

Assurance

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[0 : 00] I have to say J.C. Ryle was a wise man. And I say that because he was wise enough to include in his book a chapter on the subject of assurance, which can be very needful after five chapters on sanctification, holiness, fighting the good fight, counting the cost, and growing in holiness.

It's needful because it would be very easy for us to walk away with what we've heard with a sense of doubt and perhaps uncertainty.

As we examine our personal holiness and growth, we may begin to question whether or not we're even saved. The implication thus far has been that we, as believers in Christ, will care about holiness.

We will pursue holiness. We will grow in holiness. Last week, we talked about examining ourselves. And when we do, we may very well experience feelings of doubt and uncertainty.

After all, we are sinners attempting to measure our holiness against the standard of holiness, who is Jesus Christ.

[1 : 15] And most of us are thinking, me, holy? Not by comparison, I'm not. A few years ago, I preached through the book of 1 John.

And ironically enough, I was talking with one woman during that sermon series. And she confessed to me that 1 John was actually making her feel less confident about her salvation.

And I call that ironic because John's explicit purpose for writing that letter is to give those who believe in the name of the Son of God or to those who believe in the name of Son of God may know that they have eternal life.

So he's writing to boost the confidence of believers, of disciples of Christ. He's writing to give them certainty about their salvation. But his words were having the opposite effect on this one woman in the church, at least initially.

See, John offers three basic tests for knowing you can have, for knowing you have eternal life. First, do you love the Lord Jesus Christ? Second, do you love his word and his commandments?

[2 : 27] And third, do you love his church? And while those tests are all simple enough, John was originally writing to a broken, confused group of people, to put it lightly.

They had watched others whom they believed to be their brethren in Christ abandon the faith, completely walk away from it. These people had turned their backs on Christ.

They had turned their backs on his word. They had turned their backs on the church. And I suspect many who remained were left wondering, am I next?

Am I a true Christian myself? How can I know? And that's why John writes his letter, to give them assurance. The problem is, like the woman in my former church, we may answer yes to all of John's questions, to all of his tests.

But we may also wonder, do I really love Christ? Do I really love his word? Do I really love his church? And if so, do I love them enough?

[3 : 35] You see, the doctrine of assurance can be challenging for us, particularly for those of us who truly grasp the first chapter of Ryle's book on the subject of sin.

When we grasp sin, we may struggle with assurance a little bit. Perhaps it's a bit paradoxical, but as children of God grow in grace, they become increasingly aware of their sinfulness.

And as we become increasingly aware of our sinfulness, we may find it harder and harder to believe that we could ever belong to the family of God.

In other words, we may lack assurance of our salvation. Now, the subject of assurance, again, can be very, very challenging.

and this is more to the point, each one of them expressed absolute confidence that he himself was the sure benefactor of those promises.

I know I shall see God, Job said. We know that we have passed out of death into life, John says. Now, when the Apostle Paul reached the end of his life, he wrote a final letter to Timothy, 2 Timothy.

[12:07] Here is what he says near the end of that letter. For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race. I have kept the faith.

Henceforth, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day. And not only to me, but also to all who have loved his appearing. Do you detect even the faintest hint of doubt in those words? There's none there. As Paul knows his death is imminent, he states candidly and boldly that there is laid up for him the crown of righteousness, which the Lord will award him.

Now, you know what? The Catholic Church would accuse Paul of heresy for being so presumptuous. And that's not a stretch. He would be a heretic for saying such a thing. But Paul is certain. He will meet the Lord soon, and the Lord will count him as righteous and reward him accordingly.

He has absolutely no doubts about it. And he doesn't hesitate to say it out loud. When I was growing up, I heard a lot of preachers stand in the pulpit and say things like, If God counts me as one of his own.

[13:36] If I prove to be one of God's elect. If God has shed his blood for me. And these comments, they may appear humble, and I think that was the point. But they're not biblical.

While we may face doubts at times about our salvation, doubting and uncertainty should not be treated or taught as the standard for all Christians.

That this is the way it's supposed to be. You're supposed to doubt. You're supposed to feel uncertain. Scripture gives us a much different expectation. Paul doesn't say, If there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness.

No, he says, There is laid up for me the crown of righteousness. And in case anyone thinks only an apostle like Paul could have that level of confidence, he goes on to say, Which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me, but to all who have loved his appearing.

Paul believes every last person who loves Christ and longs for his appearing will receive a crown of righteousness. In other words, they have every reason to share in his assurance, his certainty, his lack of doubts.

[14:55] As it happens, assurance is not only attainable for us, but it's also to be expected. Keep that in mind as we consider the remaining points. So point number two.

Holiness leads to assurance. Let's back up in the text I've just read. Again, we're in 2 Timothy 4. Paul expresses his confidence in this passage. He takes a moment to briefly look back over his life, and he says, I have fought the good fight.

I have finished the race. I have kept the faith. Henceforth, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness. Henceforth, hereafter, at last, so then, in turn, Paul links his past with his future. There is a clear connection here between the two, and, you know, in the past, he has fought hard. He has persevered. He has kept the faith. Henceforth, he has absolute confidence about what comes next.

[16:03] No doubts at all. Paul's years of faith, that is, his years of trusting God, not to mention the obedience and the sanctification and the spiritual growth that came with trusting God, leads him to have undeniable assurance, even in the face of death.

Consider the alternative. Consider those people in Scripture who lacked faith, who failed to pursue holiness, who succumbed to sinful temptations and made that their pattern of life.

Solomon is the first to come to my mind. Despite a life full of God-given wisdom and blessings, he made a tremendous mess of things.

He broke his covenant with God. He disobeyed God's commandments. He let himself get entangled with hundreds of pagan women and yielded to all of their idolatrous influence.

And where do we find him at the end of his life? Suffice it to say, he doesn't leave the pages of Scripture with Paul's clean conscience.

[17 : 15] He doesn't leave the pages of Scripture with this confident expectation that Paul expressed for the glory to come. If you've ever studied the book of Ecclesiastes, which I believe Solomon wrote or at least spoke near the end of his life, you know he became a man with a lot of profound regrets.

Ecclesiastes is a fascinating book to me. You can almost hear the desperate tone in Solomon's voice throughout the book as you read it as he's pleading with younger people to not make the mistakes he made.

And even though he acknowledges the truth of God and eternity, this is what he's trying to convey to younger people, he never once stakes a personal claim on God's promise of heaven.

Yes, there is a heaven and those who have faith in God will reach it, according to Solomon, according to Ecclesiastes, but not once in that book does he ever hint that he'll be one of them.

Not once. He didn't fight the good fight. He didn't finish the race. He didn't keep the faith.

Henceforth, it would seem he lacked assurance.

[18 : 37] He clearly knew the reality of the situation for God's people, but it's very hard to read his message as one spoken from personal confidence. It just doesn't sound that way at all.

As true and as right as his words are, they seem to pour out of a broken man who has been crushed by many, many regrets.

Just listen to the way he concludes his message. In Ecclesiastes 12, he says, remember your creator in the days of your youth before the evil days come and the years draw near of which you will say, I have no pleasure in them.

This is a man speaking from experience, I think. And the dust returns to the earth as it was and the spirit returns to God who gave it. Vanity of vanities.

All is vanity. And that's the last we hear from Solomon. Solomon, or Paul, on one hand, he was a man who fought for holiness despite knowing it would cost him his life.

[19 : 44] But even as he awaited his execution, he knew his Lord was prepared to give him the crown of righteousness to reward him accordingly. Solomon, on the other hand, he gave up the fight.

He surrendered to sin, unwilling to pay the cost of holiness, if you will. And he goes to the grave, evidently, as far as we know, defeated and ashamed.

His final recorded words are not expressions of confident expectation. Instead, his final words are vanity of vanities. All is vanity.

Now, beyond these examples, the Bible explicitly teaches a correlation between practical holiness and assurance of salvation. Consider this verse in Romans 8, For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.

To say we are led by the Spirit is to say we are walking in holiness because that is the only way the Spirit is ever going to lead us, to walk in holiness. And if we are walking in holiness, we can be confident, according to Paul, that we are sons or children of God.

[21 : 00] Now, I've already cited several verses and there are many more like them, but in short, assurance demands holiness to thrive. It demands fruitfulness. If we want to reach that place where we feel secure and at peace and free from fear, if we want to reach that place where our hope in the glory to come feels certain and solid and substantial, we must be pursuing holiness, striving to be conformed to the image of Christ, growing in grace as we go.

The more we grow, the more likely we are to experience assurance. Now, having said that, let's go to point number three. Believers may not experience assurance.

assurance. As I said, assurance can be a challenging subject. According to Hebrews, we should strive for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.

Jesus said, every branch in me that does not bear fruit, he takes away. It gets thrown into the fire. So the clear implication is that if we are not growing in holiness, holiness, then we must not be one of his.

We must not be saved. And I don't think that any honest student of the Bible can deny this fact.

Even so, assurance, much like faith, can be weak or can be strong.

[22 : 30] J.C. Ryle puts it this way, It is not a question of saved or not saved that lies before us regarding assurance, but of privilege or no privilege.

It is not a question of peace or no peace, but of great peace or little peace. What is the relationship between faith and holiness?

Well, no one strives for holiness without faith. We do not follow someone or obey his commandments unless we trust him, right? Only after we trust in God are we going to follow him and by following him we are pursuing holiness.

Furthermore, assurance tends to increase as we've talked about as we increase or grow in holiness. So in other words, if our faith is weak, our holiness will lack and our assurance will suffer. Now, do I need to prove to anyone that genuine faith can be weak at times? I think we know this from experience, right? But I'll give you at least one example from Matthew 14.

[23 : 41] Peter provides a great illustration of one who has faith in Christ and there can be no doubt about it, but it was a faith that was lacking at times. When the disciples, if you remember, were out in a boat, Jesus came walking to them on water.

And we're told Jesus spoke to them saying, Take heart, it is I, do not be afraid. And Peter answered, Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.

He said, Come. So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus. Now, if the story ended right there, all we would talk about is Peter's extraordinary faith.

I mean, look at him. His faith was so strong that he was willing to step out of the boat onto water and then he walked right across the surface of that water. The story, as we know, doesn't end there. But when Peter saw the wind, he was afraid and beginning to sink, he cried out, Lord, save me. And Jesus immediately reached out his hand and took hold of him, saying to him, Oh, you of little faith, why did you doubt?

[24 : 52] Did Peter have faith in Christ? Absolutely. First, he proved it by getting out of the boat. How many of us would have done that?

Second, he immediately turned to Christ when he knew he was in trouble. That's a good sign. Yet, he doubted. He was, as Jesus said, of little faith.

Our faith can sometimes be weak and when our faith is weak, our joy can be weak. Our peace can be weak. Our hope can be weak.

And our assurance can be weak. This point is important because doubts about our salvation do not necessarily mean we do not belong to Christ.

Let me read to you a passage from 2 Peter chapter 1 and I'll read this at length. 2 Peter chapter 1 verses 3 through 11.

[26 : 00] God's divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire.

For this very reason make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue and virtue with knowledge and knowledge with self-control and self-control with steadfastness and steadfastness with godliness and godliness with brotherly affection and brotherly affection with love.

For if these qualities are yours and are increasing they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For whoever lacks these qualities is so nearsighted that he is blind having forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins.

Therefore brothers be all the more diligent to confirm your calling and election for if you practice these qualities you will never fall for in this way there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Now from this we learn two crucial truths. First even believers evidently can become nearsighted or practically blind having forgotten that we were cleansed from our former sins.

[27 : 41] we are still cleansed but we may not always act like it. We may not always think like it. We may not always feel like it. Second the solution according to Peter is to press on to continue on.

We make every effort to supplement or add to our faith. We continue to strive for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. We become all the more diligent he says to confirm our calling and election.

to confirm our calling and election. The Catholic Church doesn't permit assurance. Others will gladly give assurance to people who are not diligent to confirm their calling and election and by now you probably see that the truth lies somewhere in between somewhere in the middle.

Assurance is not this black and white issue where if you're a believer you will feel assurance and that's just it. If you're not you won't. But the Bible is clear about a few things.

Again number one assurance is attainable. Number two holiness leads to assurance and number three not every believer may have assurance though they are saved.

[28 : 56] Now before we move to the fourth and final point I'll read one more passage that captures this idea of weak believers who lack in holiness still being saved in the end Paul writes to the Corinthians no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid which is Jesus Christ.

Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold silver precious stones wood hay straw each one's work will become manifest for the day or the day of Christ will disclose it because it will be revealed by fire and the fire will test what sort of work each has done.

If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned up he will suffer loss though he himself will be saved.

So you have to imagine that we're all building a structure throughout our lives. Some are building with precious materials solid materials and some are not. Some are building with straw.

You've read the story of the three little pigs right? You know how that works out? The day of Christ is going to disclose what we actually built with throughout our lives and some of it's going to be proved to be relatively worthless others it's going to prove to be much greater but regardless even those who built with straw if they are in Christ they will be saved because the foundation of Christ is still there.

[30 : 34] So some of us are building with strong materials some with weak materials yet everyone in view here that is believers in Christ are building and they are saved.

Everyone is building everyone is growing in holiness and everyone is saved in the family of God though some will inevitably lack assurance because they lack degrees of holiness.

You know how can you be confident about the structure you are building when you are trying to stick straw to straw? Why do people lack holiness?

Why do we in the church lack holiness I should say? Perhaps we lack faith. Perhaps our faith is weak. Which leads us to our last point number four assurance is not based on us.

it's not based on us. Allow me to quote Ryle at length on this point. He writes it cannot be wrong to feel confidently in a matter where God speaks unconditionally to believe decidedly what God promises decidedly to have a sure persuasion of pardon and peace when we rest on the word and oath of him that never changes.

[31 : 53] It is an utter mistake to suppose that the believer who feels assurance is resting on anything he sees in himself. He simply leans on the mediator of the new covenant and the scripture of truth.

He believes the Lord Jesus means what he says and takes him at his word. Assurance after all is no more than a full grown faith a masculine faith that grasps Christ's promises with both hands a faith that argues like the good centurion if the Lord speak the word only I am healed.

Wherefore then should I doubt? Do you see the point Ryle is making here? Let me quote another author and I apologize because I can't remember who wrote this but he said God decreed from eternity past that you would be like Christ.

He put his Holy Spirit in you to make sure that it would happen. Christ prayed for you to be sanctified and his prayers are always answered. He even promises you that he will lovingly discipline you in order to return you to holiness whenever you stray.

How could we ever doubt that God means what he says without holiness no one will see the Lord. God calls us to be holy, right?

[33 : 14] In Leviticus 11 for I am the Lord your God consecrate yourselves therefore and be holy for I am holy. Now this call to be holy may lead us to think that what is required of us is to pick ourselves up by the bootstraps and get to work to become a holy people and while there is I guess some truth to that let's not forget what Paul writes to the Galatians.

He says did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish having begun by the Spirit are you now being perfected by the flesh?

We were saved by faith. we were saved by faith. We were justified by faith. In other words we were not saved we were not justified because we worked hard and we kept God's commandments.

We were not saved and justified because we were righteous enough. And furthermore and this is Paul's point to the Galatian churches our holiness does not grow and our assurance does not increase as a result of relying on ourselves and our good deeds and our works and our righteousness.

No, we grow in holiness and subsequently feel greater assurance of salvation because we rely on God and his promises. We trust in his word.

[34 : 50] The Christian life begins with humble hearts and empty hands doesn't it? That's how we come to Christ. I cannot save myself Lord but I trust you can.

We come to Christ because we realize we cannot possibly save ourselves and as we grow in holiness from that day forward our assurance cannot suddenly be based on us.

We continue to wholly rely on Christ who saves as well as purifies we trust in him and in his promises which both motivates us to continue growing in holiness and provides us with the only substantial assurance we can possibly have.

We don't trust in ourselves. That doesn't bring us assurance. That will give us the exact opposite. The exact opposite. Again, Ryle says it is an utter mistake to suppose that the believer who feels assurance is resting on anything he sees in himself.

He simply leans on the mediator of the new covenant and the scripture of truth. He believes the Lord Jesus means what he says and takes him at his word. Assurance after all is no more than a full grown faith.

[36 : 12] No matter which materials we use to build onto the foundation or how strong or shaky the structure may seem at any given moment, we must remember that no man can lay a foundation other than that which has been laid and that is Jesus Christ.

The foundation that holds everything up is absolutely secure and it is that foundation that provides us with assurance not what we attempt to build on top of it.

Is assurance of salvation attainable? Yes, absolutely. If we trust in Christ and in his promises we can have confidence in what he guarantees to his people.

Does increased holiness lead to increased assurance? Yes, everyone who thus hopes in Christ purifies himself as he is pure. Another way to say it, the closer we follow our Lord the more confident we will be in his promises.

can believers lack assurance? I'm afraid so because sometimes our faith is weak. We don't trust those promises as we should.

[37 : 30] Do we then depend on ourselves for assurance? No. We strive to keep our hearts and our minds fixed on Christ, our only sure foundation in hope and just as we rely on him for salvation, we rely on him for joy, for strength, for peace, for comfort, for assurance.

And once again, as we bring this study to a close, I'm going to leave you with a passage from Philippians 3. I believe I read this last week, but I want to read a little bit more of it.

Listen to what Paul says here. not that I have already obtained the resurrection from the dead or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own because Christ Jesus has made me his own.

Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own, but one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Let those of us who are mature think this way and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you. Only let us hold true to what we have attained.

[38 : 51] Brothers, join in imitating me and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us. for many of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears walk as enemies of the cross of Christ.

Their end is destruction, their God is their belly and their glory is their shame with minds set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body by the power that enables him to subject all things to himself.

Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for my joy in crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved. We are dismissed.