

“What is the Gospel: Part 11”

Introduction: Last week, we were looking at the biblical doctrine of the assurance of salvation. The first thing we saw was that in order to have sound assurance, a person must have saving faith. Obviously, if someone doesn't have grace in his heart, the work of the Spirit producing true faith, as well as all the other graces, he will never find any evidence that it's there, although he may find evidences which he may mistake as saving grace, which is why we need to be careful. But even if true faith is there, a person might still not have assurance. Our Confession tells us that saving faith does not necessarily include full assurance, that is, an assurance without doubt. It defines faith as follows, “By this faith, a Christian believeth to be true whatsoever is revealed in the Word, for the authority of God Himself speaking therein; and acteth differently upon that which each particular passage thereof containeth; yielding obedience to the commands, trembling at the threatenings, and embracing the promises of God for this life and that which is to come. But the principal acts of saving faith are accepting, receiving, and resting upon Christ alone for justification, sanctification, and eternal life, by virtue of the covenant of grace. This faith is different in degrees, weak or strong; may be often and many ways assailed and weakened, but gets the victory; growing up in many to the attainment of a full assurance through Christ, who is both the author and finisher of our faith” (WCF 14.2-3). As you can see from this definition, faith may be weak or strong. Not everyone will have a strong faith, which means that not everyone will have a full assurance that they are the Lord's. To the degree that your faith is strengthened, to that degree you will have assurance. When it is weak, a person may have very little assurance, and that which fills the gap that assurance leaves will be doubt. The Heidelberg Catechism defines faith as assurance. It first asks the question, “What is true faith?” and then answers, “True faith is not only a knowledge and conviction that everything God reveals in His Word is true; it is also a deep-rooted assurance, created in me by the Holy Spirit through the gospel, that, out of sheer grace earned for us by Christ, not only others, but I too, have had my sins forgiven, have been made forever right with God, and have been granted salvation.” Westminster recognizes that there will be some measure of assurance with faith, depending on how strong that faith is. Heidelberg simply sees faith as “a deep-rooted assurance.” I think we would have to admit, however, that a person may have true faith, but not recognize it as such. And as I said, a person may also have a false faith and believe that it's true. This is why it's important to examine ourselves. If we have true grace, we need to know that we do, so that we can rest more confidently in the fact that the Lord will finish His work in us. And if we don't have it, we need to know that we don't, so that we can come to the Lord and ask Him for His mercy. The apostle John wrote 1 John for this reason. In 5:13, he writes, “These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, in order that you may know that you have eternal life” (1 John 5:13). He shows what things will be true of a true profession, and what things will be true of a false profession, in order that those who read his letter might be able to discern whether their faith was genuine or false.

But what are those things which must be true of a person, before he can legitimately say he has true faith and is one of God's children? As we saw, the Bible summarizes it as love. Paul tells us that faith is that which works by love (Gal. 5:6). Love is the evidence

that God's Spirit is working savingly within us (Gal. 5:22-23). It is that which gives us the power to submit ourselves to the Law (Rom. 8:7-8), and the power to fulfill it (13:10). Moses tells us the same thing in the book of Deuteronomy, where he says that the true circumcision of the heart, or regeneration, produces love for God (Deu. 30:6).

- B. But of course, the question we were asking ourselves last week was, How can we know whether we love God or the things God gives us. How can we know that we really love the Giver and not His gifts?
1. The first thing we must do is look beyond the gifts and consider whether we would love the God of the Bible without the gifts.
 2. The second thing must be to discern whether the God we love is the true God. Muslims, Jews, and Mormons might all say that they love God. But do they really? There are many people today who say they love God, but the god they love is really a god of their own making, made in their image or into something they would like. A person must love the true God. He must be able to honestly say he would not change anything about Him if he could.
 3. The third thing is that we must love the true Christ, the Christ who is both God and man, the Christ who sovereignly rules over all men, and who one day will judge the world. Again, there are many ideas of who Christ is, but it must be the biblical Christ whom we love.
 4. Fourth, we must also love those things which reveal God, such as His Law.
 - a. Do we love the Law of God, and that not in spite of its strictness -- that it absolutely will not allow any sin --, but because of its strictness? Do we love holiness and righteousness? Are we striving to conform to His Law, because we see in it God's holiness and Christ's righteousness?
 - b. John writes, "And by this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments. The one who says, 'I have come to know Him,' and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him; but whoever keeps His word, in him the love of God has truly been perfected. By this we know that we are in Him: the one who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked" (1 John 2:3-6).
 - c. The love which the Spirit gives us for God, will also give us a love for His Law, because it reflects His righteous character. We will love to obey it, and we will be grieved when we disobey it.
 - d. Obedience that is motivated by a true love to God, and not just because of the blessing we get when we obey, is the strongest evidence that we are truly born again from above. The author to the Hebrews, after speaking to his audience about those who were not genuinely converted and who eventually fell away, wrote, "But, beloved, we are convinced of better things concerning you, and things that accompany salvation, though we are speaking in this way. For God is not unjust so as to forget your *work* and the *love* which you have shown toward His name, in having *ministered* and in still *ministering* to the saints. And we desire that each one of you show the same *diligence* so as to realize the *full assurance of hope* until the end, that you may not be *sluggish*, but *imitators* of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises" (6:9-12). *Notice in this passage where this full assurance comes from: it does not come through well wishing, but through obedience, through work,*

through acts of love in ministering to the saints. Obedience, if it is given freely, out of genuine love for God, is one of the strongest evidences that we are truly born again from above.

- e. Peter writes, “Now for this very reason also, applying all diligence, in your faith supply moral excellence, and in *your* moral excellence, knowledge; and in *your* knowledge, self-control, and in *your* self-control, perseverance, and in *your* perseverance, godliness; and in *your* godliness, brotherly kindness, and in *your* brotherly kindness, love. For if these *qualities* are yours and are increasing, they render you neither useless nor unfruitful in the true knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For he who lacks these *qualities* is blind *or* short-sighted, having forgotten *his* purification from his former sins. Therefore, brethren, be all the more diligent to make certain about His calling and choosing you; for as long as you practice these things, you will never stumble; for in this way the entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be abundantly supplied to you” (2 Pet. 1:5-11). Again, assurance in this passage comes from the fruits of a growing obedience to God’s righteousness.
5. Fifth, and along these same lines, a true love for God will also be accompanied by a true love and affection for God’s people.
 - a. On this last point, John writes, “If someone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from Him, that the one who loves God should love his brother also” (1 John 4:20-21).
 - b. If we hate our brother who is being renewed in the image of God, we cannot love the God whose image our brother bears.
 - c. These are very broadly the things which must be true of our love, if it is truly a gracious love wrought in our hearts by the Spirit of God.
- C. The Bible teaches us, as does our Confession, that we can be infallibly assured that we are His.
1. The author to the Hebrews writes, “And we desire that each one of you show the same diligence so as to realize the full assurance of hope until the end . . . This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, a *hope* both sure and steadfast and one which enters within the veil, where Jesus has entered as a forerunner for us, having become a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek” (Heb. 6:11, 19-20).
 2. But there are three things that we must have before we can have this assurance. What are they?
 - a. First, we must have the promise of God, and this is what **He** gives us in the Gospel. Whosoever believes in His Son has eternal life and shall never perish. If we didn’t have His promise, we wouldn’t have anything. The author to the Hebrews writes, “In the same way God, desiring even more to show to the heirs of the promise the unchangeableness of His purpose, interposed with an oath, in order that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we may have strong encouragement, we who have

fled for refuge in laying hold of the hope set before us” (6:17-18).

- b. But second, there must be the evidence of that grace to which these promises are made. This promise only applies to those who are born again. Those who are, who show that they are by their love for God and their obedience to His Word, may apply this promise to themselves. And to the degree that they see the evidences of God’s Spirit working in them, to that degree they will have assurance.
- c. But there is one more thing. What is it? It is the witness of the Spirit. Paul writes, “The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with *Him* in order that we may also be glorified with *Him*” (Rom. 8:16).
 - (i) Some see this witness to be a direct testimony of the Spirit with our souls that we are the children of God. The way that He does this is giving us the confidence to address God as our Father. Paul writes in verse 15, “For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, ‘Abba! Father!’”
 - (ii) Edwards, on the other hand, saw the witness of the Spirit as tied into the evidence of a godly life. Paul writes in verses 12-13, “So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh- for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live.” The fact that the Spirit is producing these works in your life is His witness that you are His child.
 - (iii) Certainly both can be true in the sense that the Spirit gives us the confidence to call God our Father when we see His working that same holiness in us.

D. What are some of the benefits of a sound assurance?

1. First, there is peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. Paul writes in Romans 5:1-2, “Therefore having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand; and we exult in hope of the glory of God,” in 14:17, “For the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit,” and in 15:13, “Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”
2. Assurance will also bring about a greater love and thankfulness to God, and a greater strength and cheerfulness in the duties of obedience.
3. Some are afraid of assurance, believing that it will cause a person to relax and give in more to sin. But is this true?
 - a. Some even caricature Calvinism in this way, saying that we believe that a person can sin all they want to and still go to heaven.
 - b. But will assurance produce this?
 - (i) Now it’s true that it might do this even in a true believer, at least for a time. Remember, there is still corruption in our hearts, and it will certainly try and take advantage of us in any way it can.

- (ii) But if we begin to give into sin, what will happen? We will lose our assurance. We will interrupt our communion with God. We will lose our peace. Sin and assurance are incompatible.
- (iii) Paul writes, “What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace might increase? May it never be! How shall we who died to sin still live in it?” (Rom. 6:1-2). He writes to Titus, “For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus; who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds” (2:11-14). He writes to the church at Corinth, “Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God” (2 Cor. 7:1). And John writes, “Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we shall be. We know that, when He appears, we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him just as He is. And everyone who has this hope *fixed* on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure” (1 John 3:2-3), and, “If we say that we have fellowship with Him and *yet* walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth; but if we walk in the light as He Himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin” (1:6-7).
- (iv) If we don’t live a righteous life, how can we have assurance?
- (v) Assurance of salvation, far from inclining us to sin, will drive us to holiness out of thankfulness to God. If we find instead that we are encouraged to sin, and don’t lose our assurance because of it, then we have a faulty assurance based on something less than true grace. If Jesus isn’t our Lord, then He is not our Savior either.

E. What causes assurance to weaken?

1. By neglecting the means of grace, we can lose the influence of the Spirit.
2. Falling into some special sin will cause the loss of some of His influence. David writes, after his fall into adultery with Bathsheba and consequent murder of Uriah, “Make me to hear joy and gladness, let the bones which Thou hast broken rejoice. Hide Thy face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me away from Thy presence, and do not take Thy Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of Thy salvation, and sustain me with a willing spirit. *Then* I will teach transgressors Thy ways, and sinners will be converted to Thee. Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God, Thou God of my salvation; *then* my tongue will joyfully sing of Thy righteousness” (Ps. 51:8-14).
3. A sudden and great temptation will also grieve Him. Peter was tempted to deny Christ and did, and lost the Spirit’s comfort (Matt. 26:69-72).
4. Sometimes God will withhold or withdraw His Spirit to teach us to rely on Him more. Asaph writes in Psalm 77:1-10, “My voice *rises* to God, and I will cry aloud; my voice *rises* to God, and He will hear me. In the day of my trouble I

sought the Lord; in the night my hand was stretched out without weariness; my soul refused to be comforted. *When* I remember God, then I am disturbed; *when* I sigh, then my spirit grows faint. Selah. Thou hast held my eyelids *open*; I am so troubled that I cannot speak. I have considered the days of old, the years of long ago. I will remember my song in the night; I will meditate with my heart; and my spirit ponders. Will the Lord reject forever? And will He never be favorable again? Has His lovingkindness ceased forever? Has *His* promise come to an end forever? Has God forgotten to be gracious? Or has He in anger withdrawn His compassion? Selah. Then I said, 'It is my grief, that the right hand of the Most High has changed.'

5. But will God ever withdraw His assurance all together? No. He will always leave us with some support, even in the worst of times and in the worst of our sins.
 - a. There will always be a seed of faith left. Jesus prayed for Peter, just before he denied Him, "But I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned again, strengthen your brothers" (Luke 22:32).
 - b. Job, in the midst of his trials, could say, "Though He slay me, I will hope in Him. Nevertheless I will argue my ways before Him" (13:15).
 - c. And the Lord says through Isaiah the prophet, "'For a brief moment I forsook you, but with great compassion I will gather you. In an outburst of anger I hid My face from you for a moment; but with everlasting lovingkindness I will have compassion on you,' says the Lord your Redeemer. 'For this is like the days of Noah to Me; when I swore that the waters of Noah should not flood the earth again, so I have sworn that I will not be angry with you, nor will I rebuke you. For the mountains may be removed and the hills may shake, but My lovingkindness will not be removed from you, and My covenant of peace will not be shaken,' says the Lord who has compassion on you" (54:7-10).
 - d. This ends our lesson on the Gospel. The only thing we didn't talk about are the methods we can use to evangelize. Let me leave you with this idea: there is no better way to evangelize than by getting to know someone in a friendly way and teaching them little by little the truth of the Gospel, and by encouraging them to come to church. They need to hear the Gospel and understand it, and they need to see it at work. If you can provide both of these things, and pray for them, the Lord will be able to use you to gather His lost sheep into His fold, and there is no greater blessing than to be used of Him for this purpose. May the Lord grant to each of us the grace and opportunities to be witnesses for Him. Amen.