of His Spirit”** is unusual, but commentators generally agree that John is speaking of the gift of **the Spirit’s indwelling presence**. At the moment of regeneration, God “gives” believers—once and for all—the gift of the Holy Spirit (see 1 John 3:24b; Ephesians 1:13–14). This gift also relates to what John previously described as the “anointing” which every believer possess (see 1 John 2:20, 27).

John does not go into detail here, but his language points us toward the broader topic of **the internal witness of the Holy Spirit** (see Romans 8:14–16; Galatians 4:6). The *internal witness of the Holy Spirit* is that ministry of

the Spirit in the life of the believer that enables him to recognize God’s Word for what it is, esteem it, increasingly understand it, and appropriate it in life. Through this process, the Spirit “witnesses” to our spirit that we are God’s children, since these things only take place within those who are truly born of God.

But here’s the important question: Why does John include such a brief reference to this gift of the Holy Spirit in this section on *loving one another*? Because a part of the way that the Spirit witnesses to our spirits that we are children of God is through His bestowal of divine love (see Romans 5:5; Galatians 5:22). This love is not produced naturally, but it begins to manifest itself automatically in the lives of those beloved by God. The Spirit points us to this manifestation of love and testifies that this supports our profession of faith. Calvin explained this verse well when he wrote,

The sum, then, of what is said is, that since love is from the Spirit of God, we cannot truly and with a sincere heart love the brethren, except the Spirit puts forth his power. In this way He testifies that He dwells in us. But God by his Spirit dwells in us; then, by love we prove that we have God abiding in us. On the other hand, whosoever boasts that he has God and loves not the brethren, his falsehood is proved by this one thing, because he separates God from himself.”

IV. The Certainty of Divine Love (4:14)

Having given a *subjective* basis for assurance in v. 13, John now provides an *objective* basis in v. 14: **“We have seen and testify that the Father has sent the Son to be the Savior of the world” (v. 14)**. In v. 13, John focused on the Spirit’s testimony within us. Now in v. 14 John focuses on the historical testimony of the apostles. John’s words take us back to the opening of his letter, where he provided a test of orthodoxy—namely, believing in the eyewitness testimony regarding the life of ministry of Jesus Christ (see 1 John 1:1–3). Our affirmation of the apostolic testimony is another strong basis for assurance.

But again, how does this eyewitness testimony connect with the broader focus on *loving one another* in this paragraph? The answer is that the Father’s sending of the Son is the object proof of His love and the primary motivation for those impacted by this message to love one another. The Father specifically sent His Son as **“the Savior of the world”**—not in the sense of *universalism* (that Jesus redeems all of mankind), but in the sense of *universal appropriateness* (that Jesus is the One to whom anyone in the world can look to for salvation—Jew or non-Jew; see John 4:42 and 1 John 2:2). The certainty of this message is so strong that it creates the inescapable conclusion: those who believe this message cannot help but reflect God’s love to others.

For Discussion

1. Once again, provide a definition of biblical love. Explain it with illustrations—whether real life or hypothetical—of what this kind of love is and what it is not.
2. Describe to the others in your group the kind of changes you have noticed in your life after your conversion with respect to *loving one another*. How has regeneration changed how you view and relate to other believers? Discuss how this should serve to increase assurance.
3. Why is the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit so important to the imperative to love one another?
4. Read 1 Thessalonians 4:9–10. Note how the apostle Paul motivates the Thessalonian believers to love.
5. As a group, discuss the practical ways that you as men can “excel still more” (1 Thess 4:10) in your love for others here at our church. Compile a list and use it to exhort and encourage one another in the months ahead.

For Further Study

1. **Memorize** 1 John 4:11 and Romans 13:8
2. **Sing** “How Deep the Father’s Love for Us” (#80 in *Hymns of Grace*)

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

Next meeting: March 25 – 7pm – “The Pillars of Marriage—Pillar 5” (Chris Hamilton)