
Climbing 101 for Christians



Message by Pastor Tom, Interim Lead Pastor
Sunday Sermon for June 3, 2012
Scripture Passage 1 John 3:11-24
Vancouver Chinese Baptist Church Vancouver, Canada



In a previous church, there was a young man loved to go rock climbing, told me how he would hang on to almost sheer cliff faces. Then he asked me if I would like to come with him one Saturday. I looked at him and said nothing.

He went on. He assured me I would be perfectly safe. He showed me a piton. He had a whole collection all different sizes. It is a metal wedge that you hammered into a crack in the rock face. Then you could weave a rope into it and hang on.

I politely declined. What I was really thinking was, are you nuts!

But what a piton did kind of intrigued me. Perhaps they teach us a life lesson. Many people today are living their lives on quicksand, unable to find any place to stand with certainty. Assurance and confidence are truths that are like pitons that God has hammered into the rock face of life, giving us places to tie the rope and hang on.

That is why in 105 verses of this small letter called 1st John, in some form or another the word for “knowing” or “we know” occurs about 40 times.

John passionately wants his readers then and now to know that there are points of certainty in an age of uncertainty. In times when nothing seems secure and everything is up for grabs.

This week’s study drives this home even more, reinforcing the truth that God as it were has driven pitons into the sheer rock face of humanity, where without some help there are no toeholds and you will slip and fall all the way down into the abyss, and you can tie yourself onto these pitons and they will hold you. You will not fall. You will not slip. You will not slide.

11 This is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another.

12 Do not be like Cain, who belonged to the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own actions were evil and his brother's were righteous.

13 Do not be surprised, my brothers, if the world hates you.

14. We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers. Anyone who does not love remains in death.

15 Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life in him.

16 This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.

17 If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?

18 Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.

19 This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence

20 whenever our hearts condemn us. For God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.

21 Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God

22 and receive from him anything we ask, because we obey his commands and do what pleases him.

23. And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us.

24 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.

The key phrase we know...I have described them as pitons that God hammers into the rock face of life is found in the phrase "we know..." It occurs some 5 times in these verses. It is echoing the things that we can hold on to with assurance and conviction.

They fall into 3 main groups based on time sequence.

1. There is assurance or conviction we have today based on what lies in the past.
2. There is assurance or conviction of how we can live in the present.
3. there is assurance we can have for the future.

WE CAN LIVE WITH ASSURANCE TODAY BECAUSE OF WHAT GOD HAS DONE IN THE PAST.

If it helps you, keep the idea or the picture of pitons in rock climbing as places where we can fix a rope. Then there are two points of truth that God has established. Two anchors that God has hammered into the rock face of history.

16 This is how we know (past tense) what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.

First, we can have assurance as we look back to the historical event of the life and death of Jesus Christ. This is a piton, an anchor, that God has hammered into the rock face of history.

The heart of the Christian faith is a mystery which steps out from behind the curtain of inscrutability and invisibility, and says:

"and the Word became flesh and lived for a while among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory of the One and only who came from the Father full of grace and truth. No man has ever seen God, but God the one and only son, who is at the Father's side, has made him known." (John 1:14, 18)

1st John

16 This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us.

Mystery puts on humanity. The invisible becomes evident. Spirituality becomes physical.

When Jesus came to the earth and died, God set an anchor in history and said, every time you feel that you are lost and drifting, you can come back to this place. You can return to this

point, and you can tie your life to this truth.

That is why we believe in a Jesus who was part of history. He is not some vague Christ-consciousness. He came as flesh and blood.

The second thing that God gave us is the gift of His spirit.

1st John 3:24

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.

Every Christian is given the gift and the seal of the spirit. This is how he sets his seal upon us. The primary work of the Spirit is to continue in our lives and to continue in the world the work and the ministry of Jesus. His work in our lives is one of changing and fashioning us to be like Christ in heart and in character. This is simply called "fruit" and here is how it is described.

Galatians 5

22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,

23 gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.

All of these perfectly describe Jesus, and bit by bit they are slowly being woven into our lives. The Christian life is one of submission to the power of the Spirit. He does not come where he is not invited. He shapes only what we will give him.

How much stronger and firmer would we live if we knew that each of our hands could take hold of one of these truths like pitons driven into the rock face. In one hand we rope ourselves to the truth that Christ has come to declare the love of God, and using the other hand we rope ourselves to the truth that God has given us His Spirit?

From those two anchors we can start to climb, sure and steady.

Where is the next piton, where is the next anchor to tie ourselves to?

WE WILL RECEIVE ASSURANCE TODAY BECAUSE WE ACT IN LOVE TOWARDS SOMEONE IN NEED.

Do you believe that the love of God is in you?

Do you believe that you have eternal life right now?

How would you know that?

Well, without being arrogant or presumptuous, John says we can know that with certainty.

16 This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.

17 If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?

18 Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.

19 This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence

20 whenever our hearts condemn us. For God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.

We believe that the love of God is planted deep in our heart and soul. It lies deep within us, hidden in some vault within our heart.

Can you ever measure it? Can you ever put it on the measuring scale and weigh its reality?

Most of us would say no. You cannot do these kinds of things with the love of God. It is too mysterious, too indefinable.

John says, you can know it with certainty. God defined his love and gave it profile and form when Christ came to the world. God gave his love shape when

Christ grew as a human being. God gave his love substance when Christ died on the cross for the sins of the world. There is nothing vague or mystical about the love of God. It is flesh and blood.

So we have the love of God mysteriously implanted with us. We have the gift of eternal life rooted within us.

How do we know that?

How can we be certain of that?

John says, there is a simple test, and it is done by turning the spiritual into the physical, allowing the internal to contour the external, and in return, the external actions of love reflect and echo back and give you the assurance and confidence of knowing eternal life.

Let's get personal.

Note in verse 16, he uses the plural brothers = meaning all Christians.

Then in verse 17, he changes and he uses the singular "brother". Why?

It is kind of like the person who say, I love humanity. It's the people I can't stand!

It is easy to generalize. Love only begins to take effect when it gets specific and personal.

None of us have the capacity to meet the needs of large crowds. But we can ask God for one person. Mother Teresa was often asked how she could care for carry the burden of all the dying in Calcutta. Her answer is simple. One life at a time.

Let's get practical.

Words are not enough. Words might be the places to start, and words are better than silence, saying nothing. But we have to move beyond words and good wishes to deeds and actions.

We see our brother in need and we hold in our hand what John calls the material possessions, what might that be????

Understand what John is saying and teaching. We hold in our hearts the love of God. We have evidence of that in the life and death of Jesus. We hold in our hands the stuff of life, and when we see that person whom we can help, and when we translate love into action, God says YES! And he hammers another piton in the rock face just a little higher and he invites us to reach up and rope ourselves onto it. He calls us to stretch just a little higher and as we do. He anchors our lives just a little but more firmly. He says, what you have just done in sharing love is the way in which you will know, for sure and for certain, that you have eternal life.

If you want to climb higher, then you have to rope onto the ways of the heart of God and place your feet where He has placed His. This is the only way of security and safety, and it is the way the dispels the fog of doubt and hesitancy that often makes us wander around, unsure of where to go next.

Doubt silently slips through our fingers and away from us. We hold on to reality of eternal life when we externalize in love the reality of love that lies hidden within us. Whenever we do a deed of love, love is not silent, love is not passive. Love rewards us with the gift of assurance. Love whispers in our ear, you have done a good thing, you have done the right thing, and I have a gift for you. Hold out your heart, and when we hold out our heart, love places in our hands the gift of assurance.

And if we ever thought that we were beginning to slip down into the darkness of doubt and despair, assurance drives a piton into the rock just where our hand is and shouts to us, hold on!

The reward that comes to us at those moments is the reward of **INTEGRITY**, which is much more than honesty. What is integrity? It is the reality that the internal aspects of our spirit and the external expression of our lives match. There is integrity,

wholeness, which is more than honesty. Integrity means that there is coinherence or agreement between the spiritual and the physical, between our inside and our outside, or as we may say, when we walk the talk. That's integrity. There is agreement between the love of God we sing about and the love of God which we put into practice.

Rather than discord, there is harmony between the inner and outer parts of our being.

People who are able to come to this place of synchronization and harmony within themselves and then live out of that are people who live out of a place of deep strength and certainty. The messages that their lives send to people and the replies that they receive resonate with a deep sense of inner harmony.

On the other hand, people whose inner and outer lives do not match up, live out of the turmoil of frustration and defeat. This is not the path of the Spirit. This is not the path of God.

The path of God calls us to bring our inner and outer lives into harmony, what we believe on the inside flows out into life, and what we see on the outside reflects and echoes back towards us to confirm in us and for us what we believe.

The moment we understand that, we have climbed another step in the life of the Spirit.

THERE IS THE ASSURANCE THAT ONE DAY WE CAN STAND BEFORE GOD.

This is the future dimension of assurance.

Back in 2:28, John made a bold invitation.

28 And now, dear children, continue in him, so that when he appears we may be confident and unashamed before him at his coming.

Two great words: confident and unashamed.

The next piton that God hammers in for us is the one that lies just beneath the summit. It is the one that says we can stand with boldness at the very end.

1st John 3:19

19 This then is how we know [will know - future tense] that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence

20 whenever our hearts condemn us. For God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.

21 Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God

How will anyone be able to stand with confidence [or assurance] in the presence of God?

Thinking about this idea or picture this past week brought a scary memory back from my days in a private school in Glasgow. Each morning in our home room we were made to line up on either side of the desk, waiting for our home room teacher to come in. I remember his name. His name was Mr. Rankin and he had put the fear of death into us.

You lined up on one side of his desk if you felt that your homework was done 100%, no mistakes, nothing missed, but woe betide you if you lined up there and it was not correct. You lined up on the other side of his desk waiting for him if your homework was incomplete or not done at all. That was usually not a very good idea! .

We were like the sheep and the goats waiting for slaughter.

On those mornings, sometimes rare occasions when you had everything all done, and it was all correct, you could stand on the right hand side of the desk, waiting for him to come in, and you stood there with confidence. This was not going to be a scary day.

One day we will stand at the desk of God. Our homework done. What is our homework?

God calls us to believe in the name of Jesus and to love one another.

And he says,

3:19 This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence

None of us are immortal. All of us one day will stand before God and we will find out if our hearts can be at rest in his presence. Perhaps that is the final piton he hammers into the rock face of life, and when we reach that one, we are almost at the top. We have only one step to go to see a view that we never imagined!

These steps of assurance I have described them as pitons hammered by God into the sheer rock face of life, are not incidental nor optional.

More and more the fast pace of life is leaving people dizzy and wondering what they are here on earth to do. As someone has said, you can get all A's and still flunk life.

Soren Kierkegaard wrote

"The one thing I need is to understand myself - to see what God really wants me to do. To

find an idea for which I can live and die.”

Without finding what there is in life for which you are willing to live and willing to die leaves you wondering why we are here.

Several factors make this search for significance and meaning more urgent than ever before in human history.

1. The search for the purpose of life is one of the deepest issues of our experience and need as human beings. Somehow we have to find those pitons that are hammered into the rock face of life, and if we do not, we are left standing at the bottom looking wistfully upward.
2. Modern western civilization is the very first to have no agreed-on answer to the purpose of life and why we are here. We stand with too much to live with and far too little to live for. In the midst of our material prosperity, we have spiritual poverty.

For many, the hollowness leads them to live what Henry David Thoreau called “lives of quiet desperation.”

But when in the midst of the fog a single individual or a group of people find the light to move ahead, or when in the midst of quicksand an individual or a

group of people find a place to stand and can do so with assurance and confidence, they have found that point of faith which can move the world.

When a group of people find the pitons that God has hammered into history, giving them a place to rope their lives to so that they can hang on, and more than hang on. They can climb higher and higher, and each time someone finds that the rope of faith holds them as they climb, and they share that thrill with the other climbers, they echo to one another, we know, we know, we know, and they encourage each other on.

This week, you may have to tighten your grip on the rope and hang on. God has given us both His Son and His Spirit. Tie the rope of your life to them and tighten the knot.

If you are feeling shaky and seeking assurance of the love of God in your life, follow his direction and when you see someone who is in need, share the love of God that is in your heart, and your actions will reflect back and speak into your life, and love will whisper in your ear, and assure you.

This is the time for Christians to be able to stand and declare, not with arrogance but with humility, we know, we know, we know.

It is a day for God’s people to live with certainty in an uncertain time.