

Love, Assurance and Prayer

a sermon in the series
Life in the Son

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at Oak Grove Baptist Church, Paducah, Ky.
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I John 3:18-23

My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth. 19 And by this we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before Him. 20 For if our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and knows all things. 21 Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence toward God. 22 And whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do those things that are pleasing in His sight. 23 And this is His commandment: that we should believe on the name of His Son Jesus Christ and love one another, as He gave us commandment.

Love is not defined as being kind or nice to someone; love is not greeting the brethren on Sunday or Wednesday and saying I love you. It's good that we do that, I encourage us to express our love one to another, but to say that is the sum total of love and that you have fulfilled your command to love one another by doing so is absolutely wrong.

You can parrot the words 'I love you' but that doesn't mean you love the person. John says in verse 18 that we are to love each other "in deed and in truth." In other words, you are to really love them and show it by what you do for them. Love is a decision of the will to do good to others and to serve them even if they do not respond in kind.

Throughout this epistle, the Apostle John has made our love for our brethren a test of faith. This is one of his major themes in this Epistle, to assure believers they have eternal life. To prove it to you, let me show you each time he makes this point:

"He who says he is in the light, and hates his brother, is in darkness until now. He who loves his brother abides in the light, and there is no cause for stumbling in him." (1 John 2:9-10)

"In this the children of God and the children of the devil are manifest: Whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is he who does not love his brother." (1 John 3:10)

Before I read anymore of these, I want you to notice the singularity of the pronoun "his," it's not plural. John is wise in this. He wants you to understand that you may love all the Christian brothers and sisters you know, but if you have animosity and hatred toward just one of your brothers, there is a big problem and your faith is to be questioned.

“We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love his brother abides in death.” (1 John 3:14)

“Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God, for God is love.” (1 John 4:7-8)

“If someone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen?” (1 John 4:20)

So what is John saying? If you’re not serving, ministering, deferring to, forbearing, forgiving, and giving to your brothers and sisters, you are not loving them. Love is not just a sentiment of the heart, it is action. Let us love in deed and in truth. If you do not love your brothers and sisters then you are not a child of God. This is the word of the Lord through His servant John. In verse nineteen in our text,

“By this we know that we are of the truth,”

How do we know we are of the truth? Because we love the brothers. So love is a key element in our assurance of salvation, not a date in the back of your Bible written down where you prayed a prayer. No, John says a real test of faith is if you love all of your brothers and sisters. Loving your brother or our neighbor is not just a test of faith, but it’s also a key element of prayer. John is going to show us the relationship of loving each other and our relationship with God in prayer. The two are joined. Your prayer life is impacted by how you love. Whether you love or not, will impact your prayer life.

Peter warns husbands to dwell with their wives “with understanding, giving honor to the wife as being the weaker vessel as heirs together the grace of life.” Why does he say this? He answers in the next words, “that your prayers may not be hindered.” In the same way, your prayer life can be either advanced or hindered by how you love each other here at Oak Grove and believers around the world.

Some of you struggle with prayer as I do. It’s the most difficult thing in the Christian life. I know that personally, but I’ve also read of some of God’s greatest saints, men who we deem great men of prayer, and they say the exact same thing. One of the reasons prayer is so difficult is because it’s not just vertical but horizontal; how we love and deal with our brothers and sisters affects our prayer life.

I. The Essence of Prayer

There is not a believer that does not want to pray better and pray more. John is giving us one of the most essential, vital, important points of an effective prayer life. He lets this end on how He views prayer with two little words in verse 19. Those two words are before Him.

*“And by this we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts **before Him.**” (1 John 3:19)*

How do I know those two words are about prayer? Because John goes on to explain how we can have assurance in prayer, that we can have what we ask for. John, therefore, views prayer’s essence as being before God, in the presence of God, where we acknowledge Him. That’s what prayer is. It’s to come before God, to have communion with Him. In order for that to be vital part of your life, something has to take place.

A. Prayer is to be Conscious of the Abiding Presence of God.

That’s what John defines prayer as—the consciousness of the presence of God. Now, we know we live in the presence of God. The Apostle Paul in Acts 17, preaching on Mars Hill, said that in God we live and move and have our being. All men live in His presence, but that’s not what we’re talking about when we’re talking about this consciousness of His presence. In my prayer life as I draw before God I am to have an awareness of His presence and that gives me the assurance that God is listening to me. I can’t overemphasize this enough so I continue to want to say words like “vitality” and “important” and “essential” because that is exactly what this is. One of the reasons I believe we struggle in prayer is because too much of our praying is done without this awareness of God.

We run into prayer, do we not? We begin to pray almost mindlessly. The words fall off our lips without any thought because we use the same words over and over. But Jesus warned us against vain repetitions. How often we pray the same prayers without intensity, not acknowledging where we are—in the presence of Almighty God. The next thing you know, your mind is wondering from one subject to another. Sometimes prayer is like that. It’s not necessarily wrong that we spider web our prayers, the problem is we don’t acknowledge that we’re conversing with Almighty God. Prayer is a conversation between you and God. What kind of conversation can happen if you don’t believe you’re talking to someone? Without the ability to be conscious of coming before God, your prayer life suffers so greatly.

This is something the Lord is working in my heart and life. While we were gone on vacation, many times in my prayer time, the study of the Word and even in literature, this point was reemphasized to me: I need the simplicity of a little child. I need to acknowledge that when I pray I’m not just doing my religious duty and reciting my petitions before God, but that I’m literally in His presence and my Father is attentive to me. There are some days in prayer where you experience God’s presence, perhaps even before you get to the closet of prayer. Those are wonderful experiences, but most of us have to confess that’s not how prayer often is.

Most of the times when we wake up and go to the closet of prayer we are still groggy from a night’s rest. Our mind is foggy, it’s quickly spent, and the next thing you know you’re thinking about everything in the day that you’ve got to do. Then in about five or 10 minutes you feel so condemned that you haven’t really prayed that you tell yourself you might as well go ahead and

get your day started because you're not doing accomplish anything in prayer. What does this happen? In nine cases out of 10 I would say you didn't take the time necessary for your heart and spirit to believe and become conscious of His promise, "I am with you, that I'll never leave you or forsake you."

When I do that at the beginning of my prayer time and acknowledge that I'm in the presence of God and meditate on being in His presence before I even pray, I experience His presence. I see myself coming before the Father's throne of mercy and grace through the redemption of Jesus Christ. I am putting myself right for prayer. This is not psychological babble. This is not trying to convince myself that God is listening, this is taking the truth that God said He would listen and that He'd be present. I'm learning more deeply this is what the whole Christian life is really all about —it is to live your life before God with the firm persuasion that you're living before the audience of your Father.

A little book was written in the 19th Century long out of print. I came across one line and it so impacted me. You'll hear more about this in messages God is developing within me in days to come. But it said this:

"The Lord Jesus counted upon as never absent would be holiness complete."

The point of that statement is the same point John is making in verse 19. When I count that I am always in the presence of God and that God is never absent from me though it may feel like He is, then I am becoming more like Him. It all stems from the truth that He made:

"I will never leave you."

The truth of the abiding presence of Christ must become the driving force of our relationship with Him. That's what prayer is.

II. There is Opposition to Prayer

A. A Guilty Conscience Deprives Us of the Awareness of God's Presence.

A guilty conscience is something we need to deal with this morning. Whether you realize it or not, a guilty conscience affects your prayer life, which in turn affects your relationship with God because prayer is nothing more than practicing that relationship.

"For if our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and knows all things. Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence toward God." (1 John 3:20-21)

I'm sure the Apostle understood by experience to begin praying and the conscience condemn. He, like us, has gotten on his knees and immediately the conscience begins to bark. There you are in the place of prayer and all of the sudden a sin comes to your mind that you committed the

day before, a sin you had repented of, and the thought comes, “How can I pray with this sin on my hands?” And the enemy begins to whisper to the conscience how unworthy you are to come into the presence of God because of the way you behaved yesterday. Friends, John knew what that was like and so do you. He knew the problem of guilt associated with prayer, and that it will destroy and impede your prayer life if you don’t deal with it.

The literal translation of this verse here, verse 20, is not what you read in the English.

*“And this we know that we are of the truth.... for **if** our heart condemns us....”*

The idea is that there is a possibility of your heart condemning you. However, literally it reads “**when** our heart condemns us.” It’s not a question of if but when. Your heart will condemn you. There are some of us who tend to be more introspective than others and we are constantly hounded by conscience and that’s a problem.

There is another problem here with this text. There is a difficulty of translating these two verses, especially the next verse. There are two dominant viewpoints. One says John is trying to give us encouragement that when you pray and your heart condemns you, God is greater than your heart. “God is greater than our heart and knows all things.” Meaning your heart may look on the negative, but God is greater and much more merciful than your heart. Because He knows all things, He knows your weaknesses and will not hold that against you. God is not like your heart that condemns you.

Another viewpoint says God is greater in our understanding of our sins than your conscience, therefore if your heart condemns you God will condemn you so much more.

It’s interesting to know that Luther and Calvin took opposite positions. One held that God was being more merciful and the other said, no, it means God is more stringent even than your own heart. So what’s the answer? What does John mean here when he says God is greater than our hearts?

I believe the answer to be neither one of these statements, are you surprised? Both sides have problems to me.

The first position of mercy says John is trying to encourage believers in their prayer lives, and that they don’t need to worry because if their heart condemns them, just look to the cross. God sees what Jesus did in the atonement, therefore they’re okay. The problem with that position is that it downgrades the seriousness of sin.

I’m going to make a statement that I would never have made before preparing for this sermon: we can go to the cross too quickly.

I encourage, preach and teach the Gospel. Yes, there is great grace and mercy for we who are

saved. We are justified and we ought to go to the cross quickly when we sin, but not without first dealing with the sin. If I merely look to the Gospel message and say, *well, yes, I sinned but Jesus has already dealt with that and I'm okay*, then I'm not dealing with my sin in genuine repentance and am showing more evidence that I am not truly a Christian. It proves I have been self-deceived, because the true child of God according to the apostle John deals with his sin. He does not, as he says in the first chapter, act as if he has never sinned and when he does he doesn't act like it's no big deal. He deals with it, he confesses it, he agrees with God, he acknowledges and owns his sin.

Any view of the grace of God that downplays the seriousness of sin is lawlessness and is not attached to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It's a dangerous, erroneous and damning philosophy.

I am never to flippantly say about my sin, "Oh well, Jesus died for it." Never should that be my attitude. The fact that Jesus died for it ought to make me weep over it all the more. It ought to grieve my heart that for that sin those nails were driven into His hands and a spear thrust into His side and God's condemnation rested upon His brow and heart.

The second position says if God is greater than our heart and our heart condemns us how much more will God accuse you of wrong when you've done wrong. That is contrary to the New Testament completely and to the doctrine of justification by faith.

While I am to own my sin and mourn it, I am not to wallow in the grief and pity of my sin, I have a Savior. I am to repent, I am to deal with it, I am to be remorseful but my mourning is in light of what Jesus has done and the love of God. The Bible says in Romans 8, "Who is he who condemns? It is God who justifies." So the business of God is not to accuse His children. So I completely dismiss the interpretation of the second view.

The way to test the heart is through truth. So the issue the Apostle John is stressing here is two-fold, the fallibility of our own hearts to even know our own position and God's infallibility.

Let me explain. Your conscience is like a prosecuting attorney. You're the defendant and your heart is the judge. The conscience starts accusing you especially in prayer. How many times do you kneel in prayer and as soon as you do, here comes this one thought, "Why are you even praying if you're not going to pray thoroughly?"

The conscience begins to declare what may be true, but it's advocating, accusing and—sometimes rightly—proving us to be guilty. Sometimes the heart correctly condemns us as being wrong.

It's amazing how often in prayer all of the sudden you begin to hear one accusation after another as you're trying to commune with God. You think about texts like this, *I'm to love my brother and if I don't love my brother then I'm not really a Christian and then you begin to think, you know, I haven't spent enough time with him or her. When is the last time I even asked them how they are doing? I must not really care about them.* Now what is happening? The conscience is heaping one argument on another against you and the heart begins to bend under the weight of the conscience's accusations.

Other times the conscience is wrong in its accusation. You read this text expounded as today and the conscience barks how imperfectly you love. Well, yes. But who of us can love like Jesus, that is perfectly? Is there not more room for all of us to grow in the love for one another?

Therefore conscience is not right in its accusation. If you are a Christian you do love your brothers. You know what the truth is because you do from time to time show them. You do sacrifice, you do pray for them when there are needs. If we do truly love our brothers, John is saying you can quiet your heart before God in prayer. You can have confidence in prayer.

John is giving you a more reliable test of your position before God and what is the test? The truth. The truth that we either love or we do not love. The conscience is not the test because the conscience can be right or it can also be wrong and falsely accuse. So John is saying listen, God is greater than your heart. He knows all things and He has given you a more reliable test and that test is—do you love the brothers?

III. Assurance and Prayer's Vital Link

Why does he talk about assurance and loving your brothers in prayer? How does he link all of this together?

A. Prayer Requires Confidence

“Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence toward God” (1 John 3:21).

In other words, John is saying if you are to pray you've got to have confidence towards God. The only thing standing in your way of having confidence with God is your heart. And the only way to answer your heart rightly is to test it by how much you love the brothers. So if you love your brothers, if there is inclination to have their best interests at heart, even at the expense of your own, then you can be confident before God that He's listening because your conscience is clear. That's what He wants you to see.

Prayer requires great boldness. God does not want your prayers to be full of questions and doubts, but complete assurance. For example, Hebrews 4:16,

“Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” (Hebrews 4:16)

“But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.” (Hebrews 11:6)

How can you come to God in faith if you do not love your brothers and your sisters? If this is your case, then your conscience speaks correctly, you have not loved your brothers and sisters, and you've not been sacrificing yourself on their behalf in the name of love. How then can you

approach God boldly and in faith? You can't. That's the whole point that John is trying to make. There is something that is hindering your prayer, this lack of assurance and confidence. The conscience and the heart are not clean before God, so the first thing we have to do in our prayer time is not only acknowledge the presence of God but get our hearts pure before God. Confessing all of our sins that come to our mind by the Holy Spirit and to adequately test our hearts by the truth of God's Word. These tests John has given us.

"let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water." (Hebrews 10:22)

You cannot come into the presence of God in prayer with your conscience hounding you, you've got to deal with your conscience and there are only two ways of doing that.

First, if your conscience is telling you the truth, then own your sin, repent, confess, deal with it and seek God's mercy at the foot of the cross.

Second, if the conscience is not correct and it's a false accusation spurned by either the enemy or your flesh or both, then you must deal with that lie at the foot of the cross, pleading truth over error.

For example, let's say you haven't been so consistent in your prayer life this past week so you say, I've got to get to God in the morning, I can't go another day without fellowship with God so you get up and you enter the prayer closet and your conscience is ringing and Satan's voice is accusing, *how can you now think that everything is okay? Look how you love God so poorly. You disrespected and dis-fellowshipped God all last week and now you think you can just waltz back into the presence of God? What do you do? You deal with that statement and accusation. If it's true you confess your sin, if it's not true you tell the Devil what Jesus said of him—he's a liar and you believe what God has said.*

The best text I know of in this regard is James 1:5-7,

"If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him. But let him ask in faith,"

We must ask in faith. We must have assurance our Lord is hearing us. The conscience must be clean.

"with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. For let not that man suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord." (James 1:5-7)

Why can a doubting expect to receive nothing? Because he does not come to God in complete confidence. He lacks faith.

If I know I am guilty of not loving my brothers as I should, then there should be humility and contrition seeking the grace of the Lord. I should mourn and grieve over my sin and come to a position that my heart little loves those whom God has given to me as brethren and I should ask myself some very hard questions. Do I have any love for my brother? Am I perfectly content to have no interest in any believer except when it's to my advantage?

Now please listen, if the honest examination of your heart shows there is no interest in brothers and sisters unless it is to your advantage, then John is saying clearly here that you cannot be a believer. There is just absolutely no way you can be a Christian. In verses preceding this John has said, those who are born of God, love just like God loves. God has birthed His nature of love into their hearts.

But if your conscience stings your heart as hear this command yet again today, then I would tell you to rejoice in your heart because your heart wants to love your brethren. You see, the reason you seem so sad and guilty and even condemned by messages like this is not because you're not a Christian, it's because you are. You want to love the brethren and you feel the sting of not loving them as you ought to.

Why do I say it that way? Because there is not a hypocrite I know that really has any remorse over his lack of love for the brethren. He always justifies his lack of love. But God's children's hearts are sensitive, made sensitive by the love of God poured out in their hearts by the Holy Spirit (Romans 5:5) and when they do not love accordingly they feel it, especially when they hear these commands stated.

I know if you can look into your heart and say yes, *I know there is love there and there is a desire to love less selfishly*, it can only mean you are a child of God. And if you're a child of God you have appropriated the death of Christ as your own, now therefore pray with all assurance of your position that you are God's child and He will hear you.

When fully persuaded of whose I am, then I can begin to pray with a real consciousness of God's presence and expect the answers I have sought in prayer. If you have to, use your sanctified imagination and see yourself drawing into the presence of God. The more we can see ourselves in the presence of God as we really are the more vital our prayer life will become. Then you can begin to pray with a real consciousness of His presence. And when you know you're in the presence of God and He's receiving you, then you also know He's receiving the things you are praying for.

You see, the point is not to introspectively look at your faith and say, *Oh if I could just have more faith*, because when you do that you're not looking to God. You're not acknowledging the presence of God. You're introspectively looking to gauge how much faith you have. Ultimately, the whole thing is about you, confidence in how much faith you have. Faith in faith. That never works. It destroys prayer. Faith's only object is the face of God.

B. We Will Receive Our Petitions When We Pray With Confidence.

“And whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do those things that are pleasing in His sight” (1 John 3:22).

What are those commandments and what is pleasing in His sight?

“And this is His commandment: that we should believe on the name of His Son Jesus Christ and love one another, as He gave us commandment” (1 John 3:23).

When you trust in Christ, loving Him and loving your brother, then when you bring your petitions to God you will receive them. Why do I say there are no exceptions? Because God doesn't give any exceptions. Look at the text:

“Whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do the things pleasing in His sight” (1 John 3:22).

Do you mean, Pastor, I can ask for anything and He will give them to me? Anything I want?

Anything you want that is fueled by faith in Christ, His supremacy, and love for your brothers.

Jesus in John 15:7 says,

“If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you.”

When your petition springs from His Word being in you, then what you're going to ask will be in alignment with His will. You will receive what you ask.

But how can you pray that way if you do not acknowledge the presence of God in prayer and you don't come with a clear conscience? Your prayer life is going to suffer.

God has given us a test here. Do you really trust in Jesus Christ? Are you clinging to Him, knowing that without Him there is no hope of life here or there? Even though you don't love others perfectly as God loves, is there in your heart this desire to be more loving and grow in love and faith? If so, then God is saying *you can bring Me your petitions and as long as they are in accordance with My will then whatever you ask you will receive.*

What a blessed promise to fuel our prayer lives. Many of us struggle at prayer because we just really don't believe these promises. We've prayed so many times and asked God for so many things and we've waited and nothing has happened and we finally throw up our hands and say *I guess I'm not “spiritual enough.”* You just declared what you believe when you said that. Your faith is in your faith not in Christ and what He promised.

James did say it and said it rightly, sometimes we ask and ask amiss and that's why we don't receive because we want to spend it on our own flesh. But when you abide in Christ and His words abide in you, you're walking in love for God and love for one another. Why would you ask anything according to the flesh and not according to the Spirit? You won't. You will pray according to how God is leading you and those prayers are heard and will be answered in His time. That's the word of the Lord. Love, assurance and prayer. The more I love you, the more assured I am that God loves me, and the more assured I am of God's love, the more my prayer life is strengthened. Amen.