

# Knowing God: *Can I Be Sure I Know God?*

1 John 5:11-21

Preached by Minister Jason Tarn to HCC on November 17, 2013

## Introduction

- ❖ I want to be a ten. On a scale of one to ten, I think every Christian wants to be a ten. Wouldn't you agree? I know, you probably want to know what we're measuring. Well I'm not taking about looks. We're not measuring attractiveness. We're measuring assurance.
  - It was almost a given. Every summer. Every church camp. Every one-on-one with a counselor. I knew it was coming. He was going to ask me how sure I was that I was a Christian. ***"On a scale of one to ten, how sure are you that you're going to heaven?"*** I always knew that question was coming. In fact, I was more sure of that question being asked than I was of knowing how to answer.
- ❖ I wanted to say ten, to be a ten. But to be honest, I wasn't that sure. I believed in Jesus, in the Bible, in the Gospel. I considered myself a Christian. But saying ten felt too presumptuous, too sure of myself. I had my share of doubts, my share of questions.
  - But I knew that each time I was asked, my camp counselor was looking to hear me say that I was sure of my salvation. If I said anything less than ten, I was going to get a bunch of follow-up questions and probably another gospel presentation.
    - This annual church camp experience really got me wondering: ***Is it even possible to be so sure of your salvation? Can I have such confidence, such assurance? Can I be sure that I know God?***
- ❖ According to the Apostle John, the answer is yes. In fact, he wrote this letter to say, *"Yes, such assurance is possible. I'm writing these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have salvation, eternal life."* (cf. 5:13)
  - Some would call that presumptuous. They would label it arrogance. And to be honest, it could be. In his letter John has raised the possibility that some who believe themselves to be Christians are actually mistaken and self-deceived (cf. 1:6, 8; 2:11).
- ❖ Apparently it's possible to be sure but, at the same time, to be wrong. But that's why John has offered various diagnostic tests and questions to help you know if you do know God. And today we've finally hit chapter 5:13, and I've said from the beginning that this is the theme verse of the letter. John wrote to help Christians deepen their assurance of salvation. To help you be a ten.
  - And that's not necessarily presumptuous. **It really depends on whether your confidence is rooted simply in your experience of faith or ultimately in the object of your faith** – whom John describes in v20 as *"the true God"*, the God *"who is true"*. In other words, is your assurance of salvation rooted in *you and your faith* OR is it rooted in *God and his faithfulness*? That makes all the difference.
- ❖ **It's the difference between buying a used product off Craigslist versus buying it from a trusted friend.** Imagine trying to buy used car off Craigslist. You can do all the research. You can test drive it and do your own thorough inspection. But in the end, the assurance that you're buying a good car and not a lemon rests in *you*. And if your confidence level is not a ten (or at least a nine), then you're probably not going to purchase the vehicle.

- *But what if this same car was being sold to you by the most trusted, most reliable, most faithful friend you know? He says this is a good car. It's worth the price. Now you might have questions. You still have doubts – since you have no idea what the gas mileage is like or how it handles on a long road trip – but the important thing is that you trust your friend. You can be sure because you know your friend is true – true in character and true to his word.*

- ❖ The same goes for God. **You can be sure of your salvation. Not because of the strength of your character or of your faith BUT because of the strength of God's character and his faithfulness to his word, his testimony.** Because God is true, there are three sure things you can rest in. Three things found in this morning's passage.

### Assurance of Eternal Life

- ❖ The first is this: **Because God is true, you can be sure about your eternal life.** You can be a ten, even with your questions and lingering doubts. That's because your salvation rests ultimately – not in the strength of your faith – but in the strength of the object of your faith.
- ❖ Tim Keller, in his book *Reason for God*, has a good illustration of falling off a high cliff. Just beside you, as you fall, you see a branch sticking out. It's strong enough to support your weight. It's your only salvation. But how can it save you?
  - If your mind is filled with intellectual certainty that this branch can save you, but you don't actually reach out and grab it, you're a goner. But if your mind is filled with doubts about that branch, and yet you reach out and grab it anyway, you're saved.
    - Keller says, *"It is not the strength of your faith but the object of your faith that actually saves you. **Strong faith in a weak branch is fatally inferior to weak faith in a strong branch.**"*<sup>1</sup> I'd rather have weak faith in a strong branch.
- ❖ This means you don't have to wait until all of your doubts are gone before you take hold of Jesus or even before you can feel a real sense of assurance that you're saved. **You can be sure because God is sure.** God is true to his word, to his testimony. Look with me at v11.
 

*"<sup>11</sup>And this is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son.*

*<sup>12</sup>Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life."*
- ❖ This is God's testimony. Eternal life is available in his Son Jesus Christ. And whoever has his Son – whoever grabs hold of him like you would that branch – has eternal life. **You can still have your doubts, but they in no way diminish the faithfulness of God and his promise to grant life to those who have and hold onto Jesus.** This is why John can say in v13, *"I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life."*

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<sup>1</sup> Tim Keller, *The Reason for God*, 234.

- ❖ Friends, if you believe in the name of Jesus – and in context that means believing Jesus is the Christ (2:22; 5:1), that he is the Son of God (2:23; 5:5), that he came in the flesh as God Incarnate (4:2), that he came by water and by blood, living a Spirit-filled life and dying a sin-atoning death, (5:6), that he conquered death and will come again one day (2:28; 3:2) – if you believe this, do you *know* that you have eternal life? Do you have assurance?
  - But some of you will say, “*Jason, I believe those things about Jesus are true. I don’t wrestle with the truth test. I don’t question if Jesus is who he says he is. I don’t doubt the branch. I doubt myself. I read v18 where it says that everyone born of God does not keep on sinning, and I can’t help but doubt. I wrestle with sin every day and struggle to keep God’s commandments. I question if I’m really saved, if I ever grabbed the branch in the first place. I don’t have assurance.*”
- ❖ Perhaps that’s where you’re coming from. You don’t have assurance. You’re not even close to a ten. Because you struggle with sin and guilt and shame. I know it feels like a scary place to be, but it's actually a good place to be. You'd be in a bad place if you simply presumed you're a ten irrespective of how you're living. You'd be in a bad place if you ignored your relationship to God's commands or his people and just banked your assurance on passing the truth test. That's easy-believism and it's a lie.
  - Some people are looking for an assurance that guarantees salvation no matter how they presently live. Something that easily corresponds to a past prayer or decision. But that kind of assurance has no basis in what God has done or is doing, but rather in something they did. That is NOT biblical assurance. That's false assurance.
- ❖ **It's better to have weak assurance than to have false assurance.** It's better to be worried about the state of your soul than to foolishly think everything is fine while your life is contradicting God's Word. Because now you're in a place where you're willing to hear what He has to say about real assurance. And God says that shouldn't be based on our experience of faith but in Him the object of our faith. **Real assurance is rooted both in something objective that God did for you and in something subjective that God is doing in you.**
- ❖ We see both in v18. “*We know that everyone who has been born of God does not keep on sinning, but he who was born of God protects him, and the evil one does not touch him.*” Okay so where do you find your assurance? In two places.
  - **Objectively, God has done something for you.** He gave you the new birth. God sent his Son to die for your sins, to propitiate himself, that he might move towards you in mercy and cause you to be born again, born of HIM.
- ❖ That's the first place you find your assurance. Find confidence in the fact that you didn't say or do anything to deserve becoming a child of God. Rather God initiated and did this for you out of sheer grace, while you were still a sinner.
  - ***If that's true, then why would you worry that something you say or do might make you unworthy to be his child?*** It was never about your worth. It was always about God's grace. That's the first place to root your assurance.

- ❖ **Then subjectively, there's something God is doing in you.** He keeps us from continuing in our sin. How? By the power of "*he who was born of God*". The Son of God protects us from the evil one's harm. Jesus keeps us from shipwrecking our faith.
  - John said something similar back in chapter 3. "*No one born of God makes a practice of sinning.*" (3:9) John is not suggesting that a Christian will never commit sin BUT rather that a Christian will not keep on sinning. **God, in his timing, will always lead an erring child to repentance.** Yes, we will sin, but because of the new birth and the preserving power and protection of God's own Son, Christians will not make a practice of sinning. Instead, we'll make a practice of repenting.
- ❖ That's the subjective work that God is doing in all of his children. So if you can identify in yourself a heart of repentance, if you can recognize the fruit of repentance (Mt. 3:8), then rest assured. If you see evidence of a growing love for God and others and a growing hate for your sin and sinfulness, then be encouraged.
  - But if you don't see any of these signs and if you keep on sinning and spurning God's Word, then you should NOT be so easily assured. Frankly, that would be a false assurance with no basis in what God has done or is doing in your life – **an assurance NOT based a supernatural rebirth but on a human decision in the past with no correspondence to a life of discipleship in the present.** In your case, it would be appropriate to wonder whether you have truly repented of your sins and trusted in Christ alone for salvation. And today would be the day to do just that.
- ❖ But weak assurance is different. If you admitted that your assurance is weak, would I automatically question your salvation? No, not necessarily. **Because the assurance of salvation is not a given. It's a gift.**
  - The only given is the eternal security of God's children. The only given is that the Son of God protects those who are born of God. Jesus said they will never perish and no one will snatch them out of his hand (Jn. 10:28). "*Once saved; always saved*" is certainly true. **But having eternal security is not the same as having assurance.**
    - Objectively, you could be saved, truly born of God and protected by the Son of God, BUT you might not have a feeling sense of this reality. You're eternally secure but you don't feel it. You don't have assurance.
- ❖ There could be various reasons why. **It could be because of your natural temperament.** You're prone to melancholy. The reality of indwelling sin hits you harder than most.
  - **Or it could be a form of discipline to convict you of sin you have yet to renounce.** Your Father, in mercy, removes your feeling sense of security. He takes away your assurance that you might take to flight and run back into his secure arms.
    - **Or, to be honest, there could be no discernible reason why your assurance is weak.** God has his reasons but he may never make them clear. Perhaps he's wants you to walk by faith and not by sight nor even by a strong sense of assurance. He wants you to trust him simply because he's the God Who Is There and not just because you really feel him there.

- ❖ Regardless of why, just remember that assurance is not a given but a gift. **Don't presume upon assurance but rather pray for it.** Ask your Father to gift you with a greater sense of his work of salvation in your life. And at the same time you can cultivate the means by which God has chosen to strengthen assurance.

### Confidence in Your Prayer Life

- ❖ And prayer happens to be one of the primary means. That leads to our second point: **Because God is true, you can be confident in your prayer life.** This eternal life that he's granted to those who have been born of God, who believe the name of Jesus, doesn't just offer confidence for the future in heaven BUT confidence in the here and now through communion with God. His children have can the confidence to approach him freely and boldly in prayer.
- ❖ Look at vv14-15. *"<sup>14</sup>And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. <sup>15</sup>And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him."*
  - ***Do you realize the privilege you have as one of God's children and the confidence that comes with it?*** If you were to come by church during a weekday, and you saw me in my office with my door closed, my music blaring, my nose buried in a book, then you should realize I'm deep in study. You should probably think twice about just barging in with no reason. We might be friends and all, but those are times when you should probably keep the door closed and move on.
    - But sometimes my wife and daughter like to surprise me during work hours. I could be deep in study, deep in intense thought or prayer, but when I hear that little voice on the other side of the door, my heart melts. You should probably leave me be, but my daughter can interrupt me anytime.
- ❖ ***Do you see what kind of confidence you can have towards God when he's your Father and you're his beloved child? If we ask anything according to his will he hears us, and if we know he hears us, we know we have the requests that we have asked of him.***
  - I realize that sounds like a blank check, but you know that's not how prayer works. You know from your own experience that you don't always get what you pray for. Does that mean you're not a child of God? Should that shake your assurance?
    - No, don't overlook that phrase "*according to his will*". You have to make a request that accords with God's will, and then you can be sure you'll get what you ask for.
- ❖ But we need to define God's will. John's *not* talking about what theologian call **God's sovereign will** – his preordained plans for the future. Obviously if you pray according to his sovereign will, then you'll know you're requests will be granted since God ordained it!
  - But that doesn't give me much confidence to pray since I don't really know his future plans for my life or your life. God's sovereign will is typically hidden and only perceivable with hindsight.

- ❖ John is talking about what we call **God's revealed will** – his plans, his desires, for his people as revealed in Scripture. John is saying that if a child of God asks her Father for anything that accords with what he desires *of us* or *for us* as clearly revealed *to us* in his Word, then you're praying "*according to his will*".
  - What's an example? It's simple. Read this letter once more and this time underline every command of God you come across or every mention of something that pleases him, and there you go – that's his revealed will. Pray according to that and you can be sure he'll hear you and grant you your request.
- ❖ But I know what you're probably thinking. "*It says here that God commands me to love other believers (4:21), and I've prayed according to that will. But so far I still have a hard time loving other Christians. What's going on? I know it's God's will. Why isn't he granting it?*"
  - But the truth is that your Father HAS heard you and he HAS granted your request. But sometimes (oftentimes) the results of the granting are only perceived later in the future. **Sometimes, depending on the request, you'll be long gone once the results are finally felt on this earth.**
    - If you're praying for the salvation of the nations, for peace on earth, for God's will to be done here as it is in heaven, rest assured that your petitions are being heard and granted. But you may not see it. **Like Moses, you may have to be content just knowing that a future generation will see it.**
- ❖ But let's bring it back to personal level. **If you're a child of God, one prayer that should be rolling off your lips every day is a prayer for God to keep you.** "*Lord, keep me. Preserve me. Protect me. Lead me not into temptation but deliver me from evil.*"
  - You should make a practice of praying every day for God to keep you from sin, to keep you from idolatry, to keep you close in communion with him. You know that's his will. You can be confident he hears you. You can be sure he'll grant that request.

### **A Community to Help You Be Sure**

- ❖ That sort of prayer leads to our last point. This is the third thing you can be sure of: **Because God is true, He has an entire community of faith striving to help you be sure.** God is the giver of assurance. If you have real assurance, it's owing to God and his grace. But he's not going to zap you with assurance. God uses means. Prayer is one of them.
  - Likewise, a community of believers praying for your perseverance is means by which our assurance grows. God has not called you on a solo journey of faith. He has called you into community, into the Church, into a spiritual family, and he uses your spiritual brothers and sisters as a means of helping you be sure.
- ❖ Read vv16-17 with me. "*<sup>16</sup>If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death, he shall ask, and God will give him life—to those who commit sins that do not lead to death. There is sin that leads to death; I do not say that one should pray for that. <sup>17</sup>All wrongdoing is sin, but there is sin that does not lead to death.*"

- ❖ So John describes for us a realistic scenario where a brother in Christ in committing a sin, and another brother intercedes on his behalf asking God to restore him. That's how we ought to love each another. Not by pointing fingers. Not by saying, "*I told you so.*" Not by turning a blind eye or spreading gossip or basking in a sense of moral superiority.
  - No, the brotherly thing to do is pray. Pray for the erring believer to come to repentance, to be restored and renewed in spiritual life. And trust that this is a request according to God's will, which will be heard and eventually granted.
  
- ❖ Now John adds this curious distinction between sins that do not lead to death and sins that do. These verses have been a source of theological controversy. This is where Catholicism gets the idea of venial sins versus mortal sins (i.e. sins like murder, adultery, or apostasy that cause you to lose eternal life). That's a wrong interpretation so it helps to shed some light.
  - **First of all, when John speaks of death here he's not talking about physical death but spiritual death.** He's not saying there are some sins that will lead to straight to the grave while others won't. No, he's referring to spiritual death, to hell.
  
- ❖ If so, then the *sins that do not lead to death* are referring to sins committed by believers for which forgiveness has already been secured by the death of Christ (1:9; 2:1-2). This is why John is so confident that prayer for the sake of an erring brother or sister will always be answered. Since Jesus paid it all. Because he said, "*It is finished.*" He took our sins away by becoming our propitiation (2:2), by sacrificing his own life as an atonement for our sins.
  - John's point is that, for Christians, their sins do not lead to spiritual death since they've been granted eternal life. So you can be confident to intercede for each other, knowing your Father hears and perhaps your meager prayer will be the actual means by which God leads your brother to repentance.
  
- ❖ But then there's the *sin that leads to death*. Taken in context, it likely referring to the sin of those false teachers and false believers who were claiming to no longer have sin in their lives (1:8) and denying their own need for atonement. We know from piecing things together that these individuals were denying Jesus to be the Christ, the Son of God, who came in the flesh.
  - They ended up denying the sin-atonement significance of Jesus' death. With this kind of attitude towards sin, self, and Jesus, there is little hope. **Their sin leads to death because their sin itself is the rejection of God's only Savior and means of forgiveness.** There's no other hope.
  
- ❖ John strongly encourages prayer for believers who sin, but for those who persist in their unbelief and rejection of Christ, John backs off. Some would even suggest that John doesn't want us to pray for such people.
  - **But notice he never prohibits this kind of prayer yet neither does he command it.** He just says, "*There is sin that leads to death; I do not say that one should pray for that.*" I don't think John is saying you can't pray for those who persist in rejecting Jesus, but he is giving you the freedom to eventually cease praying.

- ❖ It's really for the sake of your own soul. When you pray for another, you are, in a sense, taking up that person's cause. You're identifying yourself with this person before God. Now there's no danger of making God do something against his will. **But there is a danger that you might grow bitter or disillusioned with God if your requests are not answered and the person remains in unbelief.**
  - This is why the prophet Jeremiah was eventually told by God to stop praying for Israel (Jer. 7:16-18; 11:14; 14:11). She was so far gone that, at some point, Jeremiah had to cease aligning himself with her cause and to finally affirm that God is righteous in all his judgments.
    - I think this is what John means. He's not saying you're not allowed to pray for those who persist in rejecting Christ. It's good to stand by them and plead for their salvation. But in the end, just make sure you're standing with God.
- ❖ Let me leave you with this question. *What's your relationship like with your faith community? Your church? **Have you committed yourself to a body of believers and formed the kind of relationships where you can be open and vulnerable with your sin?** Would your brothers and sisters even know what to pray or how to pray for you?*
  - If you have yet to open up your life to fellow believers in this way, then you're shortchanging yourself. You're missing out on a vital means by which God deepens assurance. If you want to be sure of your salvation, you're going to need me and I'm going to need you. We'll need each other and each other's prayers.