

Finding Confidence in the Midst of Doubt

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Well, I'm just really, really happy that you're all here on this particular day for what we have from God's word. We've been here at Truth Community Fellowship, for those of you that are visiting with us, we've been here for almost a year now and after a period of time as pastor in preaching and interacting with people, you start to get a general feel for where a group of believers, a flock of believers is at, and I just have the sense that our passage for this morning is particularly designed in the providence of God for exactly what so many of you need right exactly today in this time of your lives, even though your circumstances are all different. I've just been rejoicing knowing what lies ahead for us in the next hour or so depending on how things go here this morning.

I want you to think with me about the Bible in a broad perspective and about the New Testament in a broad perspective just as we begin here this morning. When you read through the letters of the Apostle Paul, Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians and on and on it goes, his opening statement to the believers who received those letters from him under the inspiration of God uniformly start with the words, "Grace and peace to you. Grace to you and peace." Look at the book of Romans 1. I just want to run you through this very quickly here. Limber up your fingers for a little bit of Olympic exercise here but Romans 1 in verse 7, he says, "to all who are beloved of God in Rome, called as saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." If you turn over to the book of 1 Corinthians, just past Romans, you'll find that he's opening with the same salutation, the same opening words of blessing upon them. 1 Corinthians 1:3, he says, "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." Grace and peace. Grace and peace. 2 Corinthians 1:2, "Grace to you and peace." Reconciliation. God's favor. Settled contentment. Settled confidence, if you will, in the goodness and grace and mercy of God that has brought about your objective peace with him. The war with God for the Christian is over. God has accomplished peace in our lives and Paul brings that to their attention and not just the objective peace but wishing upon them, praying upon them, as it were, this objective sense of peace that flows out of having a reconciled relationship with God. Even in the book of Galatians which is Paul's harshest, sharpest letter to the people of God, Galatians 1:3, "Grace to you and peace from God our Father."

You get the idea. We could go on and on through Ephesians and Colossians and Philippians and Thessalonians and on it goes. Grace and peace. Grace and peace. The

signature opening of the words of the Apostle Paul to his people and when you remember that Paul was writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, these are the signature words of God to his people. This is the framing definition of how God approaches his people: he approaches them in grace and in peace when we are reconciled through our Lord Jesus Christ. And I'll just say right at the opening, for those of you that are outside of Christ, unbelieving, please take this message as God's direct invitation to you as you hear the truths that we're about to see and enjoy together, take this as God's direct personal invitation to you to turn away from your sin, to come out of a hostile world and to be reconciled to God through faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. Whether you're old or young, whether you're eighty or eight, the Gospel message is the same. We don't have to tailor it to age groups. The Gospel message is the same. The Holy Spirit who brings it to your ears is the same and the need for salvation is the same for everyone: one message from one God who is gracious and merciful and who extends peace to his people.

Now, with that little framing thought in mind, I want you to think through some of the things that I know are in your past and some of the ways that you have attempted to relate to God in your past spiritual experience. I want you to think about these things in light of that. If the framing definition of being a Christian is grace and peace, then that has very significant implications for how we go through this life but, some of you, including me, have gone through seasons, maybe you're going through them right now where you're conscious of the fact that you fall short as a Christian of the glory and the righteousness of God. You deal with besetting sins. You deal with the same sin that comes up again and repeatedly in your life and you start to feel weighed down by the discouragement of that. One person put it to me earlier this week, you kind of step back from God thinking maybe there's this mistaken idea that somehow the passage of time will kind of let God get a little bit more favorable to you than he is right now because, after all, it's the same sin again and so you go through this up and down of spiritual life and your sense of God's favor is directly correlated to your own performance in the spiritual life that he has given to you, and you know how frustrating that is, I don't need to tell you that that's the case.

Some of you have come out of religious backgrounds that have actually said that assurance of salvation is a sin and a presumption against God; that it is sinful to say, "I know and I am certain that I am truly redeemed and that I know that I will go to heaven when I die." You come out of environments that taught that; that would forbid the singing of the last song that we sang. "I know who I have believed. I am convinced that he will keep it until that day." They would forbid the singing of that. Part of the reason that they do that is it's part of the way that they keep you under their thumb; it's part of the enslavement of the religious tradition in some of those environments. Others of you, have come out of churches who might preach the Gospel but the underlying theme of the life of the body in that is that you need to give more, you need to do more, you need to be more active in the church if you want to be closer to God, all of it driving you to try harder, more effort, and sooner or later you just start to buckle under the weight of that. "It's just too much. I've given all I can give. I don't have any more time to give. How can you ask for even more?" That connects, doesn't it?

Well, listen, let's put these two thoughts together, these spiritual things from your past experience from the religious traditions that you've come out of some of you, let's put that in the context of what Scripture says should be the defining marks of Christian experience, grace and peace, and ask ourselves whether the stuff that's been put upon us and that we've believed and embraced and tried to live out, whether that is really consistent with the defining framework of what God says the Christian life is marked by in his word. To the extent, beloved, to the extent that there is a disconnect, the problem isn't with God, the problem isn't with grace and peace, the problem is that somehow we've missed the point. Well, the whole reason that we are gathered together today in the providence of God under his word here today, is for us to get the point, to live more in the realm of grace and peace rather than guilt and doubt, and to enjoy and thrive under that realm of mercy that Christ purchased for us with his own blood. That's what we're here to do today.

You see, you can turn now in your Bibles to 1 John 3 where we're going here. This may be a new thought for some of you. It may be a stunning thought for some of you but the Christian life is not meant to be one of hesitating doubt, it's not meant to be one of continual senses of guilt and falling short, the Christian life, Christ saved you in order to deliver you into a realm – get this – of spiritual confidence in the grace and peace and mercy of God, to live in confident expectation of his blessing and we're going to see that from the passage that's in front of us here in 1 John 3. We're going to look at verses 19 through 24 this morning. Beloved, this is a vital, vital passage of Scripture for you this morning. This gives you a sense of what the Christian life is supposed to be like. 1 John 3:19, John says,

19 We will know by this that we are of the truth, and will assure our heart before Him 20 in whatever our heart condemns us; for God is greater than our heart and knows all things.

Verse 21, "Beloved," look at that word "beloved." This is the attitude of God toward his people. Beloved. This is the attitude that Christ has reconciled us to with God. Beloved.

21 Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God; 22 and whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do the things that are pleasing in His sight. 23 This is His commandment, that we believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, just as He commanded us. 24 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.

Now, where are we going with this? Let's make some preliminary observations about the passage in general, just some preliminary observations. This is so important in reading Scripture to get a sense of what the defining theme of any given passages. You look for certain words that stand out that are repeated. You look for things that are at the start and at the end of the passage and say, "Okay, everything that's in between here is designed to connect these things together." Well, in this passage, you certainly see that coming about.

Look at verse 19. John says, "We will know by this." We will know. There is an element of certainty that is in place here. Look at the end of verse 24. It starts in verse 19 and it ends in verse 24, "We know by this that He abides in us." This is a passage that is talking about spiritual confidence, talking about the believer's assurance of salvation. He says, "We know. We know." Beginning and end. Everything in between is designed to reinforce that, and if you have any question about that, look right in the middle of verse 21 where he says, "Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have," there it is, "confidence before God." This passage is setting forth before us that the defining mark of your Christian experience is intended to be one of assurance and a certain knowledge that you belong to God through faith in Jesus Christ. You are not meant to go through with these doubting hesitations that are informed, for many of us, by our past experiences, our past wrong views of God, and the past wrong teaching and leadership that we've been under in the past. We can't interpret Christian life through those things. We have to interpret our expectations of the Christian life through what Scripture tells us to expect. That lets you know, that shows you, what to aim your heart after and when you find yourself weighed down with guilt, when you find yourself dealing with doubt, the first thing that should come to your mind is this, is that, "Okay, for whatever reason, I'm having these doubts and uncertainties but that is not meant to be the way my Christian life is lived out," so that you know that you have a road out of that, you know that there is an intention of God to bring you from that doubt into confidence rather than accepting it and living in the midst of that kind of spiritual mediocrity that is debilitating, that sucks all the energy out of life and makes you start to turn a somewhat questioning bitter eye toward God and say, "Why is my life like this and why can't you ever be satisfied with me?" All of those attitudes just flow out of a basic fundamental misunderstanding of what the Christian life is supposed to be like. Our Lord Jesus Christ reconciled us, redeemed us to bring us into a confident assurance of the love of God.

Now, these words alone from 1 John 3 are enough to prove that a spiritual environment, a religious system that produces relentless guilt in those who follow cannot claim the mantle of truth because it's so contrary to Scripture. So what is the truth? Well, I'll start with this, start with this knowledge and certainty: that you can reject those systems, you can reject those systems without fear of incurring the judgment, condemnation and discipline of God because it's contrary and violates his word and so the systems that produce that cannot be coming from the God of grace and peace and mercy.

So, let's dig into this passage and see why this must be true. Go back to verse 19 with me here. Look at verse 19, "We will know by this that we are of the truth." How do we know that we're of the truth? Well, you know it by this. What's the "this" that he's referring to? He's pointing back to what he just said, basic principles of Bible interpretation. Just look at the context and follow the context. Go back to verse 16, "We know by this that we are of the truth." Okay, what's the "this," John? Verse 16, "You are calling me beloved, you're talking about love," well, verse 16, "We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. Whoever has the world's goods, sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him? Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed

and truth. We will know by this that we are of the truth, and will assure our heart before Him." All right, look, this is like really important what I'm about to say. You've got to understand, you've got to start with the cornerstone foundation that God does not accept you because of anything that you have done or anything that you will ever do. You have to start with a parallel thought that God will not reject you because of anything that you have done or because of anything that you will ever do if you are in Christ. You are not reconciled to God because of anything that you have done. Your ongoing acceptance by God is not guaranteed by anything that you do or anything that you avoid. It's not maintained, your standing with God is not maintained by your daily quiet time, as important as that is. You have one basis of standing before God and that is the person and work of our Lord Jesus Christ. You don't stand before God on any other basis. We'll know by this that we belong to the truth. How do we know this? Verse 16, "We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us."

Beloved, I wish, I would pray and hope for you that those words, "He laid down His life for us," would burn into your hearts and give you a sense of certainty and confidence about the good intentions of God toward you because it's right there, it's right there that you find your spiritual confidence. Your sins are washed away not because of anything that you did but because Christ laid down his life for you. You can't add to that without taking away from it. If you try to add to that and say, "I'll add strength and the forgiveness of God in my life by going through the sacraments of the church," that utterly diminishes the work of Christ and makes it null and void because it says that Christ's death wasn't enough; we've got to do something else; we've got to participate in these other works and activities. It's a blasphemous rejection of what Scripture says about the sufficiency of Christ. Those of you that don't come out of that kind of liturgical system of government, I won't give it the benefit of the word Christianity, you need to understand also that you don't maintain your position with God by what you do even in the best of your devotional exercises. You stand before God, you are reconciled to God on one sole basis alone and that is the fact that someone else acted on your behalf, someone righteous, someone who was God, someone laid down his life for you so that you could be reconciled to a holy God and that's the only basis on which you approach him. This is utterly liberating. This utterly takes away the self-performance aspect of trying to maintain your assurance and confidence before God. You have to let go of that and say, "My only hope is and always and ever will be in Christ alone." That's how we have assurance. That's how we know.

Now, what John has done in verses 16, 17 and 18 there, he laid down his life for us, he did this perfect work on our behalf, the question now isn't how you improve that but how that you know that you have become a partaker of the blessing of that grace and peace, and what he says is that, and what he's been saying throughout our teaching here over the past several months for those of you that haven't been here, he says, "When you see desires and actions that conform to biblical righteousness coming out of your life, that is a sign that you've been born again from a righteous and holy God. When you see love and affection coming out of your life for the people of God, that is a sign that you have been born again from a loving God who had affection on his people." You start to see these things that show sympathy with, shared affection with, the purposes and character

of God. Stay with me here, don't lose me here: you have to understand what those things are saying though and what they do. Those things are testifying to a spiritual reality. They are not the basis upon which you stand before God. They are evidence of a greater reality. They are evidence that Christ laid down his life for you by name. It's not how you increase your righteousness and maintain your favor with God, Christ has already secured that with his own blood and righteousness. That's so important.

Think about it this way, I don't know if this illustration will work or not but I'm going to give it a try. Imagine yourself stranded on an ocean island and you think that you're there alone and you've gone back and forth and there's no evidence of life anywhere around; you're just on this island and you think that you're all alone. One day as you're walking along the beach, you see unmistakable human footprints but nothing else. You don't see anybody around but you see new, fresh, human footprints that are in your environment. Your heart naturally leaps for joy at that. Why does it leap for joy at that? Not because those footprints in and of themselves do anything for you but rather because they point to a greater reality. Someone is alive and has made an imprint on the sand here and it's simply a matter of time before you find that person and your isolation is shattered and maybe there is now a means for deliverance because there's somebody to work with in it.

Now, follow the point of that illustration here. My only point is this: when John is talking about the marks of righteousness in your life, the marks of love in your life and the love of the brethren, he's using those as evidence to point you to a greater spiritual reality. It's not that God loves you more because you live more righteously, it's not that you're more reconciled to God because you love the brethren, those things are simply footprints on your soul, footprints on your life that you look at that have no reconciling power in and of themselves but they point to a greater reality, a greater unseen reality because those spiritual marks of holiness and love are contrary to this world, they are contrary to a sinful heart, and they show forth the reality that you have been born again. They are meant to be evidence of the reconciliation, not meant to be something that you do to maintain your favor with God, and when it slips down, the certainty with God slips down.

What's the significance of all of that? Don't you see it? Don't you see it? The person of Christ, he said, is unchanging. His work on Calvary, he said, it is finished. You have been saved by an unchanging Savior. You have been saved by a perfect sacrificial work on your behalf. He intercedes for you before the throne of God, 1 John 2:1-2. Christ has done and is continuing a perfect work on your behalf that guarantees the certainty of your reconciliation with God and the certainty that that can never be lost. You are relying on a perfect Savior who did a perfect work that nothing can diminish. And beloved, when you say, "Do I have a part in that perfect work? Oh, do you know what? I see desires for holiness coming out my life. My life is changed. I love the things of God. I love the word of God. I love the people of God," what John is saying is when you see those things in your life, realize that that's not what saves you, that's not what maintains you, it's pointing to the fact that Christ has included you in his perfect saving work and he will never let you go and that's why you can be confident. Confident, not in what you're going to do today or tomorrow to keep it up, confident in what Christ has done, is doing, and will ever do on your behalf. This changes everything. Do you see it? It changes everything.

All of a sudden, you're living Christian life from a perspective and a position of grace and peace, not from constant fear that the stroke from the hammer of God's justice is going to fall down on you because you're dealing with that same besetting sin once more. It's utterly liberating. There is no reason for you to object to this or to resist it because this is the testimony of the word of God and this is the surety and confidence of your soul. This is something to be embraced and loved and to give everlasting thanks to God for, that he has done such a perfect work on your behalf.

Now, let's go through and see exactly what it is that he points us to in this assurance that he gives. From everything that we've said, we've got to transition now here but we've made the point that assurance starts with a saving knowledge of Christ. You ask yourself, "Do I believe the Gospel? Do I believe in this redeeming Christ? Have I received him and do I rest in him alone for my salvation?" That's where it starts but it doesn't stop there. That assurance is strengthened as you go through this passage and see other things going on in your life.

So go back to verse 19 with me. He says, "We will know by this that we are of the truth, and will assure our heart before Him." It started with the work of Christ but then there in verse 16, but as you go on in verse 17, he says, "if you believe that, if you have been saved like this, you're going to have a loving perspective toward other people in the body of Christ." If you see that, you will know by this that you are of the truth. You know, and the question becomes, "Are there marks of that in your life? Do you give yourself over to the people of God in some fashion? Do the people of God have some manner of place in your prayers, your service, your giving? What is it in your life that gives evidence of loving the people of God?" Well, that becomes the rope that ties you and points you to the fact that you have this vital connection with the saving work of Christ and when you see that coming out of your life, it becomes compelling evidence of the reality of your salvation.

But we understand, you and I know by sad personal experience that even though we have those desires and even though we see those evidences in our life, that we still sometimes fall short. You still deal with besetting sins. You're not all that you should be. I hope it doesn't come as a surprise to you that I know that. Do you know what? You know that about me too. I'm not all that I should be. This is simply the testimony of Scripture. We know this about each other. We fall short. What do we do then when we start to feel the conviction of these things? What do we do with that? Look at verse 19 so that you see that this is the issue that he is addressing, "We will know by this that we are of the truth, and will assure our heart before Him in whatever our heart condemns us." John is saying, Scripture recognizes that there are going to be times where you deal with an accusing conscience; you're going to deal with those times in your life where you fall short of the glory of God; and you're going to have a sense of guilt and condemnation about that. What do you do then? How do you respond to that, is the question? And finally, I'm going to give you four points here of Christian confidence that are going to be the marks of how you respond in those times and to the past spiritual environments that some of us have come out of.

First of all, there are four grounds of confidence, first of all, you need to have confidence in God's perception. God's perception. Confidence in God's perception. Look at verse 20 with me, he says, "in whatever our heart condemns us; for God is greater than our heart and knows all things." What on earth is he saying there? He's saying this, he's saying that you see your spiritual life sometimes from the perspective from your sins and your failures and your falling short of what it's supposed to be like. He says, when that happens, when your heart condemns you in that way, remember the work of Christ, first of all. If you're here today and you came in guilty about what's going on, "I know I'm a Christian but, oh, is my life a mess," start here. Go back to the work of Christ in verse 16, "He laid down His life for us," ask yourself, do you see evidence of the work of Christ working itself out in your life and realize that that points to a greater reality, a reality that you're truly redeemed although you still fall short, and in that, find your assurance. Find your assurance in the work of Christ, in the evidence of that in your life, not in saying, "I'm going to try harder now. This time I'm really going to get serious about it." The whole problem, the whole reason that you're in that self-defeated mode is because you've been relying on yourself to begin with. The confidence comes from stepping outside of yourself and reposing your trust in the work of Christ in your life and now, realizing in verse 20, as you go through that, as your heart condemns you in that way, the way out, you come back and you remember that God is greater than your heart and knows all things; that God in his omniscience, God in his goodness to his people, sees the big picture, sees beyond the surface of your failures and sees the greater, deeper work that the Spirit of God has done in your heart and knows that he's going to bring you to perfection in glory. God knows that. He knows more than you do about the direction that he's going to take and the culmination of your salvation in heaven and you rest in his perception of it rather than your fleeting, failing efforts at self-improvement. You rest in the perception of God about the totality of the picture. You rest in something outside of yourself rather than in your resolutions to do better next time. This is utterly liberating.

Now, let me give you an illustration of this from Scripture. Turn back to the Gospel of John 21. You all remember John 21, you remember the life of Peter at the time of just before Christ's crucifixion, you remember how he denied Christ three times, right? This was spiritual failure at its worse, from an airbag of a disciple who had been just boasting about how great and how faithful he would be, "Lord, I'll follow you even unto death," and then a servant girl comes in and says, "Weren't you one of his?" and he said, "No, I never knew the man." He started denying his association with Christ with curses. Christ is crucified. Christ is resurrected. Christ comes back to Peter and addresses his past failures. If you can't relate to Peter, I question whether in some way whether you're even a Christian or not because we've all failed and fall short of the glory of God, right? And some of us have really significant dark failures in our past. The sins of the world that the Christian church gladly condemns and homosexuality and abortion are probably marked in the walls of this room some place and you know the darkness and the guilt of that. Well, listen, listen, that's why Christ came. He came to save us and Peter here was one of the great failures, the spiritual failures of all time, and so you know what happens in verses 15, 16 and 17. Jesus asks him, "Peter, do you love me?" "Yes, Lord, I love you." Jesus asked him again, "Peter, do you love me?" "Yes, Lord, I love you." He asks him a

third time corresponding to his third denial and there's a clear correspondence, a clear remembrance. "Peter, you just denied me three times. You say you love me?"

Look at verse 17 and here's the thing, and here's what I want you to grab hold of: that sense of conviction was true and right and it properly grieved Peter to be reminded of his failure. As part of the restoration process that the Lord has to take us through, we have to acknowledge our guilt freely and openly. But look at verse 17 in John 21, Jesus "said to him the third time, 'Simon, son of John, do you love Me?' Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, 'Do you love Me?'" And what did Peter do? "Lord, I'm going to try harder. Lord, I'm going to..." it wasn't as bad as it looked. "Lord, I'll..." No, none of that. Beloved, look at the basis of Peter's appeal to answer the Lord's question, "Peter, do you love me?" "He said, 'Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You.'" He is appealing to divine omniscience and he's saying, "Lord, I realize as I stand here before you having just denied you three times, I realize that there is nothing in my life to support the claim that I make that I love you. I realize that. I'm not going to appeal to myself. Lord, I appeal to your knowledge. Lord, you know all things and though I can't prove it in a court of law, you know that I love you." Do you know what Jesus did with that appeal? He accepted it. Jesus said to him there at the end of verse 17, "Okay, tend my sheep." He appealed to the Lord's perception, by which I mean he appealed to the Lord's omniscience, as the grounds to show, "Lord, you know that I love you."

Now, go back with that thought in mind to 1 John 3:20. When you find yourself splattered with the dirt of your besetting sin as a Christian and you're there to confess it for what, the 823rd time, have you been keeping count? Abandon your promises of reformation and simply say, "God, you know all things. You know that I love you." In the language of chapter 3, verse 20, "God, you're greater than my heart and you know all things. God, I see in my life these marks of love for other believers. I love your word. I love Christ. I don't know why I'm here confessing this again but, God, I appeal to your greater knowledge. You are greater than my heart. You know all things. You know that I love you. Be gracious and cleanse me once more as I appeal to you and as I rest and still have confidence despite my remaining sin, I still have confidence that there is no condemnation for those of us who are in Christ Jesus. Lord, that's how completely I rest in you. That's how completely I trust you, that even now here, I'm confident in Christ, not myself." And let that painful experience humble you, humble your heart, and remind you all afresh that you are saved by the work and righteousness of another, not by your own works and righteousness and let that humble and crush your soul into pieces and have flowing up out of that, growing up out of that, an even greater love, loyalty and allegiance to the Lord Jesus Christ who had grace and mercy on such a sinner as you to bring you into peace with God. That's what this confidence does. It's a confidence reposed not in the fact that I'm going to be better tomorrow than I am today, it's that Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever, and I rest in him. You have confidence in God's perception.

Now, secondly, this confidence spills over and it goes everywhere and I love this, point 2: you have confidence in God's presence. Confidence in God's presence. Not just in his omniscience but confidence in his presence. When your heart is persuaded that you are a

true Christian, you should move from doubt to confidence. We are talking about serious spiritual growth here. We're talking about real change that frames the way that you live day to day life. No more apologies for the past because Christ has suffered for your past. Christ has redeemed you out of that and that brings you into confidence with God.

Look at verse 21, confidence in his presence. Oh, this letter is filled with this. He says, "Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God." Confidence. It's a word that speaks of boldness. It's a word that the Greeks used to talk about freedom of speech in the political arena. There is a liberty in this confidence, a boldness in this confidence that is to be the defining mark of the Christian life. Liberty and confidence before a holy God, how could that be? Well, because a holy God acted to make it so.

You know, I was thinking about something this morning, this is a tangent, one of my first tangent cards. You know, for so long, so many of us think that if we have read the word of God for X number of minutes or hours and if we have prayed for X number of minutes or hours, then God is more favorably disposed to us than if we had not done that. Now, do you want certain proof that that's a foolish way to think, that somehow we've impressed God with our quiet time? Do you want to know how foolish that is? How utterly ridiculous that is to think that that has increased God's favor toward me? Look, you're boasting in the fact that you read it. Do you know what God did? He wrote it. You're boasting in the fact that you prayed for X number of whatever? God has been simultaneously receiving and answering the prayers of millions of his disciples around the world while you were doing that one thing. You see, we are far too wrapped up in ourselves. We don't see this from God's perspective at all. You think that reading his words somehow impressed him more than something else? Look, it's good to read the word of God, that's why we spend so much time teaching it. It's good to pray, that's why we've got new prayer cards out at the back table. But, beloved, that's not why God accepts you. God is not impressed with that. You haven't done something that is microscopically infinitesimal compared to who he is and what he has done. It's always been about Christ. It's always been about his work and life and righteousness and death and resurrection and ascension and intercession and he's coming again. It's all about him. It's not about you. It's not about you. That's utterly liberating. Take your rest and confidence out of what you do, either bad stuff that you sin or good stuff that you do, take all of that and put it into even more deeply the person of Christ because that is why God accepts you and that is why he accepts you alone. It's in Christ. That's why you can have confidence. You stand upon the work of another that cannot be shaken.

Now, that's the only reason that you could have a certain confidence before God, it's because Christ did something for you, and what I want you to see is that this confidence in God's presence, apparently I'm over with my tangent now, this confidence in God's presence is a theme throughout the rest of the book of 1 John. He talks about present confidence in prayer, look at chapter 5, verses 13 and 14. He says, "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." Look, verse 14, "This is the confidence which we have before Him, that, if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us." He's talking about prayer.

He's saying we are confident in prayer but not just now, not just in that area, John talks about prevailing confidence even in the light of future judgment. The fact that God is going to judge this wicked world, he says that the Christian has confidence even when that comes. Unafraid and unashamed. Oh, how great is this salvation? Words can't describe it.

Look at chapter 2, verse 28, the future aspect of this confidence. "Now, little children, abide in Him, so that when He appears," when He appears, when He comes back, "we may have confidence and not shrink away from Him in shame at His coming." He's coming back, when he comes back, we're not going to shrink away. We're going to be confident. When Christ comes and the world flees his wrath, we as Christians, so to speak, as it were, are going to run to meet him because we belong with him and his salvation is so perfect that even when he comes in judgment, he has removed us from it, he has shielded us from it, he has paid it on our behalf and so we can be confident. Look at chapter 4, verse 17, "By this, love is perfected with us, so that we may have confidence in the day of judgment." Confidence. Confidence. Boldness. Freedom. Liberty. That's what it's like. Beloved, that's what grace and peace do in the life of a believer, it produces confidence because Christ's work on our behalf is perfect.

Now, thirdly, I alluded to this one already so I'll just deal with it real quickly: confidence in prayer. We've got confidence in God's perspective, confidence in God's presence, confidence in prayer. When you go to the Lord in prayer, there should be a prevailing dominating spirit of confidence that your loving heavenly Father is going to receive you favorably when you do. Look at verse 22 of 1 John 3, he says, "and whatever we ask," let's go back to verse 21 just to keep the flow of thought in our minds here, "Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God, confidence in his presence, and whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do the things that are pleasing in His sight." There is this confidence that comes from our redeemed relationship. We are living out in a spirit of obedience the reality of that life and therefore we have confidence in prayer. We go before him boldly, confidently, certain of his grace and favor upon us because we see the marks of a redeemed life over time in our lives and we know that that points to a greater reality that Christ has redeemed us and saved us.

There is a lot more that could be said about that. One thing just to say is that we do have to ask in order to receive. Sometimes people say, "Why do we pray if God's going to do certain things anyway? If God knows all things, why do we pray?" Well, you know, why does a farmer plant seed if the Lord causes the increase? Don't over-analyze it. Don't try to be too speculative in your theology about it. God gives when we ask. Ask and you will receive, Matthew 7 says. That's why we pray, because God has commanded us to and he has promised to bless us in it and so we have confidence in it, confidence that our Father loves us, has reconciled us in Christ, confident that he answers prayer.

One final thing, kind of wrapping it all up here: you have confidence in God's person. This is really the final resting point of the soul: confidence in his person. Look at 1 John 3:23 and 24 as we start to close here. "This is His commandment, that we believe in the

name of His Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, just as He commanded us." What does God want from us? He wants us to believe in Christ. He commands us to believe in Christ and to love one another. John here at this point in the passage is summarizing and concluding and bringing it all to a climax before he moves on to something else in chapter 4. In verse 24, he says, "The one who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him." Union with Christ. There is this union with Christ that makes us confident and the Holy Spirit prompts assurance in our hearts that we belong to him. God in you, you in him. The indwelling Spirit, you dwelling in the Spirit. There is somehow this spiritual inter-penetration that takes place that is the culminating effect of being reconciled to God in Christ.

Beloved, you don't see the Holy Spirit, at the risk of saying something really pedantic. You don't see the Holy Spirit. You don't see the wind but you see its effects. You see the trees bowing, blowing, leaves rustling, branches breaking. You see the effects of the wind. What John has taught us throughout 1 John 3 is that you recognize the presence of the Holy Spirit in your life by the effects that he produces: a heart for righteousness, a heart for the people of God, and those things point you to the greater reality, the unseen reality. What you see points you to the more important thing that you can't see, that the Spirit of God has done a work that has permanently, perfectly reconciled you to a holy God and therefore you walk through this life with confidence, spiritual confidence, reconciled to a holy God. Confident of future blessing. Confident of his future reception of you in glory. Confident that nothing can take you out of Christ; that the one who put you into the hand of Christ will never let you be removed from the hand of Christ; by your own actions, by the devil himself, by all the forces of hell, nothing is going to take away you from Christ. It's exciting, isn't it? It's wonderful. This, beloved, is why we bless his holy name and that's why we do so with confidence even in the midst of sorrow, even in the midst of besetting sins. There is a defining confidence that marks the life of a Christian as he walks every step of this life until he steps over the bridge, as it were, into eternal glory. Bless his name.

Let's pray.

Our Father, you have saved us to bless us now and throughout eternity. We make no claim of having eradicated sin from our lives. We are very conscious of our sins and imperfections, our God. But even in that, Father, we are unshaken in our confidence because we know that that's why Christ came in the first place was to save us from sin and the initial deliverance that we feel now, that we see and experience in our life now, the change and the confirmation and being conformed to his image now is going to be perfected one day in glory. What you have given us now in these marks and tokens in our lives, is a down payment that guarantees the final future reality will be experienced in our lives. Father, we abandon any sense of self-confidence. We abandon any claim that we have somehow increased on the righteousness of Christ or somehow done something that made his work more perfect. We abandon all of that as foolishness and the silly traditions of men and the foolish agitations of our own heart, O God, rather, we receive Christ. We rest in him alone and we know that, our Father, you are satisfied with your

Son and because your Son covers us and has embraced us, you accept us as perfectly as you do Christ himself. So Father, Christ is our ground of our confidence.

We're so unworthy of this. It's really hard for us to get our minds around it, O God, but I pray for these dear brothers and sisters in Christ who are here and who have wrestled with doubt, with indecisive living, with a prevailing sense of guilt even though they truly know Christ. Father, I pray that the power of your word, the truth of what we have seen from your word today would catapult them from guilt into confidence, from fear into assurance, and that the defining nature of that change in their hearts would be evident to everyone around and would become the vehicle by which you draw sinners to talk with them about the hope that is within them, and then your Spirit would work and use them, use us, use me, our God, as instruments to expand the circle of this marvelous grace and peace that you have bestowed on your people. We don't want to keep it to ourselves. We want to live in the confidence but we want to see that circle expand to include others who don't know you. Bless our lives and bless our fellowship to that end, we pray, our God. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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