

“The Joy of Assurance”
1 John 2:1-11
December 10, 2006

INTRODUCTION:

John states his purpose in writing this letter at the end. **“I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life”** (5:13). Then at the beginning of his letter he says that he is writing **“so that our joy may be complete”** (1:4). If you put those two verses together, John teaches that an assurance of our salvation brings to us a great joy. The lack of assurance, on the other hand, leads to a loss of joy. Let me state that a little differently by referring to a question that was asked of me recently by one of the children in our church. He asked, “If it is possible for a person to think that he is a Christian when in fact he’s not, then how can I know for sure that I have eternal life?” The premise of his question is that there is a group that professes the true faith but does not possess it. This is a group spoken of repeatedly in the Bible, including this epistle of 1 John. Later in our chapter, John says of them, **“They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us”** (2:19).

So if we acknowledge the existence of such a group of people who think they are Christians but are not, the natural question is the one John answers. How can we know that we both profess and possess the true faith? If many people’s hearts are deceived about this, how do we know that our hearts are not deceived? John answers that question by introducing some diagnostic questions throughout this book. Diagnostic instruments are helpful in the spiritual realm just as they are in the medical field. I was talking recently with someone about the state of medical care in Uganda, and they asked me if good care was available there. The question arose because of one time when our son got really sick while serving there as a missionary. Medical care in Uganda is not nearly as good as in America. The biggest difference, though, is not the lack of good doctors in that country. Good doctors are there, but not good diagnostic instruments. And without such things as MRI equipment, good labs and other sophisticated diagnostics, even a good doctor is significantly hampered. Think of 1 John as a wonderful diagnostic instrument designed by God to diagnose our spiritual condition. What’s at stake here is far more significant than any medical test, because the result of a mistaken diagnosis is eternal condemnation. So, let me ask the question again that was asked of me by this child in our church. If it is possible for a person to think he is a Christian when in fact he’s not, how can we know for sure that we truly possess eternal life? Notice the three diagnostics appearing in our text. These things will be true of the person possessing eternal life.

I. There Will Be a Struggle not to Sin.

In verse 1, John says that he is **“writing these things to you so that you may not sin.”** Wherever the grace of God is proclaimed, there is always the possibility of a misinterpretation. Because of the grace of God, we are not treated by God as our sins deserve. God forgives us and takes us into his family because of the life and death of Jesus, and not at all because of our performance. When this grace is declared, people sometimes draw the wrong conclusion. They believe that it is okay now if we sin. There is a technical name for this that you need to know, and it’s called “antinomianism.” Antinomianism says that it doesn’t really matter what you do, because God will love you anyway. If you’ve been around Altadena for long, you’ve probably heard me quote W. H. Auden as he wrote these words to parody this view. “I like to sin/God likes to forgive/the world is admirably arranged.”

Throughout his letter, John constantly puts together two ideas that many find contradictory. First, he says that **“If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us”** (1:10). Then, in the very next verse, he says that he is writing so that we won’t sin. And in verse 4 of our text, he says that **“Whoever says ‘I know him’ but does not keep his commandments is a liar.”** So, he says we are liars if we claim not to sin, and liars if we do sin while claiming to know him.

Here’s what this indicates. If we have understood the grace of God in such a way that it promotes a casual attitude toward sin, then we have misunderstood the grace of God. John writes of the grace of God that we might not sin. One of the common versions of antinomianism that I notice is when comfort is drawn from the idea of the universality of sin. To say, “It’s okay; everyone’s a sinner,” is to misuse the grace of God. While it’s true that everyone is a sinner, there ought not to be any comfort from that fact. It’s like saying, “It’s okay that I have cancer, because everyone in my family has cancer.” Sin is not okay. It is spiritual adultery that brings destruction into our lives. It unleashes powerful forces of chaos and destruction that increase the misery of our lives dramatically.

So John says here that if we have a true faith in Christ, one of the results of that will be that our attitude to sin is one of struggling against it. So when the Bible says “Don’t be anxious,” we understand anxiety to be sin, and we fight against it. When God says, “Bring up your children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord,” the failure to make any effort to do so is sin. When God says, “Don’t covet,” and we find ourselves believing that life will be so much better if we can just get that new car, we are sinning. True faith hears God on these things and begins to fight against them, at the same time that we recognize that the fight will be ongoing and perpetual. So we fight against sin at the same time that we acknowledge its universal presence. I heard someone say recently that the error of the phrase “Just try harder” is in the first word. It is right and biblical that we should try harder not to sin. That’s John’s point here. But it shows a lack

of faith if we do nothing more than try harder. We must try harder in faith and dependence on God. That brings us to our next point.

II. There Will Be a Firm Hope in Jesus as the Answer to Sin.

Two important words are used in verses 1-2 describing God's grace toward us: advocate and propitiation. First, it is said that Jesus is our advocate with the Father. The idea is one familiar to us all. Someone is accused of a crime and enters the complex, mysterious world of the judicial system. It is a world in which the one who doesn't know the rules and procedures will be certain to run afoul of justice. I remember one of our elders telling me about a time when he found himself facing an appearance before a judge as one accused of violating the law. Then he said that an attorney he knew came up to him with these words, "Don't say a word; I'll take care of everything." That's what Jesus says to us concerning our sin. He says, "Let me take care of this. I know all about the holiness of God the Father, and I can stand before him as a man who is righteous."

But there's another very important question that needs to be answered. It's one thing for a lawyer to know all the rules and to be very skillful in his work. But he still has to have a case. That's where our next word becomes important. Jesus is the propitiation for our sin. This is a word about which a great deal has been written. It is a word that is used only one other time in the New Testament, just two chapters later where John says about God that **"he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins"** (4:10). But the word is very common in the Old Testament, and its meaning is also clear. It is a word used frequently outside the pages of the Bible and it always "conveys the thought of an offering made by a man in order to placate the wrath of a god whom he has offended" (I. Howard Marshall, p. 117). The meaning, in other words, is that the wrath of God is satisfied by the offering of Jesus as a sacrifice. In the Greek translation of the Old Testament, it is the word used of the offering on the Day of Atonement. Do you remember how on this one day of the year, the High Priest would take the blood of the sacrificial animal and sprinkle it over the lid of the Ark of the Covenant that was located in the Holy of Holies of the Old Testament tabernacle? By doing so, he would make atonement. He would satisfy the wrath of God.

This idea of propitiation leads to wonderful news, because it means that God is no longer angry. Did you know that one of the devil's most common lies is to get people who ought to be afraid of God's anger to deny its existence, and to get those who are in Jesus—and therefore have no need to fear God's anger—to live in constant dread of the wrath of God? This verse is such wonderful good news because it says that God is no longer angry at those who come to him through the blood of Jesus. He is satisfied. Look again at verses 1-2 and let these words soak into your soul. When we sin, Jesus **speaks** to the Father on our behalf. Note the present tense, indicating repeated action. As often as we sin, Jesus is there as our defense attorney, and his case is ironclad every time, because he bases it on his own death, which God has said satisfies his wrath.

One of the difficulties involved with these two words of advocate and propitiation is that they tend to communicate the idea of a God who is reluctant to forgive, and must be persuaded by Jesus to do so. Is God an unwilling judge who is forced to forgive because of the good case presented to him by Jesus? Clearly, that is not the case. Listen again to the language of 4:10. **“In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.”** God the Father initiated this whole thing. Jesus was sent to be the propitiation by God the Father, and as a result we can have an assurance that this sacrifice really is effective.

If we believe this, one of the ways it will work itself out in our lives is to bring us to the place of a new honesty about our sin. Or to word it as John does, we will confess our sins and find God to be one who forgives and cleanses us (1:9). One of my favorite illustrations of this confession is the story from a preacher of the early 1900s. He said that when he was 12 years old he had killed one of the family geese by throwing a stone and hitting it squarely on the head. Figuring his parents wouldn't notice that one of the 24 birds was missing, he buried the dead fowl. But that evening his sister called him aside and said, “I saw what you did. If you don't offer to do the dishes tonight, I'll tell Mother.” The next morning she gave him the same warning. All that day and the next the frightened boy felt bound to do the dishes. The following morning, however, he surprised his sister by telling her it was her turn. When she quietly reminded him of what she could do, he replied, “I've already told Mother, and she has forgiven me. Now you do the dishes. I'm free again!”

III. There Will Be the Fruit of Obedience, Especially a Heart of Love.

John gives us a third diagnostic test here. In verse 3, he says, **“And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments.”** And the summary of the commandments is the command to love one another. **“Whoever loves his brother abides in the light”** (v. 10). If we know God, we will keep his commandments. Let me word that differently to get across the sense I believe John seeks to convey. If we go beyond just knowing about the grace of God into actually knowing God's grace in an experiential way, then the inevitable result will be a heart that seeks to obey God and love others. You see, there is a big difference between knowing about something and knowing something.

Illustration: My first trip out of the country was a missions trip to India when I was about thirty years old. I had read about India, about its poverty, its beggars and its overcrowded conditions in many of the cities. But I was completely unprepared for what met me when I arrived. I can remember feeling overwhelmed by the crush of beggars pressing in upon me, the smells of raw sewage, the human deformities exploited by the operators of the beggars to elicit a compassionate gift particularly from people like me. The result for me was an intense desire to get right back on the airplane and come

home. Since that was not possible, I just wanted to hide in the hotel room as much as possible. I had known *about* India, but I didn't know India.

There are many people who know about God's grace, but who don't know God's grace. They can give you a correct definition of God's grace and even tell you about the role of Jesus in that grace, but they don't know the grace of God. If they did, there would be a heart of obedience. Do you know God's grace to the point that your heart is affected, to the point that you are learning to love people? That was the experience of our author, John. Jesus had given John and his brother James a nickname. He called them Boanerges, which means "sons of thunder" (Mark 3:17). I think a better translation for our culture would be "sons of Rambo." For example, once when Jesus and his disciples were traveling through Samaria, they were refused hospitality in a small Samaritan village. When James and John saw this, they went to Jesus and asked him, "**Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?**" These were not the kind of guys you would want to cross and then meet somewhere in a back alley. And yet, by God's grace, a wonderful transformation was wrought in the life of John. We can see something of that by the way he addresses the believers here, calling them my "dear children." And we see his strong emphasis on love for others, with a real gentleness in his manner. Jesus had changed him.

God will change all who come to him through faith in Jesus, teaching us to love others instead of hate others. Just as faith in Jesus changes our attitude toward our own sin, so the love that is a fruit of that faith changes our attitude toward the sin of others. We become more gentle and more bold at the same time. We are gentle because we understand our own susceptibility to sin, and we are bold in that we are more willing to talk to others about their sin.

Illustration: I read this week of a man who saw another well-dressed man at a restaurant eating a bagel with cream cheese for his breakfast. The well-dressed man was by himself and was obviously preparing for an important business meeting later that morning. As he stood up to leave, the other man noticed about this business man that he had a noticeable bit of cream cheese stuck on his moustache. Should he tell this complete stranger, or risk letting him go to his important meeting oblivious to this flaw in his appearance? We face the same issue in our relationships with others. Are we our brother's keepers? Love says that we are. It is not that we go around like the Gestapo correcting every error we see in others. It is, rather, that we develop the kind of deep relationships, characterized by love and courage, that lead to this.

CONCLUSION:

These are the qualities that God brings into our lives as we trust him. They are never perfected in this life, but they are present in at least seed form in everyone who has a genuine faith in Christ. May God help us all to diagnose ourselves accurately, and be filled with the joy of assurance!