

Of Assurance of Grace and Salvation (Part 1)

Eph 1:3-14; WCF 18.1-18.2

Reformed Church of Wainuiomata, 23 February 2020, 16:30
(Sermon put together by Pieter van Huyssteen with due acknowledgement)¹

Intro

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ.

An elder, once on a home visit to a family, asked all family members this question: “Are you sure that if Jesus returns tonight, you will be ready?”

All family members said yes!

Then he asked another question: “Why are you so sure?”

Well, to this question, the answers were not so clear.

Only one member’s answer was very clear: “Because my assurance is based not on what I have achieved, but on what my Lord Jesus has achieved for me; and He cannot make a mistake!”

What should we conclude from the answers these family members gave their elder?

Well, we cannot say that those family members whose answers were not so clear, were not yet right with God. I mean, they did say that they had assurance of salvation. Perhaps they just struggled to put in words their reasons. No human being can make a conclusive opinion on those family members’ hearts – only God can!²

Well, my brother & sister, when it comes to assurance of salvation, there are four kinds of people in the world.

- There are those who are not saved, and they are aware that they are not saved. They have not been born from above by the Holy Spirit, and they know it. And they have no desire of becoming Christians.
- The second group are just the opposite. They have been born from above by the Holy Spirit. Yes, they have been made new, and they know it. They have assurance of salvation.
- Then there’s a third group. They have been born from above, but they don’t know that for sure. Yes, they have an inkling that they have been saved, but they’re not absolutely sure. Now, many Christians struggle with this issue. Their degree of assurance hovers between firm and shaky. After all, in the Christian’s walk of life, it may happen that he/she falls seriously and radically – committing even some serious sin – but does not fall fully and finally. However, when a Christian is in a serious fall, it’s then that the evil one takes his chance to create great doubt in his/her heart! So, a person can be a born-again Christian and yet experience times of uncertainty of his/her salvation.

¹ In writing this sermon, I am greatly indebted to my two main sources whose guidance I appreciate: 1) Van Dixhoorn, Chad. 2014. *Confessing the Faith: a reader’s guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith*. Carlisle, PA : The Banner of Truth Trust. 484p.

2) Sproul, R.C. 2006. *The truth we confess*. (In: Sproul, R.C. ed. *Truths we confess: a layman’s guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith – in three volumes*. Vol. 2: *Salvation and the Christian Life* (Chapters 9-22 of the Confession) Phillipsburg, NJ : P&R Publishing. 279p.).

Many words & phrases I have written, I have gladly borrowed with great thankfulness from this source.

² 1 Sam 16:7 ***But the Lord said to Samuel, “Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him. For the Lord sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.”***

- Well, there's also a fourth group – those who are not saved, but *think* they are – and, it's they who form the first point of our sermon....

False Assurance

My brother & sister, the biggest reason for a false assurance seems to still be that people think they're right with God, *because they are living a good life*.

And one often hears a shop assistant or a client say, "Well, I'll be in heaven, for I haven't done anything too seriously bad!"

Indeed, once when I walked our dog, I met a kind lady who also walked her dog. I soon found out that she was a caregiver – caring for frail people in their homes. So, I said to her, "You know, I have always thought that, *if* people could go to heaven because of the good works they have done, then nurses and caregivers *would* stand right up front in the queue!"

Sadly, this lady did not hear the "if" part of my sentence. So, how did she respond to what I said? Well, she enthusiastically continued to explain how she was also thinking that, because of her caregiving, God would receive her into heaven with open arms!

Now, I don't know to what faith that lady belonged, but it's quite possible that, deep inside, even some Christians may think like her: "The Father will welcome me into heaven. After all, I've gone to church all my life, I have been a Sunday-school teacher, I've regularly donated money to the church and charity groups, and I have never murdered anyone nor have I committed adultery."

What's wrong with such thinking?

Well, that those who think that way, have based their confidence upon their own goodness, which is not at all what the Bible teaches! In fact, such thinking completely obscures the true Gospel!

And what's so damaging about it is that it gives people a false sense of security.

In His Sermon on the Mount, our Lord Jesus warns against that. He says, "*Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord.'*"³

Well, here's the shocking thing – that those people will repeat the personal form of address; yes, they will say, "Lord, Lord!" Such repetition of the personal form of address was in Bible times a way of indicating an intimate relationship with the person whom you were speaking to!

So, what do we see?

Well, that Jesus is saying that people will come to Him on the Last Day, not only *confessing* Him as Lord, but also *claiming an intimate, personal relationship with Him*.

So, Jesus is talking about people who will approach the Judge of heaven and earth with a strong sense of assurance of salvation. They will even claim that they have been active in the church and in missionary work.⁴

But Jesus will say, "...*I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.*"⁵

³ Cf. Mt 7:22, *On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?'*

⁴ Cf. Lk 13:25-26, *When once the master of the house has risen and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and to knock at the door, saying, 'Lord, open to us,' then he will answer you, 'I do not know where you come from.'* ²⁶ *Then you will begin to say, 'We ate and drank in your presence, and you taught in our streets.'*

⁵ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Mt 7:23). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

My brother & sister, of course, our Lord does know every person on this planet – He knows each one by name. But what He means here is: “I never knew you in a personal, intimate, saving way! So, you are pretending!”

How scary that we may have a false assurance!

And that’s why we must examine ourselves to make sure that what we profess to believe comes genuinely from a heart surrendered to the Lord Jesus!

So, we have to make sure that we’re not just like the demons of which James talks. You see, the demons have a clear understanding of who God is – and they even shudder before Him (Js 2:19). So, if anyone’s attitude towards Christ is like that of the demons, here’s what he/she is still lacking: they lack *relying on* Christ for their eternal salvation and for daily upholding them.⁶

Perhaps someone now asks, “But, pastor, how can I know that my faith is better than that of those with false assurance – and that I’m better off than the demons who know God and yet shudder!?”

Well, that brings us to point 2...

Assurance

My brother & sister, remember what we once learned about a saving faith. It consists of three parts: content (or knowledge), assent (intellectual assent), and reliance (the acronym is C.A.R.)⁷

In other words, saving faith is a *head-and-heart faith*! The demons lacked the *heart* part of faith – and so do those who have a false assurance of salvation! They don’t really *entrust* themselves into Christ’s hands for their salvation, neither for being upheld daily.

You say, “But, Pastor, how do I know that I have such a head-heart faith?”

Well, look, the Bible makes a clear link between the *fruits* of a *saving faith* (on the one hand) and having *assurance* of salvation (on the other hand)! After all, if you notice the fruits of the Holy Spirit in your life, then you can have assurance. I mean, “You will know a tree by its fruit!”

For this reason, the Holy Spirit prompted John to write the following verses:

- 1 Jn 2:3 ***And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments.***⁸ My brother & sister, of course, there is such a thing as cold or forced obedience (or even coerced obedience). And no one who keeps God’s commandments in such a mechanical, cold and obligatory way, should think that such works are proof of his/her salvation. After all, if someone keeps God’s commandments in such obligatory way, then such person is again guilty of seeking justification by works. No, when John says, “...if we keep His commandments, then by *that* we will know that we have come to Him,” he

⁶ Does the Bible speak of people who had a false assurance of salvation?

Yes, in many places. But here’s Micah 3:11 in which God rebukes the leaders – even the *spiritual* leaders – of Israel. Says He...“***Her leaders judge for a bribe, her priests teach for a price, and her prophets tell fortunes for money. Yet they lean upon the Lord and say, “Is not the Lord among us? No disaster will come upon us.”***”

Then there were also some Pharisees who were convinced that they were children of Abraham (i.e. that they were right with God). But what did our Lord Jesus tell them? Well, that they were sons of the devil. Then Jesus adds, “***You are doing the things your own father does***” (Jn 8:41).

⁷ In Latin: *notitia*, *assensus* and *fiducia*.

⁸ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (1 Jn 2:3). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

has in mind *that keeping* of Christ's commandments which flows from our grateful hearts as the fruit of a saving faith!

- Here is 1 Jn 3:14, ***We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death***⁹ – again, faith expressed in my love actions to my brothers & sisters in Christ!
- 1 Jn 3:18-19 ***Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth. By this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our heart before him.***¹⁰
- 1 Jn 3:24, ***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.***¹¹ See how in this verse John connects our keeping of God's commandments with the Spirit whom He has given us? In other words, it is clear that John has in mind an obedience which comes as fruit of having been born from above (having been changed inside-out) by the Holy Spirit!
- Well, look what John says now (in 1 Jn 5:13): ***"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."***¹² In other words, "You might have wondered whether you really are in Christ! Yes, you might have lacked assurance of your salvation. So, that's why I have written all these verses to you!"

My brother & sister, someone might perhaps still feel to ask, "How strong is this assurance?" "Yes, what kind of assurance is it?"

Well, that brings us to the last point...

What Kind of Assurance?

When we Christians talk about the certainty of our salvation, we don't mean that it's an "educated guess."

You see, it's not as if, through Bible reading, the Christian acquired some knowledge upon which he then makes a jump into the dark – yes, a "likely bet!"

No, the author of Hebrews says for all practical purposes that, through a diligent fruit-bearing faith, the Christian will have, "***the full assurance of hope until the end***" (Heb 6:11).¹³

A few verses later (Heb 6:19) he also describes the Christian's assurance as "***a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul.***"

See the degree of assurance!?

But there's more, for you know what? The author of Hebrews reminds us that the promise of our salvation has been made by God – by God *who cannot lie*! And, in order to make it

⁹ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (1 Jn 3:14). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

¹⁰ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (1 Jn 3:18–19). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

¹¹ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (1 Jn 3:24). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

¹² [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (1 Jn 5:13). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

¹³ Heb 6:11, "***And we desire each one of you to show the same earnestness to have the full assurance of hope until the end***..." (Emphasis mine).

even more convincing/reassuring for us, God even took an oath on His promise – an oath by His *unchanging* Name! What better could the Christian have hoped for? Hear how Hebrews 6:16-18 has put this: “**Men** (i.e. human beings) **swear by someone greater than themselves, and the oath confirms what is said and puts an end to all argument.** ¹⁷ **Because God wanted to make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised, he confirmed it with an oath.** ¹⁸ **God did this so that, by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled to take hold of the hope offered to us may be greatly encouraged.**”¹⁴

See the assurance!?

My brother & sister, just like John, so also *Peter* exhorts his Christian readers to display the fruits of their faith, because, by fruit borne by a sincere faith, their assurance of salvation will be made firm (will blossom into full flower). Hear what Peter says in 2 Pt 1:5-8, 10, “**For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; ⁶ and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; ⁷ and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love.** ⁸ **For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.**¹⁵ ... **Therefore, my brothers, be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure....**”¹⁶

But look, the Holy Spirit does more than working reassuring good works in us! After all, the Holy Spirit Himself is the inward evidence inside us – as Paul explains (in Rm 8:16), the Holy Spirit also *witnesses* with our spirits that we are children of God!¹⁷

And it is this internal witnessing of the Holy Spirit which also our Ephesians passage refers to (in Eph 1:13-14), “... **Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit,** ¹⁴ **who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession—to the praise of his glory.**” ¹⁸

Dear Wainui member, do you have assurance of your salvation?

Do you know (and are you sure) that you have in your heart the Holy Spirit as first deposit (earnest) of your ultimate salvation?

How does one receive the Holy Spirit?

Well, through Bible reading!

You see, there’s no time when the Christian gets greater assurance of his salvation than when he is in the Word of God. Indeed, the Spirit does not leave us alone to read this book – His book!

¹⁴ [The Holy Bible: New International Version](#). (1984). (Heb 6:16–18). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan (Emphasis mine).

¹⁵ [The Holy Bible: New International Version](#). (1984). (2 Pe 1:5–8). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

¹⁶ [The Holy Bible: New International Version](#). (1984). (2 Pe 1:10). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

¹⁷ Rm 8:16, *The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children* (NIV84).

¹⁸ [The Holy Bible: New International Version](#). (1984). (Eph 1:13–14). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

I love how RC Sproul has put it, “The Word is infallible, and the Spirit’s testimony is infallible. That combination, that one-two punch of Word and Spirit, is what pulls us out of the morass of doubt and lack of confidence in our standing before God.”¹⁹

What blessed times – those Bible-reading times!

AMEN (2,242 words excluding footnotes)

¹⁹ Sproul (ibid:235)