



10p

# The Round Church at St Andrew the Great Cambridge

A Sermon Preached  
on Sunday 20th June 2004  
by Mark Ashton

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1 John 3:18-24

**But I feel so unworthy...**

Confidence—it is that intangible factor in sport is it not? The English Test Cricket team seem to be getting it at the moment. The English World Cup rugby team had it last autumn, but now it has gone! The English football team...well, I don't know if it was lack of confidence that afflicted David Beckham before taking that penalty against France last Sunday, but Arthur Guitemann was surely right when he wrote:

He rarely hits the mark,  
Or wins the game,  
Who says, "I know I'll miss  
While taking aim."

Confidence is vital to achieving one's best performance. Wayne Rooney clearly has it. In fact, in the bumping races on the river here, wise rowing coaches know that when a crew is successful in making a bump, it will be at least a length faster over the course the next day. That is what confidence does. And I guess the reverse is true: when you get bumped, you half expect it to happen again so you go slower the next day. If we can afford a tiny digression at this stage—as you may know, they race in the bumps in reverse order, so that the VIII finishing top in a lower division starts again half an hour later at the bottom of the next division up. There have been crews which rowed over-successfully at the head of one division, with no-one bumping them, so they immediately started at the bottom of the division above, but failed to catch the boat in front of them. So on the second day they started again at the head of the lower division, and again they were not caught, but nor could they bump in the division above. For four days in succession they have rowed flat out over the entire course twice a day half an hour apart. Only the oarsmen and women among us will realise the full enormity of that feat. Oh for just one bump that could have made all the difference. Just that little boost to the confidence.

And it is not just in sport. In every area of life there is a necessary confidence, even in Christianity, not arrogance nor complacency, but a humble security spiritually. We need that to protect us from the introspective depression, which plagues us with recurrent doubts about our relationship with God. This passage has a little more for the Christian than the non-Christian. But, if you are not yet a Christian, I hope you will find it helpful to peep, as it were, through the window into the Christian life this morning. The Christian is not to be arrogant, but he or she can be sure. We are all too aware of how bad we are, but we do not get depressed by that knowledge, because if God knows how bad I am, then I can cope with knowing it myself and even with you knowing it too. Let's look at what John tells us about finding such a proper spiritual confidence.

## **1. Confidence before God and the condemning heart**

As we saw in the previous verses, John has revealed two pairs of opposites (good and evil, love and hate), which are so entwined in normal human experience. But He knows that our day-to-day life is still lived in that confused moral twilight where right and wrong are not always clear-cut, where our own behaviour so

often falls short of the love we would want to show. He knows that our hearts condemn us from time to time, and he tells us that when they do we are to hold our love for the brethren (brother and sister Christians) and to trust in the greatness of God: ***For God is great than our hearts and he knows everything (v 20b)***. God knows your and my sins better than we do ourselves. He's more bitterly opposed to our sins than we are. And He acts more graciously towards our sins than we can.

You and I have never committed a sin that has surprised God. We have surprised and appalled ourselves at some of the things that have welled up out of our hearts. "How could I have said that; or thought that; or done that?" But He had already paid the price. He knows everything. And no-one has ever reached the limits of His love, nor plumbed the depths of His mercy. ***For God is greater than our hearts and he knows everything (v 20b)***. He does not just know the outward circumstances of your and my life; He knows and understands all the hidden and mysterious complexities of our personalities. He understands our psyches, our anxieties, our neuroses, our suppressed emotions. He knows not just what we do, but why we do it. And when we come to God in humble confession of our sins, He does not say to us, as our friends tend to, "Oh don't worry. You're not that bad. You're no worse than anyone else." When I come to God in frank confession of sin, He says to me, "Mark, you are far worse than you think you are. Actually, you've only just begun to glimpse the tip of your sin. But I have seen it all; and, for Jesus' sake, I forgive it all!"

When your heart condemns you, don't try to ignore or hush it up, or drown it out. Take it to God, Who is greater than your heart.

That is what John tells us to do when our conscience convicts us, and we think "How can I be a Christian if I am as bad as this?" We are to take our conscience to God and let Him deal with it, by the Cross of Christ. But we are also to love: ***Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth. This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence whenever our hearts condemn us (vv 18-20)***. For some Christians, their lack of assurance may be due to an excessive introspection. So we are to look outside our own hearts to God, and away from ourselves to others in practical love. One commentator wrote on this passage—"John puts it to some of us in this way: 'You are lacking confidence in your Christian life because you think about yourself too much. Start putting into practice Christlike living. Is there a brother in need? Then get out and show the love of God to him. That is the therapy for these morbid fears you have. Of course you feel depressed while you look within and mope! Don't you see, there is an element of self-indulgence in that kind of moroseness and introversion? Get out and love people! Fill your empty hours with Christian action. You will be surprised how quickly self-sacrificial service drives the blues away!'" (Roy Clements)

## **2. Confidence in Prayer and the Obedient Will**

***Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God and receive from him anything we ask, because we obey his commands and do what pleases him (vv 21-22)***.

Notice the relationship between spiritual confidence, prayer and obedience. You cannot go very far in the Christian life without realising that prayer is not a technique but a relationship. It is not a matter of knowing how to get my will done. It is a matter of knowing God well enough to get His will done. So, looking at these two verses, confidence before God (v 21) is the same as obedience to God (v 22); just as belief in His Son Jesus is the same as obeying Jesus' commands. To believe will be to obey. ***And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us (v 23)***.

So the beginning of verse 24 is the clue to the answered prayer: ***Those who obey his commands live in him, and he in them***. It is a picture of my will and God's will becoming the same—as I trust Him, and so obey Him. In the final chapter of the letter (Chapter 5), John wrote ***This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him. (v 14-15)***. It is not a matter of knowing how to get my will done. It is a matter of knowing God well enough to get His will done. Effective prayer is all about knowing and obeying God.

Listen to this illustration of a girl praying on her wedding day: *Dear God, I can hardly believe this is my wedding day. I know I've not been able to spend much time with you lately, with all the rush of getting ready for today. And I'm sorry too, I guess, that I feel a little guilty when I try to pray about all this, since Larry still isn't a Christian. But, Father, I love him so much what else can I do? I just can't give him up. Oh, you must save him, some way, some how. You know how much I've prayed for him and the way we have discussed the gospel together. Dear Father, please bless our marriage. I don't want to disobey you, but I do love him and I want to be his wife. So please be with us and please don't spoil our wedding day.* It's not the confidence of verses 21 and 22, is it? It's not what John was talking about. If we translate that prayer into more honest language, it sounds like this: *Dear Father, I don't want to disobey you, but I must have my own way at all costs. For I love what you don't love, I want what you don't want. So please be a good God and deny yourself and move off your throne and let me take over. And if you don't like this, then all I ask is that you bite your tongue and neither say nor do anything that will spoil my wedding plans, but please just let me enjoy myself!*

***Those who obey his commands live in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us (v 24).*** No, it is those who obey His commands who live in Him and He in them. We circled back in that delightful Johannine way to where we began at v 19, ***This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence whenever our hearts condemn us (vv 19-20).*** So let's end by noticing the 4 strands John has been twining together for us in these verses in his own distinctive way:

### **3. Confidence, Faith, Love and Obedience**

***And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us. Those who obey his commands live in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us (vv 23-24).***

Can we be commanded to believe? Apparently so. Notice the word 'command' is in the singular, but like a shotgun it is double-barrelled. That's one singular command to John—to believe in Jesus and to love one another: you cannot do one without the other. It is relationship as much as it is rule. If you have not discovered that, you've not yet discovered the Christian life: the relationship provides the context for obedience. Is that a new or strange idea to you? If you are not yet a Christian, it may be. One friend described how Christianity looked to him as a non-Christian: "A list of dos and don'ts, where all the dos begin with don't." But it is not about rule keeping when you realise that it is the relationship which provides the context for obedience. Because I now belong to God, I long to please Him. I no longer strive desperately to please Him in order to belong to Him.

And this is a whole new way of living that provides evidence to us that we are His: ***...And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us.*** The changed life of the Christian provides evidence for the Christian confidence. Perhaps someone is saying, "But Mark, I just don't see any changes in my life." Then I reply, "Well, make some now!" If we lay down our lives in sacrificial service for others, as John is bidding us to do, we will not doubt that we are Christians. Start loving and you won't doubt.

To obey God is to believe in Jesus. To believe in Jesus is to love other people. To love other people is to have confidence before God, and so we could go on. They are inextricably intertwined. But I guess each of us is aware of which strand we ought to be paying a little more attention to, so that we may grow ever more confident in the right sense: not of our own goodness, but of his love drawing our lives up into His. Let's go a length faster spiritually this week, with confidence before God.