

Be Sure: Confident Living from 1 John

That Your Belief Works

1 John 2:3-11

Mark Vroegop

³ And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments. ⁴ Whoever says "I know him" but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him, ⁵ but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may know that we are in him: ⁶ whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked. ⁷ Beloved, I am writing you no new commandment, but an old commandment that you had from the beginning. The old commandment is the word that you have heard. ⁸ At the same time, it is a new commandment that I am writing to you, which is true in him and in you, because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining. ⁹ Whoever says he is in the light and hates his brother is still in darkness. ¹⁰ Whoever loves his brother abides in the light, and in him there is no cause for stumbling. ¹¹ But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes. (1 John 2:3–11)

Over the years I've had frequent conversations after a service with someone struggling with doubt. They come because of a lack of assurance that their belief is real. It may sound like this: "I'm just not sure that I'm really a believer. How do I know for certain?"

I never dismiss this question flippantly. Instead, I usually ask a few questions related to the story of how this person came to faith. I want to know if they really understand the gospel. I will ask if there is something going on that is creating doubt—some aspect of suffering or sinful behavior. I'll inquire about their engagement in community. Where does a local church fit into the picture?

After this quick evaluation, I will often say, "The people who should really doubt their belief usually don't. Not trusting yourself is actually a pretty good sign that you are a legitimate follower of Jesus."

In other words, genuine believers regularly wonder if they are genuine believers. John Calvin, in his classic book, *The Institutes of Christian Religion*, said:

When we say that faith must be certain and secure, we certainly speak not of an assurance which is never affected by doubt, nor a security which anxiety never assails; we rather maintain that believers have a perpetual struggle with their own distrust.¹

Therefore, being sure that you really are a Christian is something we must regularly consider.

Three Aims

¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 1997), 3.2.17.

As I say these words, I have three purposes in mind for this message. Considering if your belief works or talking about the subject of assurance could be considered three ways:

1. **Comfort.** I hope those of you who have tender consciences, who are prone to doubt, and who tend to assume the worst about yourself will be comforted by this text. I hope you are encouraged and exhorted to keep following Jesus.
2. **Caution.** There are some who need to hear this message and consider carefully what you are doing or what you are considering. Overconfidence, a dullness of heart, or a cavalier spirit can each make this an important message.
3. **Conviction.** I'm also mindful that some people need to feel the full weight of this text because there is need to acknowledge that belief is not working. There are some, no doubt, who need to respond to the conviction of the Holy Spirit and embrace repentance.

The book of 1 John was written to provide assurance—to help struggling believers know that they really believe. There's something in this text for every one of us.

What You Do or Don't Do Matters

How does the Bible speak into the issue of assurance? Besides helping us understand the work of Christ and put our trust in Him, the Bible also calls us to look at our lives. Belief in Jesus changes people. We know we love Jesus by what we consistently (not perfectly) do and don't do.² There is a clear connection between our actions and what we really believe.

1 John is not the only place where this truth is taught. Jesus was very clear on this as well. In John 14:15 we read, *"If you love me, you will keep my commandments."* Obedience is vital evidence of the legitimacy of one's love for Jesus. Loving God results in obeying His teaching. It's that simple.

But this also extends into our relationships with others. In John 13:35 Jesus says, *"By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."* Loving God must result in loving other people, or something is terribly wrong. The two are so linked that to not have one is to not have either.

If you want to know if your belief "works" or if it is legitimate, then you need to examine what you do and what you don't do.

Our text highlights this with two categories: obedience and love. Let's see how this passage serves to bring comfort, caution, or conviction.

Obedience

Last week we learned about the connection between our view of God, confession, and forgiveness. John provided hopeful assurance that confession brings forgiveness based upon God's trustworthiness and faithfulness. The hope for forgiveness is God—not us!

² <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/how-do-i-know-if-i-really-love-jesus>

In verse 3, John continues his letter with the implications of that spiritual reality. He anticipates someone asking, "But how do I know if I'm genuine?" That's why he says, "And by this we know that we have come to know him . . ."

Before we get to his answer, I hope that you heard the word "know" used twice. When you see that in your Bible, take note. "To know" is one of John's major goals in his book. You will find the word used 37 times in this book and 106 times in John's gospel (a book we'll study this fall). In fact, John summarizes humanity's problem with the word "know" in John 1:10—"He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him."

There are different words used for "know" in 1 John. This particular word means much more than intellectual knowledge. In fact, part of the problem in John's day was likely due to false teachers suggesting that spirituality was merely intellectual or spiritual. They downplayed the physicality of obedience. But they also diminished the humanity of Jesus. That is why 1 John begins with statements about seeing with eyes and touching with hands. John is targeting a view of over-spiritualized Christianity.

I trust that you know this perspective is still with us. A survey in 2017 concluded that over a quarter of people living in the United States (27 percent) consider themselves to be spiritual but not religious, an increase of 8 percent in the last five years.³ This view is particularly popular with millennials and younger ages. And it typically means a person has a sense of spirituality, but they have rejected traditional religious institutions and teaching, especially in regard to matters of sexuality.

But John directly (and uncomfortably) links intellectual knowledge with experiential knowledge. How do we experientially know that we know Him? "If we keep his commandments" (v. 3). John directly links obedience with the experiential proof of what you believe. What you do or don't do matters. John Stott says, "No religious experience is valid if it does not have moral consequences."⁴ Titus 1:16 tells us that there are some who profess to know God, but they deny Him by their works.

Verse 4 reiterates this truth but with even stronger words. If a person says "I know Him" but does not keep His commandments, he is a liar and the truth is not him. What you say must be backed up with actions. If they aren't, then our words are simply not true. Words are tested by works.⁵ Conduct confirms confession.

This is a heavy and important truth. Let me apply it to the three groups I mentioned earlier. You should be comforted if you are constantly seeking to discover new and deeper ways to pursue obedience. If you are fighting against sin and seeking to obey, don't quit. God isn't asking you to be perfect. But He is calling you connect what you believe to how you live, so keep going.

You should be cautioned when a temptation or a thought pattern begins to emerge in your life. One way to battle against sin is to realize that you need to prove whether or not you are real. And one way to do

³ <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/09/06/more-americans-now-say-theyre-spiritual-but-not-religious/>

⁴ John R.W. Stott, *The Letters of John - Tyndale New Testament Commentary*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 95

⁵ Stott, 95.

that is to not give up in your fight. Let this warning increase your sensitivity to sin, and let it increase your proclivity to fight off temptation.

You should be convicted if you know there is an on-going sin pattern in your life that has become normal and defining. You should be scared at the blatant inconsistency between what you say you believe and how you live. And I hope this will push you toward repentance. If you can still hear what I'm saying and feel conviction, be thankful. That's a gift. But—listen!—don't waste it. It won't be long until you don't hear it any more.

Disobedience is a problem. Thankfully, John does not only focus on the negative. He also provides positive encouragement about the connection between belief and actions. We find this in verses 5-6.

In verse 5 John connects "keeping" the Word and the perfection of the love of God. What does this mean? "To keep" is another word for "obey," with a nuance of guarding (Acts 16:23) or continuance (1 Cor. 7:37). If you are into English castles or building them virtually on Minecraft, a keep is the main tower that is built for safety. Keeping the Word is treasuring it, valuing it, obeying it, and living in it.

And when this happens, the love of God is perfected in us. Does this mean God's love is perfected toward us or our love toward Him is perfected? In context, it should be taken to mean our love for God, and perfection should be understood as "made complete," not a total absence of anything that might need improvement. John's message is this: "True love for God is expressed not in sentimental language or mystical experience but in moral obedience. The proof of love is loyalty."⁶ Obedience makes love complete.

Finally, verse 6 connects all of this to Jesus. Previously the questions were "How do we know we know Him?" and "How is our love for God made complete?" Now the question is, "How do we know we are 'in Him'?" To be "in Christ" is to be united to Him. This phrase is a categorical position with rich spiritual blessing connected to it (see Eph. 1:3-14). "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:1). To be "in Christ" is to trust in Jesus for the forgiveness of your sins and to have "no condemnation" pronounced over you.

How do you know you are "in Him"? How do you know if you abide in Him? John's answer is clear in 6b: "walk in the same way in which he walked." In the same way that disobedience invalidates someone who claims to know Him, so too obedience serves as a confirmation that you are "in Him" and "abide in Him."

The hope of Christianity is not only that sins can be forgiven. It is also the transforming power of what this new position of forgiveness does to you and through you. Belief in God's grace transforms your heart such that you have a different orientation and motivation toward walking as Jesus walked. Believing in Jesus means behaving like Jesus.

Now this is comforting if you are trying to increase the scope of Christlikeness in your life. The more you grow, the greater you will understand how much more growth is needed. Maturity is becoming more and

⁶ Stott, 96.

more aware of your need for transformation. This text should encourage you to keep growing, keep confessing, keep becoming like Jesus in more and more areas of your life.

It should be a caution if your passion or desire has begun to falter. This text could be a helpful motivator for you to seek God's help and transformation in new and deeper ways. You could cry out to Him for help.

And it could serve as conviction as you come to terms with areas of blatant inconsistency, or perhaps it could lead you today to become a Christian. As you look at your life, perhaps you realize that you need a deep transformation that will not come from you.

When it comes to obedience, what you do or don't do matters. It validates what we know, confirms what we say we believe, and reveals our spiritual position. Obedience helps us see if we are real.

But it is not the only way to test our belief. There is another.

Love

In verses 7-11, John identifies a more specific application of the obedience test. He elevates the importance of love and warns us about the incongruence of hatred and belief. We will come back to this topic in May because John talks about love in other places in this book.

For today, however, I want you to see his argument and its connection to true belief. In verse 7 John connects love to what he said previously about obedience to commandments. He frames his instruction as "no new commandment," an "old commandment," and "the word that you have heard." In other words, John wants us to know that what he's about to say, at one level, should not be surprising or new.

The words of Jesus' teaching should have been echoing in their minds:

¹² "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ¹³ Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends (John 15:12-13).

This was the central message of Jesus. It defined His teaching and His life. It characterized how He "walked." This is the way that Jesus expressed His obedience to God. His command to love applies the moral requirement of the law into the social arena.

However, we've not seen the command to love yet. John has more context to provide. In verse 8 he says he is giving a new commandment. Now John doesn't mean that it is completely new, but he means that this command has a reason to be applied. Look closely at the wording of verse 8:

⁸ At the same time, it is a new commandment that I am writing to you, which is true in him and in you, because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining (1 John 2:8).

The ministry of Christ brought light to the world. His victory over death set in motion the passing away of darkness. And what is true about Jesus is also true about those who believe in Him. His death and resurrection results in a heart-based change that effects our relationship with God and also with one another. In other words, individuals and communities who claim allegiance to Christ must also embrace the social and relational implications of that relationship. The victory of Christ was designed to affect the

lives and culture of people now. Heaven is in the future, but we should have tastes of it now. What does this look like?

Verses 9-10 give us the picture—both negatively and positively. Verse 9 identifies the problem if someone says he is “in the light” but hates his brother. John says if a person hates his brother, he is in darkness. Now remember, darkness is what God is not (1:5). The presence of hatred calls into question the presence of true belief. Verse 10 states it positively. If a person loves his brother, then he abides in the light, and there is no cause for stumbling. Let’s unpack a few words and phrases.

First, the word “hate.” The word is used for the way enemies are normally treated (Matt. 5:43), how persecutors respond to the church (Luke 6:22), and the overall behavior of the world (John 3:20). It means to despise, to dislike intensely, and to have a strong aversion towards. It is the emotional posture where you refuse to give someone grace or even want them to have grace. It is the opposite of bearing all things, believing all things, and enduring all things. Hatred is the opposite of being patient and kind. It often involves people being rude, irritable, or resentful. Hatred rejoices when someone gets hurt (1 Corinthians 13).

Hatred is not disagreement or differences. It doesn’t mean there is no tension. Nor does it mean that you are best friends with everyone. But it does mean that there is a basic orientation where you have a heart set toward the destruction or the hurt of others.

This applies at a personal level in terms of our relationships, but it also applies to broader categories of people, especially as it relates to ethnicity. It means that the gospel conquers any superiority complex we have toward others. But it also means we don’t allow the hurts of the past to create hatred in our hearts. That leads us to the second phrase.

Verse 10 says “there is no cause for stumbling.” Hatred causes an internal problem that gets amplified over time. Verse 11 reiterates this, saying that a person filled with hatred is “in the darkness,” “walks in darkness,” and “does not know where he is going.” In short, the darkness has blinded his eyes.

Surely you know what this is like—even momentarily. Something hurtful happens. You are filled with anger and hatred. You say or do something that is uncharacteristic of you. As you look back, what felt so right and justified in the moment is later seen as foolish. That’s temporary blindness caused by some form of hatred.

This kind of mindset and heart-orientation can be devastating, especially if someone develops a pattern where these hateful feelings become normal or you start to find other people who agree with you. Before you know it, your hostility seems justified—even righteous. But it’s not. And to make matters worse, it destroys you on the inside. Tim Keller says it like this:

“Evil has been done to you—yes. But when you try to get payment through revenge the evil does not disappear. Instead it spreads, and it spreads most tragically of all into you and your own character.”⁷

⁷ Tim Keller, *The Reason for God – Belief in an Age of Skepticism*, (Riverhead Books: New York, 2008), 195.

Hatred, revenge, animosity, bitterness, slander, and malice need to be put away from us (Eph. 4:31). They grieve the Holy Spirit. Hatred in all its forms does not fit with true belief.

So, let me comfort those of you who are trying to love hard people. You may feel taken for granted or unfairly treated. You may have absorbed some mistreatment or terrible insensitivity. But you find yourself tired and weary. Can I just remind you that your actions are not only right and they not only honor Jesus, but they prove that you are real. Anyone can lash back. Anyone can harbor bitterness. Anyone can nurse a grudge. That's nothing special. But it takes a work of the Spirit to produce Christ-likeness in you, so rejoice in your opportunity to prove that you are real.

Some of you need to be careful. This message lands on you while you are not only tired, but you've started to justify your sinful responses. You've got a list of all the reasons why your hatred is the exception. And yet somewhere you know your posture toward that person is not right. Why not receive this word today and put on kindness, tenderheartedness, and a spirit of forgiveness? Oh, be careful!

Finally, there are others who need to feel the weight of conviction. Truth be told, you are filled with hatred, and yet you claim to be a Christian. It could look like animosity, perhaps that is years-long, toward a brother or sister. It could be bias towards certain kinds of people. It could look like nursing a hurt that has made you defensive with pastors, police officers, your employer, or anyone in authority. I just want you to hear me: You can't love Jesus and love your hate. You have to choose.

What you do and don't do matters.

Listen! There is something in this message for everyone. And no matter where God finds us today, all of us—all of us!—need the same thing: We need to look to Jesus. God isn't calling us to be perfect. If this message lands on your heart, and you think, "I've got some stuff to deal with," that's a great sign! In fact, the struggle is a marker that victory is coming—it may even have already started.

Assurance that our belief is real does not come by looking deep within our hearts. We ought to look inward and ask ourselves some questions. But ultimately, assurance comes as we look to Jesus and say to Him, "Help me be like you!"

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