

The Ultimate Ground of Assurance

a sermon in the series
Life in the Son

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I John 3:24

Now he who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him. And by this we know that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us.

The Apostle John moves now into the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. It is not the first time John has mentioned the Spirit but it is the first He is mentioned by name in this Epistle. John first does so in the second chapter. There He's referred to as the anointing, the unction that comes from God.

When we get into the subject of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, we realize there are various opinions on this third person of the Trinity. There seems to be more disagreements about Him than the other two persons in the Godhead. There are many denominations and groups who have arisen in the last several decades whose whole doctrinal thesis and reason for existence revolves around the Holy Spirit. So when you begin to discuss Him, you are liable to offend someone. One man's piety is another man's poison, so to speak.

Here the Apostle John gives us some very good theology and he does it in a simple way, proving that you don't have to be a lettered theologian from seminary to understand the third person of the Trinity. You don't have to go through some course online or attend some Bible college class on the Holy Spirit. In fact, at first glance, you'd say there's not too much here to learn about the Holy Spirit, but oh, there is.

I. THE GIFT OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

In a day where the gifts of the Holy Spirit are the center of attention and the desire of many, John reminds us of the greatest gift: the Holy Spirit Himself.

Many groups are fascinated by the question "Does God still heal today?" and "Are miracles still possible for this generation?" Well, of course they are. God has not changed and there is no indication in the New Testament that His operation of performing miracles has changed. However, I would say that many of the miracles claimed by televangelists today who seem to be experts in giving them, are probably not. They are more perfect at practicing hoaxes than miracles.

Be that as it may, we live in a generation where every gift of the Spirit is possible as God hands it

out, but that's not to be the point of interest. The greatest Gift God has given us is Himself in the person of the Holy Spirit. God Himself is manifested in you. What gift could be better than that?

In 1 Corinthians 12 we find listed wonderful helps for the church, "Words of wisdom, words of knowledge, the gift of faith, the gift of healings, tongues, prophesy, interpretation, discerning of spirits." But Paul states that some of these gifts are not to be sought after while others are. But in the whole mix of that discussion on gifts I think we lose sight of the fact that the greatest gift to be sought after is God Himself and that to every believer the gift of the Holy Spirit has been given. Why don't we rejoice over Him more than we do the gifts He gives? Why do we divide the Body of Christ over who has what gift? Let us know Him and be satisfied in Him.

We call this the church age, or the age of grace, but the Apostles in the early church would not have called it such. If they were to name the time since Christ came, died, rose again and ascended back to the Father until now, they would have called it the age of the Holy Spirit. Because the Holy Spirit is the center of the New Covenant in which we now live. He is the essence of that promise, "I will give you a new Spirit. I will pour My Spirit into you."

Joel says it this way: *"I will pour out my Spirit among all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams and your young men shall see visions."*

The Holy Spirit is the essential part of the New Covenant. God Himself would indwell every believer. No man would need another man to teach him God, but every man would know God because He would inhabit everybody who believed. So the blessing and benefits of the New Covenant are centered around the person of the Holy Spirit and that is why the New Covenant is far superior than the Old Covenant.

In the Old Covenant the Holy Spirit indwelled every true believer, yes, I do believe that. When Elijah was having his complex that he was the only one that hadn't bowed the knee to Baal, God tells him there were seven thousand others who hadn't bowed their knees to the idols either, unbeknownst to Elijah. The question is did they have the Spirit of God in them as Elijah? Absolutely. That's why they hadn't bowed the knees and had kept true to the living God Jehovah.

A believer in the Old Covenant is no different than being a believer in the New Covenant in that the same Holy Spirit regenerates both. However, Jesus said he who is least in the Kingdom is greater than John the Baptist. Why? Because he is a recipient of this New Covenant promise in an age that is highly privileged, even greater than Old Testament prophets.

Also, the Holy Spirit did not come upon all believers in the Old Testament with power as He did some. The Holy Spirit came in power and quickened them to do special acts of service, but that was given only to the mediators. In the Old Testament a mediator was simply a man who would stand between God and the people. There were High Priests who did that, there were God-given kings who did that, and there were God-given prophets. These men were intercessors between God and man and upon them were given special influence of the Holy Spirit.

But the promise of the New Covenant is that God will not just select certain ones to bless with this power, but He will baptize, pour out His Spirit on all flesh, all of His sons and daughters will have the influence of His power in them so that it can be written of them that it is God who works in you both to desire and to do His good pleasure. This concept that says the power of the Holy Spirit only comes upon the pastor or preacher is an Old Testament view, not a New Testament doctrine. That was true in the Old Covenant. Yes, they had a special anointing of the Holy Spirit, but as a believer, in this wonderful age of the Holy Spirit, you have access to the same influence and power of the Spirit of God and you ought to be bathed in it. You ought to seek the power of the Holy Spirit that you might serve God not in the power of the flesh, but in the power of the Holy Spirit. For that which is done in the flesh is flesh, but that which is of the Spirit is Spirit.

Oh, how the church needs to be endowed from on high! How we need a new and fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon us! It is the difference between little fruit and much fruit. It's the difference between living off the life of the Vine, or struggling in the flesh trying to please God. Oh dear friend, covet the power of the Holy Spirit so that what you do is done in His power and not your own.

“Now he who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him. And by this we know that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us” (1 John 3:24)

Now the question is who is the pronoun ‘He’ there in that last phrase referring to? *The Spirit whom **He** gives us?*

Jesus said in John 14:16,

“And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that He may abide with you forever.” (John 14:16)

Interesting, Jesus said He will ask the Father to give us the Holy Spirit, but the Apostle Peter said something different in his Pentecost sermon.

“This Jesus God has raised up, of which we are all witnesses. Therefore being exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He poured out this which you now see and hear.” (Acts 2:32-33)

Peter said it's Jesus who has given us the Holy Spirit. Well, which is it? The Father or the Son? The answer, of course, is both. The Father gives the Spirit and the Son gives the Spirit. How can that be? Because they're one. We understand the doctrine of the Trinity; there is not three Gods but one. We only worship one God but there are three distinct personalities in that Godhead, so I ask you, you clever theologians, which is it? Is it God, the Person of the Father, or God, the person of the Son? And the answer again is both. How can both be the answer? Simple. The Bible says in the epistle of James, “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from

the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning.” Before Jesus Christ came there was no access to God and His blessings and benefits. None whatsoever. God, in the Old Covenant, bestowed many blessings even on the Gentile, the unbelievers. He led them in the joy and grace of sunshine and rain. He fed man bread to sustain life, but He sustained them by His grace and mercy as He has done every one of His creatures.

Having said that, to have access to God in the Old Testament, you must obey the law. The blessings of the covenant that God made with Israel were closed to any and all who did not obey the law. And who obeyed the law perfectly? Not one. *For by the deeds of the flesh no one shall be justified.* Why? Because we cannot keep the law, said the Apostle Paul. So God sent His Son and in our place crucified Him, put Him to death as an embarrassment and shameful thing on that cross. And as His side was split and the blood spilled out, the life of God was poured out on Calvary. Do you know what else was opened up other than the wound on His side? Access to God.

We were given access to God when Jesus Christ died so that every good thing that comes to us now comes through the intercession and the mediatorship of Jesus Christ. God is good to me because of Jesus. He doesn't have to refrain His blessings because I am imperfect, rather He grants me His blessings because the perfect One has come and has satisfied Him.

Here is what happens, the Father gives the Holy Spirit on the basis of what Jesus has accomplished. So Peter is right, Jesus has poured this out on you because as a man He obeyed the law of God perfectly. The man Jesus Christ obeyed, and being led by the Spirit He fulfilled all the Father required of Him in the power of the same Holy Spirit. And when He died, God raised Him from the dead, validating that the man from Nazareth, born of a virgin, was perfect and blameless in His sight. Then He ascended to the right hand of God's own throne and gave unto Him all principalities and powers and said, "Son, you have earned the right to pour out the Holy Spirit on any whom You so choose." And He did that very thing. So the word *He* refers to the Father and the Son through Jesus Christ's accomplishments.

John is telling us the Holy Spirit indwells every one of us. There is no way you can be a Christian without the Holy Spirit being in you. You are occupied by God.

The same Holy Spirit that indwells us will empower us, to different degrees, to serve Him and live for Him. Some of us may have more influence or power of the Holy Spirit but that does not say you cannot ask for more. *"If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall the Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask Him?"* Jesus was speaking to those who were already His. You are encouraged to pray for more of the influence of the Holy Spirit. The question is not how much of the Holy Spirit you have, the question always is how much of you does the Holy Spirit have?

How surrendered are you? There's the question. To the degree you are surrendered is the degree of power you will have of the Holy Spirit. How little we look to the person of the Holy Spirit. How little we think of Him. Is your day consumed with thoughts of His presence? Do you liter-

ally, in and out of moments contemplate who He is? Do you supplicate Him, meaning you ask of Him? Do you pray for His guidance, do you look to Him for leadership? Sadly, most of us do not.

Jesus said it was better that He go to God and give us the Holy Spirit than stay here on earth. When He said that to the disciples He was talking to men who saw Him and could go to Him at any moment, who could beseech Him and ask for help. And He said it's better that He go so you can have the Holy Spirit. Do we not believe our own Lord?

So many of us have said or felt at one time at another, *Oh, I wish I could have been Peter or like John and could have walked with Jesus. Oh, how wonderful. I could be a better Christian if I could just see Jesus and walk with Him.* And Jesus answers resoundingly, no. That desire contradicts Jesus. He said it is better that He's at the right hand of God so He could pour out the Holy Spirit on you. Now whom ought we believe, you or Jesus? We think so little of this person, the Holy Spirit. We dash out of our homes in the morning forgetting who indwells us. We dash quickly to try and resolve our problems without realizing a greater power dwells within us. What is your power compared to Him? No wonder some of our life situations get so difficult when we try to apply the vice grip of our own strength, refusing the atomic power of the Holy Spirit.

Friends, my power, my abilities are so limited to resolve the issues that confront me on a daily basis that even the complexities of human beings are enough to confound me. Do you know what I mean by that? There is enough complex, difficult, hard-to-understand things about just one of you to stump my wisdom.

No wonder when we enter into conflict one with another we do so because we really don't understand the other and yet, with our limited wisdom and insight, we try to resolve with what we know when the One who knows all things dwells within us. Why don't we pray? Why do we not humble ourselves and call upon the Spirit of God who has been given unto us as wisdom, strength and comfort? Tell me, why do we dash around forgetting the most essential Person in our lives? I pray this message will remind you that you are not alone. But if you are a child of God the Spirit of God has been given to you as a resource, as a friend, as a constant companion, that you might say as the song says,

No, never alone, no, never alone.

All heaven and earth's power is at your disposal for the One who made heaven and earth dwells within you. What a gift! God must really love us to give us His Spirit.

II. HOW THE HOLY SPIRIT ASSURES US

How should I read this verse? That is the first question we should ask. Because it reads horizontally, meaning chronologically.

For example, "He who keeps His commandments" → "Abides in Him, and He in him" → "by the

Spirit whom He has given us.”

If you keep God’s commandments, then you abide in Him, and if you abide in Him, then we know the Spirit was given to you. That’s what I mean by reading it horizontally. One follows the other. Keeping His commandments is followed by abiding in Him and that’s followed by the Spirit.

But you cannot interpret John chronologically or horizontally here. To interpret John horizontally leads either to false doctrine or a dangerous mysticism. Let me explain both.

It could lead to false doctrine because it will read to say that what you do brings the Holy Spirit into your life. If you keep the commandments of God, then you are the person who will abide. In other words, you abide by obeying. And after you obey and abide, God gives you the Holy Spirit. That is a dangerous way to read this verse because it is completely contrary to the Gospel of grace. We do not earn the Holy Spirit. We do not earn the position of abiding in Jesus. We do not earn anything of God’s favor to us. So if you read it horizontally as it seems to be written, you could come to a conclusion, which is very dangerous mysticism.

What do I mean by that? Well, there are some who believe the more holy you are the more power you can have from God or the Holy Spirit’s influence in your life. If we keep His commandments, then God will give us more favor. Now, there is a shred of truth to that and that’s why it’s dangerous. Certainly, those who are more intimate with Jesus have more of His authority, not because they’ve earned it but because they believe more. The more intimate you are with a person, the more you find out just how trustworthy they really are. I have heard many of you testify, *You know, I knew God would help me, but He really did help me. I’ve learned I can trust Him.* What do you mean, you *learned*? He already said He was trustworthy and He’s never lied. But in our fallen humanity the experiencing of God leads to stronger faith. But that is different from believing that by works you have more of the power of the Holy Spirit.

Others read this verse this way: *How do I know I abide in Him? Because I keep His commandments. How do I know I abide in Him? Because the Holy Spirit was given to me.* But how do you know the Holy Spirit has truly been given to you? If you read it that way you have to come to that question and John doesn’t seem to answer.

How do I know I keep His commandments? Because I abide in Him. How do I know I abide in Him? Because the Holy Spirit has been given to me. What do I have to do to justify my belief that the Holy Spirit has been given to me? This leads us into all sorts of mystical problems. We begin to judge whether or not God is in us by certain experiences we have. Now again, I say this readily admitting I have an inclination to be a mystic. I believe God can be subjective, personal with me. But there are dangers and Satan will lay your pathway with experiences and emotions and impressions that will lead you to a mysticism that is not biblical.

Some of us, who are more introspective than others, listen to someone’s testimony of how they became a Christian and because it didn’t happen to us that way we immediately start to feel

condemnation and question whether we're saved or not. For example, if you hear somebody say, *You know, the other day God spoke to me and said this and gave me clear direction. You walk away from hearing that and say, You know, I don't remember God doing that for me. I guess there was that one time, but it's been a long time. It hasn't been that way for years. I wonder what is wrong with me. Why doesn't the Spirit of God do that for me?* Instead of basing our relationship upon the truth of Scripture, we want to base it upon something we feel or experience. That's dangerous. In fact, it's wrong.

I believe in the conversion experience. I believe that a sinner when confronted with the Gospel, convicted of his sins, and Christ is revealed to him has an encounter that changes him. And it often is dramatic. The longer that person has been in sin, the more dramatic the conversion, but to base salvation, eternal life and your assurance of eternal salvation on that dramatic experience is quite unbiblical. You are to base your assurance on the Word of God and whether or not your life comes into agreement and harmony with that Word, not experiences.

Why do I caution you, especially at a time in American evangelicalism when so many people believe they are Christians but have not experienced conversion and the new birth? Why would I make that statement when we need people to experience God and the new birth? Here's why. Because it's not the experience that saves you, it's Christ that saves you. And friends, there is an enemy. John knows there is an enemy and in the very next chapter, the very next verse he will tell us to test and try the Spirits because not every experience, not every emotion, and not every impression your heart receives comes from the Spirit of God. To leave you in that kind of place is like dropping you in the middle of the Mojave Desert without water, compass, or food. It's to leave you in a place where there is no signpost and no landmarks by which to guide your way. So John gives us a verse, one little verse, which is the ultimate foundation for our assurance. What is it? In order to see it you have to read this verse not horizontally but vertically, meaning foundationally.

Instead of reading verse 24 chronologically, "If I obey God's commands then I'll abide in Him and then have the Holy Spirit," you need to read it vertically.

"He who keeps His commandments"



"Abides in Him, and He in him"



"By the Spirit whom He has given us"

"He who keeps His commandments" is built on a second, deeper layer: "Abides in Him, and He in him" which is built ultimately on the final layer of the foundation: "By the Spirit whom He has

given us”

If you were to build a foundation for a home and you were going to use concrete blocks, which layer gets laid first? The top layer, middle layer or bottom layer?

That's the most ridiculous question I've ever heard, preacher. You evidently don't know how to work for a living. You spend all your time in the office studying the Bible and praying. Anyone in the real world knows the answer to that. That's stupid. Yes, but if you don't read this verse this way, then you're going to end up with some very illogical conclusions, that's my point. The very bottom foundational layer is the first that's laid. What is the bottom layer of this verse? “By the Spirit whom He has given us.” in other words, John is saying the Spirit was given to all who believe and as a result of that now He abides in you and you abide in Him and the result of that is you keep His commandments. That's what John is saying and that's how you ought to read this verse. And by the way, what are the commandments that we are to keep? Verse twenty three tells us,

“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.”

Friends, how do you love God and how do you love your neighbor as yourself? You do not unless God first does something to you. God must initiate that. The Old Covenant proved that we couldn't do it, but the New Covenant is this,

“I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them.” (Ezekiel 36:27)

Now that God is within me I can believe on the name His Son Jesus Christ and I can love my brother. Why? Because I have a new heart, I have a new foundation. So how do I know the Spirit has been given me? Because I abide in Him. How do I know I abide in Him? Because I keep His commandments.

How do you know the Spirit of God is in you? Because you've had some mystical experience? No. Because you trust Jesus and you love the church.

Isn't this awesome? Instead of John leaving us in some barren wilderness of subjectivity where you never really know whether you measure up or not, he gives absolute concrete evidence by which you can know if the Spirit of God is in you. How do I know He's in me? Because I abide in Him. And what's the proof that I abide in Him and Him in me? I keep His commandments. Jesus said it another way in John 15,

“I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing.” (John 15:5)

How do I know I'm in the Vine? Because I produce fruit. The life of the vine is in the life of the

branch. How do I know if the Spirit of God is in me? Because I had a dream? Because I had a dramatic encounter that left me on the floor weeping for almost an hour? No. I know that God is in me because I'm not the same. I've been changed. That's how I know. Subjective tests are unreliable. Salvation is not dependent on having certain experiences. John gives us the most reliable test of all: a changed life. In the Old Testament you could never be sure if you'd done enough to obey and please God, but the New Covenant works so differently. The Holy Spirit is enough. Because He's "the earnest of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession to the praise of His glory."

The Holy Spirit is enough and He dwells within you. If you will listen and submit to Him, you too will trust God and love the brethren. You can't help but do so because you've been changed by the One who comes and lives within you. It's the life of the Vine that produces fruit. The ultimate ground of my assurance is the new birth itself—the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit. I'm not the same man I once was.

Here's my problem. Can I confess? I don't want to base my conversion on the changed life that I've already experienced, I want to base it on what I can't seem to do—be perfect. Did you hear what I said? I want to be assured that I'm a Christian because I'm doing great things for God and that I love Him more than I did yesterday and that I pray more and I'm more holy and I'm more devout and I'm more pietistic and I'm witnessing more and seeing more people saved. Those are the kinds of assurances that I want, and all of that is unreliable.

Not only is it unreliable, it's not a biblical test. The test that John gives us is singular, meaning one—God changed you. God did something to you. God converted you. God transformed you. The work of the Spirit is that a man was blind but now he can see, he was dead but now he lives. We sang it earlier:

*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound,
That saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost and now I'm found,
I was blind but now I see.*

If you find a way out of the woods you're not lost. If you can see, then you are not blind. Dear friend, I was blind and I was lost without hope in this world, but God came and rescued me and not only did He rescue me out of sin, but He changed my heart that I don't love it like I used to love it. And I love you, whereas I would never have loved you as God required. That's the evidence of a regenerated work.

The question is, are you regenerated? Has God done this to you? Are you content to be secluded from the rest of us, and the only time you think of us is when you gather together with us on a Sunday or Wednesday, and even then you're anxious to leave this place and go about your secluded life again. Oh dear friend, have you been transformed and regenerated by the Holy Spirit?

To the sinner, I want to make an appeal. If you say to me, *Well, you have shut fast the door to heaven for me, if the Holy Spirit is the only One who changes me, I have no hope unless He chooses to do so. This gives me no comfort.*

That is the charge many make against the doctrine of a sovereign God and His sovereign grace. They say our view of sovereignty bars the doors of heaven and makes them closed but I say to you, that is not true. It is sin that shuts the doors closed and fast! It is your sin, not God's sovereignty that closes heaven to you. This God that can do whatever He pleases and rules over all things, so pleases to show mercy to sinners. Are you listening? God is so delighted to save you that it provoked Him to give His only Son over to cruel mockers and tormenters. He chose of His own free will to punish Jesus for our sins.

The only free will you need to be concerned with is God's. Let me tell you about God's free will, He freely gave His Son. Nobody forced Him to do it. Nobody put any kind of weapon to His head and said "Do it or else..." No, friend. He did it willingly and lovingly. The Bible states that God has opened the doors of His Kingdom and He bids all to come, every last one of you.

If you're not a Christian today it is not God's fault, it's your fault. God through me is beseeching you to be reconciled to Him. My voice is now His call to you, "Come!" The Bible, in one of its concluding statements says,

"The Spirit and the Bride say come and let him that heareth come and whosoever will let him take of the water of life freely."

Come now for the same Spirit of God has been given to deal with you, that is if at this moment you sense the weight of your sin. Do you know you are a sinner and you have no other excuse? Do you know you can't save yourself, that there is no other refuge? Well, then my dear friend, that is the Holy Spirit Himself persuading you. Will you resist Him this hour? Will you say to Him, *No thank You, please leave me alone.* He is not some telemarketer bothering you at an inconvenient hour, this is the convenient season to be saved, now is the acceptable time! Today is the day of salvation! Be saved! Come and the Holy Spirit will do for you what He's done for others. He will give you the Holy Spirit. He will come and abide within you and you will abide in Him and you will keep His commandments.

That is the Good News of Christianity and that's why, even in the darkest hour, we Christians are happy people. Because we know the Spirit of God has been given to us. Amen.