

1 John 3.19-24 & 4.1-6

The Promise of Assurance [3.19-24]

v.19: True believers love one another, not merely in word, but in self-sacrificial deeds (v.18). They actively look for, and recognise need, using their material means to meet such need. It is this love for one another that produces inner assurance of salvation (vv.19-20), confidence in prayer (vv.21-22) and the full enjoyment of intimate fellowship with Christ (vv.23-24). Love for the brethren causes believers to 'know' (in Christian experience) they are 'of (*ek*) the truth', i.e. the truth is the source from which springs their thoughts, motives and conduct (WE Vine). In addition, love 'assures' a believer's heart. The word 'assure' basically means 'to persuade' (Matthew 27.20) with the secondary thought of 'to soothe' or 'set at rest'. The 'heart' often stands for the whole inner man – his emotion, intellect and will and probably implies the conscience in this context (cf. Acts 2.37). Thus, the practice of such love gives a believer confidence in the presence of God – as one living out His character. *Smith: The child that is conscious of disobeying the father's wishes cannot be happy in the father's presence.* **v.20:** However, if the believer does not love in deed, then practice does not match profession and they are found a hypocrite. As such the 'heart' (conscience) continually (a sustained protest) condemns and there is no 'confidence' (boldness) before God in prayer – communion is disturbed. Such a believer is not, then, at home in the presence of God and unable to express themselves with confidence in prayer. *Hay: Perhaps there are situations when a called-for expression of love is unfulfilled. A tender conscience will protest loudly!* But, if the conscience (singular, oneness of experience) condemns, how much more the omniscient God who 'knoweth all things'? God knows more than we do in the matter of hypocrisy in love, for sometimes we cannot even rightly judge our own motives. How solemn and searching a statement. Any meanness of heart will not go unnoticed by an omniscient God (Deuteronomy 15.7-9). And yet, there is a hint of *comfort* too. Peter had claimed love for His Lord in 'word' (John 13.37) but denied Him in 'deed'. Peter's heart thus condemned him (Luke 22.62). But despite failure, his love was genuine, and he was able to draw on the Lord's omniscience in public confession: *John 21.17: Lord, thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I love thee.* While God knows our failures and shortcomings, He also understands our true motives and desires (Hiebert). **v.21:** Alternatively, our 'heart' does not condemn us if we walk according to the truth of God in sincerity of love, having no unconfessed sin in the life. Then there is 'confidence' (frankness of speech, communion which is free and unrestricted) as children 'face to face' with the Father (cp. Hebrews 4.16; 10.19).

v.22: Answered prayer does not just depend on a *subjective* conscience devoid of condemnation, but an *objective* obedience to the word of God (duty) and devotion to Him. Such an individual will always *desire* and therefore *ask* according to His will. 'Whatsoever we ask' is a blank cheque limited by the will of God. The *present* tense suggests the period and persistence of prayer – we pray freely, repeatedly and continuously. The Lord Jesus is the ultimate example of one who was perfect in *duty* and *devotion* – and thus His prayers were always answered (John 8.29; 11.41-42; Hebrews 5.7). His mind and will was ever in harmony with that of His Father. Scripture gives a number of conditions for answered prayer. We pray: **1.** According to the will of God (5.14; John 15.7). **2.** In the name (as the representative) of the Lord Jesus (John 16.23-24). **3.** For the glory of God (James 4.2-3). **4.** In faith (Matthew 21.22; James 1.5-7). **5.** Having confessed known sins (Psalm 66.18; Isaiah 59.1-2; James 5.16). **6.** Forgiving others (Mark 11.25). The characteristic conduct of those whose prayers are answered is *obedience* to the commandments of God (cf. v.23) motivated by *love* rather than selfish-ambition (legalism). Such individuals are so devoted to God they always seek what is pleasing to Him, though the situation may not be covered by a specific commandment.

v.23: The various commandments of God are summarised in one comprehensive commandment from the Father (believe) and Son (love). The two explanatory verbs express the *content* of the command and emphasise the vital union of *faith* and *conduct* (cf. Ephesians 1.15; Galatians 5.6; Colossians 1.4). The two aspects of this commandment are so closely connected they are spoken of as one. The first matter is to '*believe the name*' (*aorist*, encompassing the initial resolution and entire onward course of a Christian's life). There is no preposition in the Greek, hence it is not to believe 'in' or 'on' the name of the Lord Jesus as an object of trust. Rather it is to believe (accept) all that His name declares Him to be. One's 'name' in scripture speaks of the whole nature and character of the person concerned. He is the **Son** (deity), **Jesus** (humanity) **Christ** (anointed Prophet, Priest and King). To 'believe the name' also suggests total commitment (devotion) and obedience to a person in their absence – and thus we obey *His* commandment – to love one another. The whole tenor of a saint's life should be Christ-ward (Wuest). The second matter is the practice of *agape* love – the love of choice (will). This love must be mutually expressed one to the other. Those who complain loudly about a lack of love are probably those who are most unlovable and fail to 'live love' themselves. **v.24:** This verse is transitional, concluding the *devotional* evidence attaching to those born of God (3.11-24) whilst introducing the *doctrinal* evidence (4.1-6). Obedience (in faith and love) proves that a close, permanent union between the human and divine has been established (positional). The true believer 'dwells' in God, and God 'dwells' in them (cf. John 17.21-26;

Colossians 1.27-28). But the thought of abiding (*meno*) is both *positional* and *conditional*. One who keeps divine commandments must be living in the enjoyment of such close communion. We know (by experience) this close spiritual union with deity because of the indwelling Spirit of God *and* His operating power in our lives. That He has been 'given' (aorist) marks a definite and memorable occasion on which He was received – the moment of conversion.

Trying the Spirits [4.1-6]

Having spoken of the Holy Spirit (3.24), John proceeds to speak of evil spirits, clearly implicating their role in energising the false prophets abroad in the community. There are many false voices abroad in Christendom today. It is the responsibility of every believer to measure their teaching in relation to the *person* of Christ (v.3) and *word of God* (v.6). In respect of the prophet, what is their *confession* of Christ (vv.2-4) and *content* of their message (vv.5-6). If they are found wanting in respect of either of these tests, they are 'antichrist'. **v.1:** John is not speaking of pagan philosophies, but those who claimed spiritual insight and relationship with God. Evil spirits were operating through the human agency of false prophets. Even though the 'prophet' may claim divine inspiration, the believers were to look beyond the human instrument to the 'spirit' which inspired him. They must not be in the habit of uncritically accepting and trusting every 'spiritual' and professedly 'Christian' message they heard! Instead they were to 'try' (continually) the spirits, i.e. prove or test them for authenticity. Generally, the word 'try' denotes 'testing with the expectation of approval' especially in relation to metals or coins. Sadly, the 'many antichrists' (2.18) had become 'many false (imitation) prophets' and gone *out* from the Christians *into* the world to propagate their false doctrine. In 2 John, the same are 'many deceivers' seeking to bring their doctrine into the homes of God's people (2 John 7, 10). False prophets are so dangerous because they appear in sheep's clothing, often propagating error with a measure of truth. They are even capable of signs and wonders so as to deceive (Matthew 7.15; 24.11, 24). **v.2:** A prophet acted upon by the Holy Spirit (the *true*) is distinguished from one speaking through an evil spirit (the *false*) by their confession of the person of Christ. *Calvin: As Christ is the object at which faith aims, so He is the stone at which all heretics stumble.* These prophets possibly affirmed certain things about 'Jesus Christ' but would not 'confess' (agree with God). This is an open and bold assertion of 'Jesus Christ in flesh having come' – not a mere recognition of His *identity* but a bowing to the Lordship of His Person. His *deity* is implied in His 'having come'; we were 'born', John the Baptist was 'sent', but Christ 'came' (also suggesting the purpose for which He came). 'In flesh' (not 'into' flesh) states that the eternal God stepped into manhood. This combats the error Cerinthus taught that the Divine Christ came 'into' the flesh of Jesus at His baptism. The *perfect* tense marks the abiding reality and permanent union of full deity with perfect humanity in one glorious person. Thus, He is qualified to be mediator between God and men (1 Timothy 2.5) – all of which implies his death and resurrection. *Crain: We should be reminded here it is not merely to confess that Jesus Christ did come in flesh; the idea of the verse is the confession of Himself, the acknowledgment of who and what the Incarnate One is – the bowing of will and heart to Him – confessing the claims and rights of Christ.* Such an individual has been born of God. **v.3:** As is John's habit, he presents the contrast for emphasis. Every spirit that does not confess 'the Jesus' (definite article), of whom John has been speaking, is not 'of God' but 'antichrist' in character and spirit (cf. 2.18). The believers had been warned this *would* come and was *now* actively present in the false prophets (cp. 2 Thessalonians 2.7).

v.4: The final three verses of the section begin with an emphatic personal pronoun to encourage and embolden the saints. '**Ye**', in contrast to the false prophets, are 'of God' – as those born of God they had a vital union and personal relationship with Him. John's 'dear children' had 'overcome' (*perfect* tense) the false prophets by resisting and rejecting their teaching (cp. 2.14, 18-19). They were in a settled state of victory over them. This victory was won because of the personal indwelling of the Spirit of God. He is greater as to His *person* and *power* than the devil who *sustains* and *perpetuates* the spirit of antichrist in the world. The devil is the authority and power that sustains the evil spirits operating in each false prophet. The Holy Spirit, however, is omnipresent. He indwells each individual believer. **v.5:** The false prophets ('**they**') are 'out of' (i.e. belong to) this wicked world system. Consequently, they speak 'out of' (*ek*) the world, deriving their inspiration and message *from* the world, i.e. its religious and philosophical principles characterise their sermons. Unsurprisingly then, the world hears them (implying appeal and approval). *MacDonald: This reminds us that the approval of the world is not a test as to the truthfulness of one's teachings. If a man simply wants to be popular, all he needs to do is to speak as the world speaks, but if he is to be faithful to God, then he must face the disapproval of the world.* **v.6:** In contrast, '**we** are of God' referring specifically to the apostles. The one who is habitually and progressively growing in their personal experience of God, accepts and heeds the message of the apostles (Acts 2.42). One who is not 'born of God' will refuse the teaching of the apostles. *Hiebert: Only one who has been born of God has ears that are habitually attentive to the Word of God.*

In summary, a person energised by the Spirit of truth (Holy Spirit) can be distinguished from one energised by the 'spirit of error' (deception) by their *confession* of Jesus Christ (vv.2-4) and the *content* of their message (vv.5-6).