

Going into 2014 with confidence from God
1 John 3:19-24

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2014 is here. We are 5 days into another New Year. If you had to describe your outlook on this New Year in one word, what would it be? Excited? Scared? Anticipating? Anxious? Confident? Fearful? Ordinary? For some of you, 2014 holds the promise of a new baby; a new job; graduating from High School or College or University; going away to school; getting married or retiring. Some of you look forward to a new beginning, a new direction, adjusting to a new little one in your family; getting fit; going into a new school or celebrating a significant birthday or anniversary. Some of you have a decision to make about a relationship – will it go further; deeper or is it time to end it?

For others there might be things coming this year that you dread – further health issues or complications for you or a loved one; decisions about care for your aging parents; work change or finding a different job; retirement decisions; wondering what life will be like with your child this year; wondering what will happen with your parents; difficult courses; a lot of work ahead; a big decision to make; figuring out what life looks like without that loved one; or a decision about your faith in Christ. Will you grow in Christ, start growing in Christ or drift further away from Him?

We look into 2014 wondering what this year will bring. But no matter what we will face, we have a God who watches over us. Not only does He watch over us, He is our Father.

This assurance that we are God's child is vital especially when we doubt our standing with God. Sometimes, we may wonder how God views us. We might doubt where He's at, our status as God's child when tragedy strikes, if we sin, If we think we could have done more, If we're experiencing failure, If we've made a big mistake, If we're sick, or dying, If we're stuck at work or in life, if nothing is happening in that relationship, if things aren't working out, If we're not sure what to do in life or if something new has come into your life whether you want it or not. You might wonder if God still sees you as His child or if God still watches over you.

Well the good news I have for you today from God and His Word is this: **When our conscience causes doubt, God assures us with His clout.** God assures us with His power, greatness, knowledge, promises and love. Assurance is a pledge; guarantee; oath or promise. To be assured means to be given evidence, proof and support to strengthen a claim. God's assurance delivered with His power and word give evidence, proof and support to strengthen the claim that we are His children.

When you are in need of God's assurance that you are His child, you are not alone. There was group of people who lived near the end of the 1st century that needed this kind of assurance. They were part of churches that John the Apostle ministered to. But then a good portion of people left these churches. They claimed some new knowledge that proved they were the true Christians. So John writes to reassure those who remained. We saw last Fall John provide the belief, obedience and love test to help them identify true Christians. As we pick up the next section of 1st John, we discover how God reassures his own people that they are His even when their consciences doubt this. My prayer is that you will leave this place today like a child going into a New Year facing some new and old things, but with the confidence that your heavenly Father watches over you and is with you.

Our text today is 1st John 3:19-24, but I'm going to start in 1st John 3:11 to remind us where we're at.

1 John 3:11-24, ESV

For this is the message that you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another. **12** We should not be like Cain, who was of the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother's righteous. **13** Do not be surprised, brothers, that the world hates you. **14** We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death. **15** Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.

16 By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. **17** But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? **18** Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.

19 By this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our heart before him; **20** for whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything. **21** Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God; **22** and whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him. **23** And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. **24** Whoever keeps his commandments abides in God, and God in him. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit whom he has given us.

John went hard at his readers in verses 11-18. He pushed them to examine whether they are people of love or hate. He exposed those who thought they were solid Christians but would turn away when they saw a brother or sister in need. He concludes that section by saying, "Talk is cheap. Show your love. Don't just say you love. And if you don't love other Christians especially, then it's questionable whether or not you even are a Christian. So He's set a very high standard for the Christian life.

But when his readers read this and when we hear this, we might wonder about our status as Christians. There have been times when we have seen others in need. Yet we have closed our hearts against them. If that's the case, our consciences might raise the question, does God's love even abide in us? Are we really his child?

Now some of us don't have the problem of a self-condemning conscience. There are some guys who believe they are God's gift to women. I'm not going to ask for a show of hands because I'm afraid that some of those guys might actually put their hands up. There may be some gals who think they are God's gift to men. Some may think they are God's gift to their profession or the world. These people might think they are God's greatest gift to Himself. They might think something like "God, you are so fortunate to have me as a Christian. I lend my gifts to your cause and without me, you couldn't do much." If that's how you think, you might not have the problem of a condemning conscience. Your problem might be a little more along the lines of a dull conscience to things like humility.

Certainly, we need our consciences to alert us when we're going down a wrong road. The Holy Spirit can use our conscience to warn us. But we don't have perfect consciences. We sometimes might make wrong conclusions like we failed to reach out to that person in need that we saw, therefore, we must not be God's child.

In verses 19-20, John gives us God's assurance to this situation. He paints the picture of going into God's presence. Standing before the holy God of the universe is a pretty serious thing. Though we physically don't have to do that until Judgment Day, we spiritually do that all the time. God is always present with us but when we consciously become aware and come before Him in prayer, it's like we're entering the holy court of heaven. When we do that, we can doubt ourselves wondering "am I really God's child? Am I approaching someone who looks favorably upon me or someone who will zap me or punish me?"

John assures his readers in verse 19 – By this we shall know that we are of the truth; by what? By loving in deed and truth in verse 18. When we aren't sure of our standing before God, we can gain some assurance by considering our love towards others. If we can see examples where we're shown love, the text says that's reason for reassurance. "By this, by loving in deed & truth, we know we are of the truth and reassure our heart before him."

But what if we've failed to love? What if we're convinced we didn't do enough? That's where verse 20 comes in. "For whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart and he knows everything. How does God assure us that we are his? **He overcomes our self-condemning hearts with His greatness and knowledge. (19-20)** Yes,

He saw that time when we ignored the person in need. But He also saw that time we showed kindness to that person at work and have forgotten about. He remembers the love we showed someone last year that we don't remember. And even if we have not shown love recently. He knows that we are covered by Christ's sacrifice. He has purchased our membership in God's family that cannot be revoked.

And even then if we still doubt, God is greater and knows everything. So when you doubt that you're actually God's child, you have to bring that before God. You come humbly before Him and declare that you doubt your relationship with Him. If you're not one of His, He will reveal Himself to you. But if you are already one of His, He knows everything. Even though you might not see evidence of that right now, He might point you to evidences from the past. He might remind you of some of His promises. He might bring someone who will remind you of His faithfulness.

God is great. He is able to overcome the doubts of our hearts. He identifies with the lowly and humble. So when conviction of wrongdoing weighs down our hearts, we need to turn to God. We do not look into our hearts to see if we feel secure and then use this as evidence of our security. If our conscience unjustly condemns us, God overrides the verdict. For He knows all things.

John does not include this so we can write papers about God's greatness. He offers this out of pastoral heart of concern. Robert Yarborough puts it like this. "John reminds readers that in coming before God, they approach one who knows everything about all hearts, yet is still able to forgive. He knows our foolishness and guilt, disgrace and shame, even thoughts and words before they are spoken. Yet at the right hand of this God is Christ our advocate. Because of Jesus, we can come to God for release from our burdens and doubts. Illustrate: It's kind of like having to go to a house where we've just hit a baseball through the window. We have done wrong and know the owner has every right to demand payment. But when the owner opens the door, he welcomes us, talks with us about what happened – yet sends us on our way encouraging us to keep going and growing in life. He sees beyond the immediate to the bigger picture. God is greater and knows everything beyond our doubts.

God assures in another way. **He responds to the prayers of a confident heart. (21-22)** Verse 21- Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God." Once God has reassured our consciences in His presence, this can give us confidence – not a self-confidence based on our wonderful abilities but based on His grace and acceptance. When our conscience doesn't condemn, we can pray with confidence. If you have this confidence from a

cleansed conscience before God, it improves your prayer life. Don Carson says “when we have sleazy consciences, our praying becomes formal and we have no confidence that God will answer us. But when our consciences are clear before him, we pray differently. “

Think how different prayer might sound from one with a condemned conscience compared to the one with a relieved conscience.

Here’s the one with condemned conscience. “O Lord, I come before and I think I’ve been good enough this week to earn a hearing but I’m not sure. But I’m not even sure if you’re my Father or you care about me. So if you could spare a moment and consider helping me, I would appreciate it but only if you want to.”

Now here’s what prayer might sound like from one with a clear conscience. - Lord, I come before you as your forgiven child. Thank you for your assurance and comfort. I know you are great and mighty and desire to see people come into deep relationship with you. So I pray about my brother Lord. You know He wanders from you. Will you bring His wandering heart back to you? Will you provide opportunities where we can discuss this? By your great power, will you break down the walls in his heart to hear anew your love for Him and his need of you? I ask you to act on this Lord by your great power and in your way.

John is not talking about self-confidence here. He talks about God-centered confidence. With the uplifting truths that God is great and knows everything in our minds, we can move from defensive and defeatist prayer to positive prayers.

But confidence before God is not the end goal. It is the means to the end of effective prayers. We don’t get our prayers answered because we are confident going into God’s presence. So we don’t pray – “God, I’m a really confident person. So I can ask you for whatever I want and such spirit should impress you to give it to me.” No. We come with a God-centered confidence that comes from a cleansed conscience. This is backed up by lives that keep his commandments and do what pleases him. Our prayers are more likely to be answered yes when we follow verse 22. “And whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do what pleases him.”

It’s like approaching your parents for something you need from them. So those of you who are old like me can think back to when you were a teenager or young adult. Those of you who are teenagers or young adults just think about what it’s like today. Say you need something from your parents. It’s no small thing. Maybe it’s a couple hundred

dollars, a couple of thousand dollars or a place to stay or help with a big problem. Your parents' openness to your request will be greatly impacted by how you've been living and treating them prior to the request. Say you've neglected them, spoke harshly to them, ignored and defied them. Then you come to them with your request. They would likely say no or things must change for this request to even be considered. But say you've treated them with respect, invested time in appreciating them and honoring them, pulled your weight around the house, worked hard at your studies or job and have pursued a growing relationship with Christ. Then something unforeseen happens where you're struck down and need help. They will hopefully be much more willing to consider your request.

Now God is certainly greater and different than our parents. He accepts us when we come to Him with nothing when we first trust Him. But after we become His children, our lives and choices will impact our prayer life. God is not obligated to listen to us when we cherish sin in our hearts. God will not respond positively to someone who wants some blessing upon their sin. But God will consider and give strength to those who learn His commands and do what pleases Him. For God's commands are God's will and He is delighted to do His will which is the best thing for us. Yes, there will be times when we request something that could be God glorifying yet He still says no to. But often when we pray according to His will, He answers.

That can bring great assurance. God has answered many prayers in this church family over this past year with healings, direction, new believers, baptisms, safe delivery of babies and even a peaceful passing of one of our seniors. So whatever you face in 2014, once your conscience has been cleared before God, pray with a God-centered confidence. Continue to learn His will and what pleases Him. Your prayer life will grow.

The final way I see God assuring in this passage is **He lives in us by His Spirit. (23-24)**. But first John reminds us of the 3 tests. Verse 23 – "And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ and love one another just as he has commanded us." Now what did John just do? He's brought in the tests for authentic Christianity again. The 3 tests are the obedience, belief and love test. True Christians obey Christ's commands. True Christians believe in Jesus Christ – that He was in fact God the Son - fully man and fully God. True Christians love one another. So verse 22 – and whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him – the obedience test. And this is his commandment (verse 23) – to believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ – the belief test. And love one another just as he commanded us. The love test wrapped up in the obedience

test. If obeying Christ's commands is important to you – if you can say you believe and have received Jesus, the Christ; if you love others in ways you didn't used to – these add up to evidence that you are indeed one of God's children.

But He does even more. God provides even more assurance. Verse 24 – *Whoever keeps His commandments abides in God, and God in him. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit whom he has given us.* So God comes to live in us by His Spirit to further assure us that we are his. In fact, according to Romans 8:15-16, the Holy Spirit bears witness to our spirit that we are sons of God.

I don't know what 2014 will bring for each one of you here. But God does. Knowing that you are His child is vital to going into this year in His strength. When your heart condemns you and causes you to doubt your status with God, you can turn to the great God who knows everything for His reassurance. Then with that confidence pray for others in life's most difficult and desperate circumstances to join God in what He's doing there. You will receive power to continue with the rewarding yet tough work of living the Christian life. The Christian life is hard. This life can only be lived in the power of the Spirit. This life is marked by passing the three tests. It is a life of more and more dependence upon the Lord.

If you're nervous about something in the future; when you've done something wrong or damaging, when you face a life threatening situation, you still have your Heavenly Father. He loves you, cares for you and assures you that you are His, even when we doubt it ourselves.

His assurance isn't based on how He feels about what you've done on a particular day. It's based on the blood that Jesus poured out on the cross. With that blood, Jesus purchased your pardon so that you could be adopted into God's family and be called His sons and daughters.

If you've never had the heavenly father as your Father, 2014 could be the year you join His family. You do that by first acknowledging your own sin – your own rebellion against God and His moral law. You confess wanting to be the Lord over your life and wanting to go your own way apart from Him. Then instead of trusting your own works and efforts to make yourself acceptable before God, you put all your trust in Jesus' life and his works on the cross. You say something like *"Lord Jesus, I put my entire trust into you and what you did on the cross for me to save me from the just penalty for my sins. I turn from my sins to receive you into my life as both Savior and Lord. You are now my leader. I must follow you Lord and your will for my life."* At that moment the Holy Spirit will regenerate your soul from spiritual

death to spiritual life. You will be forgiven your sins and declared not guilty forever. You will receive the Holy Spirit as God comes to live in you. You will begin the journey of becoming like Christ. Whatever you face in 2014, you will walk in the assurance that you are God's child and that He is leading you.

For those of us who already know Christ, will you think about this upcoming year for a few moments and what it might hold for you – especially the things that concern you or cause some anxiety? Now with those things in mind, I invite you to put your hands like this and imagine you hold all those things in your hands. God your Father knows about those things. He is greater than your heart and knows everything. He dwells in you by His Spirit. He is your Father and will walk with you and guide you through whatever it is that you hold in your hands right now if you invite Him to guide you. So I am going to ask you to make one New Year's resolution today regarding those things you hold in your hands. The resolution is simply this – **I will not try to go through these things apart from God.** Or stated positively, **I will cling to and follow God as He leads me through these things.** Will you demonstrate that by lifting up your hands and giving all that is on your heart to Him?