

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

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Sermon manuscript

### **Sermon Series: Walking in the Light with Jesus**

(Studies in the Apostle John's first letter)

## **You Can Be Sure**

(1 John 4:20--5:13)

Study #7

### **Introduction: *The myth of the myth of certainty...***

The always quotable genius, Albert Einstein, in 1932, stated with certainty, *"There is not the slightest indication that nuclear energy will ever be obtainable."*

And the Decca Recording Company was certain about a certain British musical quartet in 1962 - *"We don't like the sound of the Beatles, and besides, guitar music is on the way out."*

It can be really embarrassing to be certain of something, and then find out that it wasn't at all certain, as an old man told me of correcting his father, *"Dad, the company is Chevrolet"* - with an emphasis on the final "t".

We can think there is certainty about something and be dead wrong. It can happen in science, entertainment, the stock market and in matters of faith.

Daniel's Taylor's book, The Myth of Certainty (1999), calls Christians to a little humility in calling our opinions God's, our perspectives, God's; our politics, God's.

I appreciate Taylor's call to a reflective Christianity. Dogmatism about things that are not backed by Scripture's *"Thus saith the Lord"* is the ultimate in hubris.

And Christians have, at times, expressed certainty about something and been certainly wrong.

But...while it is a myth that we can be certain of everything, it is also a myth that we can't be certain of anything.

Today, God's Words points us toward certainty in two essentials in our life with God. And that certainty makes all the difference.

*To review...*

In this letter, the old Apostle John has been urging us to be honest with God about our sin. We are to confess it and receive cleansing forgiveness. He wants us to walk in the light of holiness. We are to steer clear of *"antichrists"*, be careful to not love *"the world"*, and give special care to *"love one another."*

John highlighted that last one - loving one another - in the passage we looked at last Sunday. He reminded us that no one has ever seen God at any time and then pointed out that the best way for our culture *"see"* God today, is to watch a loving church. That's how powerful it is when we love one another - and that was the capstone to the main section of this letter.

Today, John is on the home stretch. He's laser-focused on those two life-with-God essentials I just mentioned. He's going to give us some certainty.

First, he speaks of love, a perfect follow-up to Valentine's Day AND to what he has just been saying.

### **Love: The Essential for Obeying God (4:20--5:5)**

#### **An Impossible Disconnect (4:20)**

*"I love God"*

**[20] *If someone says, "I love God,"***

There are several different Greek words John could have used that would have ended up being translated into English as “love.”

He could have used the word “*eros*”, a Valentine’s day word that’s all about romantic love, sexual love. He didn’t use that word here.

And, he could have used “*philos*”, a word that describes love between good friends. He didn’t use that word, either.

The word he used was “*agape*.” (pronounced “agapay”)<sup>1</sup>

This word is very common in the New Testament, but it wasn’t at all common in the secular Greek world of the first century. In fact, to this day, while the verb form is used a few times, the noun “*agape*” has only been found once in secular Greek literature.

Where it appears, the word is rather cold. There isn’t much emotion attached to “*agape*.” It didn’t have the emotion of “*philos*” or the passion of “*eros*.”

And “*agape*” was such a rare word that the New Testament authors - especially the Apostles John and Paul - decided to hijack it and infuse it with the meaning that they wanted it to have.

They used “*agape*” to describe God’s love for us and to describe the love that is to flow between us who believe in Jesus.

It speaks of an unconditional commitment to bless. God unconditionally loves and blesses us. We are to unconditionally love and bless each other. We are to unconditionally love and bless God.

Here, John imagines a believer in Jesus affirming his love for God. **[20] “If someone says, ‘I love (agape) God’...”**

That’s a great claim, but there’s a problem with this claim. This believer, who claims to love God, hates his Christian brother.

*“I hate you, brother”*

**[20] If someone says, “I love God,” and hates his brother...**

We wonder if John pictures someone who actively loathes someone else in the church? Red hot hatred? Or is there the simple absence of love?

If love is an unconditional commitment to bless and to meet needs, then John might be imagining someone who simply does not unconditionally seek to meet a certain brother’s needs as hating. For John’s purposes, non-love may very well equal hate.

Wherever on the spectrum “hate” might land, it happens that a Christian might “hate” a fellow Christian. A believer in Jesus might not seek to meet the needs of another believer in Jesus that he could meet.

In this case that John wants us to consider, for whatever reason, love doesn’t flow from Jesus-follower to Jesus-follower.

God, who is altogether lovely, deserves our love. We’re happy to love God. Our brother, who is NOT altogether lovely, has annoying habits and bad breath. He doesn’t deserve our love.

So, maybe this guy admits that he’s not doing such a great job loving this or that Christian, “*But,*” he says, “*at least I love God!*”

To which John says, “*Nonsense.*”

*Cognitive dissonance*

To claim love for God while hating a brother creates cognitive dissonance.

Cognitive dissonance occurs when we hold two contradictory beliefs or ideas at the same time. Lots of experiments have been conducted to illustrate and explore cognitive dissonance.

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<sup>1</sup> Verbal form - *Αγαπαω*.

In one of them, university students who strongly opposed cheating on tests were tempted to cheat on an important exam. Sure enough, some of the students cheated.

Those who cheated, began to judge cheating less harshly than they had previously.

They couldn't live with the cognitive dissonance of being guilty of such a thing as cheating, so they lowered the bar and said that cheating wasn't such a bad thing, after all.<sup>2</sup>

Thankfully, John comes to the rescue of the Christian he's got in mind from his cognitive dissonance.

***[20] 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.***

A little on the blunt side, but helpful. We can't truly love an invisible God if we don't truly love our very visible brother. Those two "do's" don't go together.

John points the way out of this cognitive dissonance fiasco with a grand, moral imperative.

### **The Imperative to Love (4:21--5:2)**

*The moral imperative (4:21)*

***[21] And this commandment we have from Him, that the one who loves God should<sup>3</sup> love his brother also.***

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<sup>2</sup> Aesop's fable, "*The Fox and the Grapes*" tells of a fox who tired himself out trying to reach a cluster of grapes that was just out of reach of his jaws. He finally gave up, admitting that he hadn't wanted them, anyway, since they were so sour. Cognitive dissonance.

<sup>3</sup> The form of the Greek verb here (the "mood") is subjunctive. It demands "should" or "must".

Here's a really creative way to get out of this mess. That brother you're not loving? Change your behavior. Start loving him.

This is not a command to love every brother or sister in the world, generally. No. Love that one brother or sister you know whom you don't love.

Go out of your way to be kind. Speak to her first. Affirm him for the good he's doing. Help if help is needed. Target this brother or sister in love.

After all, loving your brother is the right thing to do, theologically speaking.

*The theological imperative (5:1)*

***[5:1] Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and whoever loves the Father loves the child born of Him.***

We'll think about what he says here again, a little later. But in the first part of this verse, it's clear that a Christian is defined by faith in Jesus, not by lifestyle, good works, or obedience to God.

In the same exact way, the lover of God is defined by loving God's child (our brother and sister in Jesus), not by claims to love God.

That was the point of Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan, where the two men with the sterling reputations of godliness - the priest and the Levite - would have claimed to love God.

The hated Samaritan with the tarnished reputation helped the wounded man by the side of the road, loving where the other two had not, showing that he not only loved his "neighbor" but that he was obeying the greatest commandment to love God. (See Luke 10:25-37)

And loving isn't just theological. It's logical.

*The logical imperative. (v. 2)*

***[2] By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and observe His commandments.***

Not only God's *command* to love, but all other *commands* God has given to lead a life of purity and holiness.

No question about it. God smiles at your obedience to His commands. But when you live in obedience to God, you're also helping your brother by modeling the kind of life God wants him to lead.

I have been helped beyond measure in my own walk with God as I have watched the way others around me live.

Friends who model servanthood drive me to serve. Some who model generosity have fueled a thirst for the same within me. Others, who are committed to purity, have helped me with my own pursuit of purity. Brothers and sisters who pray prompt me to pray.

Your obedience to God's commands is an amazing gift to the family of God!

All of this ties in to the first "certainty" we can have in our life with God. Can we be certain that we are loving God? John says, "Yes."

***[3] For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments; and His commandments are not burdensome.<sup>4</sup>***

Don't evaluate your love for God<sup>5</sup> or not on the basis of emotional highs or lows. Your feelings are often unreliable indicators of our spiritual state. John doesn't leave us adrift on a sea of emotional introspection. He tells us to test our love for God by the objective measure of obedience to His commands.

I'm not talking about a legalistic, rules-oriented thing. It's an obedience from the heart. But God considers that we are loving Him when we do what He says to do.

If we are on an emotional high and think we're doing great with God, but are consumed with hatred for a brother or are walking in some darkness, we're just fooling ourselves.

If we are feeling low, we might equate that sadness with a lack of love for God. That may not be called for.

We should be in no doubt as to whether we are loving God or not. To the extent that we are doing what He says to do - and explicitly, this means LOVE - we are; to the extent that we are not, we are not.

So, if love is the essential grace to be exercised in life in Jesus (and it is), and if love for others is the essential assurance that you love God (and it is), then John's move now to address faith and assurance of eternal life makes perfect sense.

Before we can love others as we are called to love them, we have to be loved in the way we were designed to be loved. Well, we experience God's perfect love when we believe in Jesus.

### **Faith: The Essential for Eternal Life (5:4-13)**

#### **Overcoming in Jesus (vv. 4-5)**

***[4] For whatever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that has overcome the world - our faith. [5] Who is the one who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?***

*The world*

Remember. John uses the term "*the world*" to describe either:  
 (1). Planet earth;  
 (2). All people everywhere; or  
 (3). The system that revolves around the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the boastful pride of life and is opposed to God.

It is the system that is designed by our enemy to keep people from coming to Jesus. (see Luke 8:5, 12; 2 Corinthians 4:3-4)

<sup>4</sup> Jesus said, *[Matthew 11:30] "For My yoke is easy and My burden is light."*

<sup>5</sup> And that is what is at issue, our love for God. NOT His love for us.

### *Complete victory by faith*

It is faith in Jesus Christ that delivers from the realm of the world into the kingdom of God. Every time someone believes in Jesus, the world suffers a permanent defeat.

In this sense, every Christian is an overcomer, just as everyone who has ever won something is a winner.

There is another sense, often used in John's writings, in which the term "*overcomer*" is used to picture a Christian who nurtures the initial seeds of faith that were planted at conversion. These continue to "*overcome the world*" for their whole lives.<sup>6</sup>

That isn't what is in view here. What John is saying here is that if you are believer in Jesus - "*our faith*" - you are an overcomer.

That's great, basic stuff about the centrality of faith. But it's not just faith that is the thing. It's faith in Jesus.

### **Jesus, the Object of Faith (vv. 6-12)**

#### *Three witnesses to Jesus (vv. 6-10)*

***[6] This is the One who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ; not with the water only, but with the water and with the blood. It is the Spirit who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth.***

***[7] For there are three that testify: [8] the Spirit and the water and the blood; and the three are in agreement.***<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> John is not saying here that everyone who overcomes at conversion will continue to "overcome the world" throughout their life. That would be a decision he or she makes every day. But, a failure to "overcome" in the days following conversion doesn't negate the initial overcoming. Even if we don't lead the life of an overcomer, we are still delivered from the realm of the world. He still has eternal life even if he doesn't live the life of the consistent overcomer.

<sup>7</sup> Note the addition of words that are not attested to in the earliest or best Greek manuscripts, *[7]...in heaven: the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit; and these three are one. [8] And there are three that bear witness on earth.*

### Historical setting

Early Christian sources tell us of a man named Cerinthus who lived during John's life and in the same region John lived. (Asia Minor) This Cerinthus and John came down on opposite sides of the fence when it came to Jesus.

Cerinthus taught that Jesus grew up as a regular man and that the divine Christ descended on the human Jesus at the baptism. This divine Christ then left Jesus before Jesus died on the cross.

Thus, only the human Jesus died, not the divine Christ, meaning that a mere man died on the cross, to no saving effect.

The Apostle John, like the rest of the New Testament authors, taught that Jesus was born the God-man, lived a perfect life and then died a horrible death on a Roman cross before rising from the dead.

John would tell us that Jesus was the God-Man throughout His life, before the baptism and including the cross event.

### The testimony of the water and the blood

Here, the "*water*" and the "*blood*" (v. 6) refer to Jesus' baptism and to the cross. These two events - baptism and crucifixion - marked the beginning and the end of the ministry of Jesus Christ.

The baptism was His inauguration into Messianic ministry. At the baptism, when John the Baptist pulled Him back up from under the water, the Father said, *[Matthew 3:17] "This is My beloved Son in whom I am well-pleased."*

At the cross, Jesus shed His blood for us. With His dying breath, He said, "*It is finished*", concluding His messianic ministry.

### The testimony of the Spirit

The Holy Spirit's testimony at the baptism consisted of descending on Jesus as a dove when He surfaced.

So, the three witnesses are the public baptism at which the Father spoke (water), the very public crucifixion (blood), and the Spirit's appearance at the baptism.

These are divine witnesses to the truth that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God. And, John argues that since we do often accept human testimony (like in courts of law),<sup>8</sup> we should by all means accept the testimony of God to Jesus.

***[9] If we receive the testimony of men, the testimony of God is greater; for the testimony of God is this, that He has testified concerning His Son.***

John tells us what happens when we do - or do not - receive God's testimony about Jesus.

The testimony of God - receiving it, or not (vv. 9-10)

***[10] The one who believes in the Son of God has the testimony in himself; the one who does not believe God has made Him a liar, because he has not believed in the testimony that God has given concerning His Son.***

You'll notice here that John doesn't draw a line separating "saving" faith and "not-saving faith." The Bible doesn't use terms like "spurious" faith or question if we have "head-only faith" or "heart faith."

God's Word doesn't complicate things in this way.

Once we have understood the message, the issue is, *"Is it true or is it false? Do you believe it / trust it / rely on it / depend on it / have faith in it - or do you not?"*

If you do, you have eternal life.

*God's testimony about His Son: He gives eternal life (vv. 11-12)*

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<sup>8</sup> Here, John may have in mind Jewish law that required two or three witnesses to validate a legal fact or charge.

***[11] And the testimony is this, that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. [12] He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life.***

John wrote his twenty-one-chapter book about Jesus (the Gospel of John) so that people who didn't believe would come to ***"believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing, [they] would have life in His Name."*** (John 20:31)

That's the purpose of John's Gospel.

The purpose of this first letter of John is to confirm believers in their faith. It is to give us confidence in our standing before God and to encourage us to press on in our walk into the light with Jesus.<sup>9</sup>

John wants us to know with certainty that we are safe and secure, now and eternally, in our relationship with God.

**Knowing for Certain (v. 13)**

***[13] These things<sup>10</sup> I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life.***

*The importance of knowing*

Friends want their friends to know that the friendship is solid. Nobody wants to be walking around wondering if everything is OK in the friendship. Parents want their kids to be assured that they are secure in the family.

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<sup>9</sup> The repeated use of ***"us"*** throughout this letter validates this assumption.

<sup>10</sup> ***"These things"*** do not refer to the whole epistle. John is referring to what he has just said about overcoming the world (vv. 4-5), the various testimonies to Jesus (vv. 6-8), and the truth that faith in Jesus brings eternal life (vv. 9-12). The near reference is consistent with John's style elsewhere in the letter.

Having given His children eternal life, God doesn't want them to be wondering if they have it. He wants His children to rest easy in the knowledge that they have eternal life.

No, we can't have certainty in everything. But certainty in this is crucial. So, how do we arrive at this certainty?

We can be certain because of God's promise.

*The basis of knowing*

***[John 3:16] "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life."***

***[John 5:24] "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life."<sup>11</sup>***

God keeps His promises and He has promised that the one who believes in Jesus for eternal life has eternal life.

Do you believe in Jesus for eternal life? Yes? Good. You have eternal life.

Doubts may certainly arise due to false teaching that confuses the matter, bad decisions that lead you into sin, painful events that tempt you to doubt God's goodness.

I get all that.

Well, it is John's burden and it is my great delight to assure you who believe in Jesus, but now doubt, that you do, in fact, still have eternal life.

How can I say that? Does that sound bold or controversial? It is not. It is simply what God promises.

***[13] These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life.***

The antidote to doubt is to return to God's promises.

Do you remember the day when you came to faith in Jesus? You may have been with a friend or you may have been by yourself or you may have been in a large or small group.

Someone planted the seed that eternal life, forgiveness of sin, adoption into the family of God was possible because Jesus died on the cross for you and rose from the dead for you.

You believed. You believed and you received eternal life. Right then and there.

Do you remember how you rejoiced on that day and your heart was light as you realized, *"I'm saved! I have eternal life!"*

Stand on that. You're still saved. You still have eternal life because, well, the gift you received was eternal.

### **Conclusion:**

In addressing this topic, the question often is raised, *"Aren't you afraid of giving someone 'false assurance.'?"*

I understand the concern and I do share that concern. I'd hate for someone to think that they were saved, forgiven, and going to heaven if they weren't.

In other words, I'm devastated when I think of someone who doesn't believe in Jesus thinking that they have eternal life.

If I was speaking to group of people in Terminal A at the San Antonio Airport, and shouted out, *"I'm speaking to all you Spurs fans,"* some of those present would know that I was speaking to them, and

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<sup>11</sup> There are many other passages throughout the New Testament that affirm that faith alone in Jesus Christ alone saves forevermore.

some of them (those traveling from Dallas or Houston) would know that I was not speaking to them.

But if I was at the San Antonio International Airport waiting on the tarmac with a big crowd of people ready to welcome home the Spurs after what has been a tough rodeo road trip, and I said, *"I'm speaking to all you Spurs fans,"* everyone there would know that I was speaking to them, the whole crowd.

John knew his audience. He refers to them as *"us"* and *"we"* and calls them *"brethren"* and *"beloved"* throughout. He knew that the people who were first reading his letter believed in Jesus, and he wrote to them with insider language.

This morning, we're not on necessarily a homogenized group of people, waiting on the tarmac to welcome home the Spurs. Some may or may not believe in Jesus.

And to you who have not yet placed your trust in the Lord Jesus Christ for eternal life, please know that there is salvation in no one else.

Your sins have separated you from God. Forgiveness is only available in Jesus. Becoming a daughter or a son of God is only possible by way of Jesus.

If you have not yet put your faith in Jesus to receive the gift of eternal life and to begin the adventure of a walk with God, please do so today. Turn to Him and receive the gift you could never earn.

I have one more concern. I don't want anyone to make the mistake of basing assurance of salvation on lifestyle, on personal holiness, or on being good enough.

What a trap.

To think that assurance of my salvation rests on the holiness - or not - of my life is to build my house on shifting sand. Same for you.

There is never a time when any of us are free from sin. John said that back in the first chapter of this letter, and we know it's true every day of our lives.

If my life is the basis of my assurance, I'll doubt all day long.

How much sin is allowed to still allow assurance? What is the line, which, if crossed, negates assurance? How high or low should I set the bar when evaluating if my lifestyle should give me assurance that I'm God's child?

What crazy-making!

Assurance of salvation cannot depend on the holiness of my life. It can only depend on the promise of God to save forever the one who has faith in Jesus.

It would be a tragedy that you would not have assurance, when assurance is yours for the taking.

You can be assured that you love God when you keep His commandments. You can be assured that you have eternal life when you believe in Jesus.