

Assurance

Letters from John, Part 4

I John 2:3-6

How much should a bushel of corn weigh? Who defines the length of a yard or a mile? What are the standards for the amount of precious metals in coins?

These questions arose with the union of our first 13 Colonies. Someone had to regulate it all or the economy would never find traction. Someone had to determine the standard.

Both George Washington and Thomas Jefferson had argued for a uniform system of weights and measures at a time when a variety of systems were being used in early America.

Early American farmers were weren't sure if they were to use the standard, "Queen Anne's gallon", or come up with their own gallon.

They didn't know if they were to follow U.S. Bushel weight or the French Bushel or another, popular measurement called the Winchester bushel?

Custom houses needed to know how much was in a bushel.

That power to determine and protect these definitions of weights and measurements and a million related issues was ultimately granted to Congress in 1776.

Additional discoveries would need to be measured and priced too – for instance, units of electricity would need measuring and George Washington and John Adams had no idea that was coming.

John Adams argued in 1821 that America should adopt the metric system, which was then being used in France. But Congress disagreed; and I'm really glad about that because I've never been able to figure it out. They chose to adopt and refine an English system of measurement.

In 1836, the responsibility for determining weights and measures was given by Congress to the Treasury, and originally called, The Office of Standard Weights and Measures.

That responsibility and authority has now changed hands and names over the years – in fact, in 1988, the name was again changed to the National Institute of Standards and Technology.

A century ago, it had a staff of 12, along with no more than 5 visiting scientists and industrialists to keep watch.

Today, it has a staff of 4,600 scientists, engineers, technicians, researchers, specialists and administrative staff along with an annual budget of around 1 billion dollars.

The reason is simple – with every invention and with every consumer product – with nearly everything we touch and drive and eat and cook with and buy; standards must be maintained and measurements must be consistent.

This office not only determines honest weights and measures; it tests materials and supplies; it researches in the fields of engineering, chemistry, physics, construction quality, electronics, computer science, information systems, fabrication systems – and on and on.

One article I found in my research said that 50% of America's gross national product in some way answers to this National Institute of Standards and Technology.ⁱ

And it all started – in the early colonies – with:

- how much is in a bushel?
- how heavy is a pound?

It wasn't long in the early church, before questions began arising – what makes a genuine Christian – who defines the nature and the ingredients of the gospel – what is true spirituality?

The founding fathers of the church – the Apostles – put down on paper, under the inspiring influence of the Holy Spirit the standards and measurements of Christianity.

John, the last living Apostle, is about to deliver the answer to a question that has persisted throughout the church age – how do you determine who is a real Christian?

Which also answers the question, "How can Christians have assurance that they are meeting the divine standard – the biblical weights and measurements, so to speak, of a true Christian."

Throughout John's first letter he clearly wants the Christian to know . . . to have assurance.

And he needed to, right, because we surely can't leave it up to each other.

There are all kinds of man-made standards and measurement out there:

- you can't be sure you're a Christian unless you meet someone's external standards – whatever they may be;
- you can't be sure you're a real Christian unless you join their church or movement;
- you can't be sure you're a Christian unless you've experienced what they are experiencing;
- you can't have assurance unless you've done the things they've done . . . or don't do the things they don't do . . . don't hang around people who do the things you don't do . . . and on and on and on.

Someone sent this poem to me some time ago – with humor it illustrates this very problem:

*I dreamed death came the other night,
And Heaven's gate swung wide
An angel with a halo bright,
Ushered me inside
And there to my astonishment,
Stood folks I'd judged and labeled
As quite unfit, of little worth,
And spiritually disabled
Indignant words rose to my lips,
But never were set free,
For every face showed stunned surprise,
No one expected me!*

The Apostle John happened to be big on assurance – in fact, several times he'll effectively write, "This is how you know you're a Christian."

Here is the divine standard.

In chapter 2 of First John – if you'll turn there – he delivers at least 3 principles that support the believer's assurance of salvation.

Here's how you can know that you belong to God through Jesus Christ.

1. The first principle that supports our assurance is the principle of obeying

He begins in *chapter 2 at verse 3. By this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments.*

You're probably thinking, "In that case, I'm toast . . . I'm never going to get into the family."

First of all, John's letter is actually intended to encourage the Christian, not terrify the Christian.

I've read commentators on this Epistle who are convinced that John is trying to terrify people for ever daring to think they were genuine Christians to begin with.

That's not the heart and spirit of a letter delivered to *my little children (2:1)* – John's dear children in the faith.

Let's take a closer look at *chapter 2 and verse 3. By this we know that we have come to know Him.*

These are the first of 25 occurrences of the verb "to know" in this letter.

And John chooses the verb *ginosko* (γινωσκω) here which refers to knowledge through personal experience.ⁱⁱ

Another Greek verb from *oida* (οἶδα) means to have knowledge through information.ⁱⁱⁱ

So the Greeks would use different verbs to talk about knowing: knowledge gained through personal experience and knowledge gained through personal instruction.

And there is a difference.

For instance, you tell your little boy not to bite his little sister – why? Because it hurts. And so what does he do? He bites her anyway.

You see, you're trying to give him information and what he really needs is an experience.

I remember one of our sons – for some reason liked to bite. He just didn't get it. The instruction wasn't sinking in that it hurt.

So one day he bit his little sister on the hand. She's screaming bloody murder – we can see the teeth marks in her hand. So I took his hand and bit him back. And the look on his face told me, he got it.

He gained knowledge through personal experience.

He never bit her again.

I'm not recommending parenting principles here – I'm just illustrating the meaning of a Greek verb.

Reminds me of reading about a little boy who began to yell and cry . . . his mother rushed back to the room where his little sister had a fistful of his hair, pulling his head. She unwrapped the toddler's fingers, hugged her son and explained . . . "Honey, she doesn't know it hurts." She left the room and seconds later, the little girl started screaming . . . she ran back as he was walking out – he looked up at her and said, "Now she knows."

The Apostle Paul used this verb when he wrote, "*That I may know Him.*" (*Philippians 3:10*) *Ginosko* – that I may interact on a personal level through experience, the passion of Christ and the

power of Christ and even the persecution of Christ and the perseverance of Christ.

I don't just want to have more information *about* Him; I want to have personal interaction and communion *with* Him.

One Greek Scholar wrote that this verb not only implies a personal relationship between the knower and the known; but that the one knowing is influenced by the object which is known.^{iv}

What John is writing here is simply, "This is how you know that you are personally interacting with and communing with and under the influence of Christ – now notice, verse 3, ***if we keep His commandments.***"

The word commandment refers to injunctions or orders – this is not the word *nomos* (νομος) as a reference to the Mosaic Law.^v

He's specifically thinking of the commandments of Christ for the New Testament believer.

This is the great commission of Christ to His apostles – to make disciples, teaching them to observe all that I've commanded you.

The New Testament letters are filled with the injunctions of Christ.

And the believer is to keep them, John writes here.

The word translated "keep" has the idea of observant, watchful obedience.^{vi}

While the Christian will not perfectly or at times even consistently obey the Lord – which is why John began his letter by giving us the means and methods of confession – the believer wants to obey.

The believer is grieved by his disobedience.

The idea here of ***"keeping his commandments"*** has to do with determination and desire.

The believer wants to match his walk to his talk.

I like the way one author summed it up when he commented on this verse; he writes, "The believer cannot keep Christ's commandments perfectly, but he can keep them purposefully. The believer can rise each day with longing in our heart to do what God would desire."^{vii}

And I think it's fascinating here that John ties assurance of salvation, not to our emotions, but to our actions.

Emotions ebb and flow . . . while you might wish your assurance wasn't tied to actions – it's far better than tying it to emotion.

How you feel can change on a whim, but the direction and determination of your life as a believer is settled.

John isn't asking us if we feel like we know Christ, he's asking us if we live like we know Christ.

That standard of measurement is objective . . . observable . . . practical . . . visual.

In fact, notice the contrast he makes in the following *verse*; ***4. 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;***

In other words, the standard of our assurance is not tied to our lips, but to our lives; it isn't our language, but to our lifestyle.^{viii}

Notice again – ***The one who says*** – they say with their lips that they personally interact with and are under the influence of the person of Jesus Christ – BUT – they do not keep his commandments – in other words, they have no desire or determination to obey Christ with their lives . . .

That person, John writes, ***is a liar.***

You need to know that John isn't writing about someone who has been tricked by someone else or confused by the facts of the gospel. ***The liar***, he's referring to here is someone who lies as a pattern of life.

In other words, they say they know Christ – they are personally interacting with Christ, but the pattern of their lives has nothing to do with Christ.

They are lying doctrinally – like the Gnostics that John is confronting in this letter, they promote the heresy that those who live perpetually and unrepentantly in sin can claim to [be interacting at the same time with] the Savior; furthermore, they are lying practically; they talk like they know the truth but their lives show that they are [willing] strangers to the truth.^{ix}

They fit the description of the person in this caricature, written by someone to describe the false believer who talks every so often about God, but doesn't want anything to do with Him – he writes, "I would like to buy \$3 dollars' worth of God. Not enough to change my soul or disturb my sleep but just enough to equal a cup of warm milk and a nap in the sunshine. I don't want enough of Him to make me love someone I don't like or help someone I don't know; I want happiness, not transformation; I want the warmth of the womb, not a new birth. I want a pound of the Eternal in a carry out bag. I would like only \$3 dollars' worth of God."^x

That person's assurance doesn't meet the divine standard of measurement. It isn't built upon the principle of obeying.

So the first principle that supports our assurance of salvation is the principle of obeying.

2. The second principle that supports our assurance is the principle of treasuring

Notice verse 5: Whoever keeps His word, in him the love of God has truly been perfected.

The word translated *perfected* means “accomplished”. In other words, John is encouraging us that when we keep His word, the love of God is accomplishing its purpose in our lives.^{xi}

One author put it this way; the more we treasure the word of God, the more we open the door for his love to accomplish his purpose in our lives.^{xii}

I love this verb – to keep – His word. It opens up the meaning of what John is intending to convey here.

The word was used in John’s day of a sentry, on duty, walking his post.^{xiii}

It was used for guarding carefully as if a person were guarding a treasure.^{xiv}

So how do we guard our treasures?

Just this past Sunday, during the Chapel hour on Sunday evening, while I was preaching on the subject of the leper who returned to say thanks, a couple of burglars broke into our home. I was the first person home, before my girls got home, and I immediately noticed muddy footprints on the living room carpet.

My return home may very well have sent them scampering. But they had just enough time to steal all of my wife’s jewelry – every last bit of it. Most of it was inexpensive, but all of it meaningful, including some special pieces from her mother and father – every bit of it was taken.

The irony of it was that this past Christmas, I had finally gotten her a nice jewelry armoire that stood on the floor. I guess I just made it really convenient for them, didn’t I? Here it is.

Marsha has responded so submissively to the will of Christ . . . I’m really proud of her . . . I told her I can’t imagine coming home and discovering all the books I’ve collected stolen. I can’t imagine that . . . I could only hope they’d read them, get saved and give them back.

We’re locking doors and turning on alarms and being careful like never before . . . we’ve traded in our little dog, Pixie for two genetically altered German Shepherds . . . we’ve even bought two killer cats.

Okay, I made that part up.

Ironically, our son had his home broken into 2 days ago and a number of things were stolen.

It’s just so strange to have someone break into your home and steal your personal belongings.

I don’t know, maybe John the Apostle had experienced a break-in. The word he used – in fact, twice already in this paragraph, is a word that challenges the believer to carefully treasure the word and guard it as his most prized possession.

So, assurance of salvation is directly connected to our view of Christ’s word – frankly put, is it one of your prized possessions. Do you treasure God’s word?

Or does it stay under the front seat of the car or on the coffee table or in the closet . . . or somewhere in the house, I really don’t know where it is . . .

Can you imagine your wife saying, “Honey, I really don’t know where I put all my jewelry, would you check under the front seat of the car – look out in the garage . . . maybe it’s in the closet somewhere.”

John the Apostle writes, in *verse 5* – at the end – this is how we know . . . *this is how we know that we are in Him* . . . how? By how we *treasure His word*.

Did you notice that key phrase – *this is how we know we are in Him*.

One of John’s favorite expressions – *in Him*.

This doesn’t mean that you’ve been absorbed into Deity, as pantheism teaches; this refers to a spiritual relationship and unity in life that we have with Christ.^{xv}

We are *in Him* – that is, He not only indwells us spiritually, He is the sphere that envelopes our lives.

We are in Christ.

Think of it this way. You live in North Carolina. That doesn’t mean you are North Carolina – that you’ve become some strange appendage to the state – it means you live within the sphere of North Carolina’s borders.

And you actually have a new identity – you are a North Carolinian. You used to be a Floridian – and Texan – a New Yorker – but now you have the privilege of paying your taxes to North Carolina; because you are now a North Carolinian.

Over time you begin to love the culture and beauty of North Carolina. You love the mountains to the west and the ocean to the east.

You begin to feel at home here . . . you get accustomed to the weather and you learn how to adapt to all the allergies. You actually enjoy the

variety of 31 degrees one day and 73 degrees the next day. You enjoy living in the state of confusion.

You finally break down and begin drinking sweet tea . . . you go out to eat at Cracker Barrel and order grits and cornbread.

Then, when you are fully converted, you begin to cheer for the right teams. You cheer for NC State; and if they get eliminated from the tournament, you cheer for UNC – and if they get eliminated you, um, cheer for Duke?!

Because they're from North Carolina too . . . although they really shouldn't be.

I'd better get back to my analogy . . . we are *in* Christ.

What does it mean to be "*in Him*"?

It means:

- We have a new sphere of residency.
- We have new obligations and responsibilities
- We learn to adapt to a brand new culture and way of living
- We love to cheer for everyone related to Him, and we understand they're related to us too.
- It means our appetites change over time
- It means we have a new name – Christian – because we live within the borders of His ownership and His will.

And we have found His word to be our greatest treasure.

Our assurance is based on the principle of obeying . . . upon the principle of treasuring

3. Our assurance is based upon the principle of imitating.

Verse 6, the one who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked.

This is the classic text from which we get our proverbial phrase – make sure your walk measures up to your talk.

The one who says . . . better walk the way He walked.

In other words:

- if that's what he's saying, that's what he ought to be doing.
- if he's talking that way, he ought to be walking that way.

The one who says he abides in Him – John loves the verb, *to abide* – he'll use it 24 times in his letter.

Abiding in Him means to have an ongoing relationship with Christ.^{xvi}

And if you really do have an ongoing relationship with Christ you're going to walk like He walked.

This is the principle of imitation.

It doesn't mean you're going to walk on water like He did, at least not yet, or walk through closed doors like He did, at least not yet.

It means your walk – as in your lifestyle – will be consistent with your claim to know Jesus Christ in a personal ongoing relationship.

It means your walk would resemble His walk – how? You're walking in the same direction; you're making the same decisions; you're walking with the same sense of determination; you're walking toward the same destiny.

You can't walk with someone unless you're heading in the same direction. And you have the same destination.

But here John implies an even greater truth about the Christians' walk.

We not only walk with Him, but we walk like Him.

This is a reference to the imitation of His character and His spirit and His wisdom and His patience and His joy and His love and His perseverance and His obedience to the will of His Father.

This is not hypocrisy, this is imitation.

We're not pretending to be him – we're wanting to be *like* Him.

And that shows up in the way we walk.

And that principle of imitation gives credibility to assurance.

Do you want to build your assurance of salvation?

John writes, here's how you can know that you know: imitating . . . treasuring . . . obeying.

Warren Wiersbe is in his 90's I was told recently – unable to hear – but still somewhat active. In his autobiography Warren Wiersbe writes about his first church building project as a young past in Indiana. He and the church's building committee were working with an architect and at one of their meetings Wiersbe says he learned this principle of theology. In the meeting he asked the architect, "Why do we need to have such a high ceiling in the auditorium? Why not save money by building an auditorium with a low ceiling and just build a tall façade in the front of the church building? The architect said in a quiet voice, "Pastor Wiersbe, the building you construct reflects what you believe a

church is and what a church does. You don't use facades on churches to fool people. That's for carnivals. The outside and the inside must agree.^{xvii}

Our assurance is measured by the standard of these divine principles.

While our salvation is secure by grace through faith in Christ alone – our assurance rises and falls in

direct proportion to how closely the outside of our lives agrees with the inside of our heart.

And we can measure that daily – as we obey the will of Christ; as we treasure the word of Christ and as we imitate the walk of Christ.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 2/3/2013 by Stephen Davey.

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i Adapted from: Gale Encyclopedia of US History, "*National Bureau of Standards*"

ii D. Edmond Hiebert, *The Epistles of John* (BJU Press, 1991), p. 78

iii Ibid

iv Fritz Rienecker and Cleon Rogers, *Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament* (Regency, 1976), p. 557

v John MacArthur, *1–3 John* (Moody Publishers, 2007), p. 57

vi Ibid

vii Joel Beeke, *The Epistles of John* (Evangelical Press, 2006), p. 63

viii Roy L. Laurin, *First John: Life at its Best* (Kregel, 1987), p. 57

ix Beeke, p. 64

x Adapted from www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/1997/December/976.html

xi Beeke, p. 64

xii Sam Gordon, *Living in the Light: 1, 2, 3 John* (Ambassador, 2001), p.

xiii Herschel H. Hobbs, *The Epistles of John* (Thomas Nelson, 1983), p. 42

xiv Gordon, p. 61

xv Hiebert, p. 83

xvi Hiebert, p. 83

xvii Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Myself* (Victor Books, 1994), p. 104