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Welcome to the New Life Podcast, a ministry of New Life Presbyterian Church in Ithaca, New York. Today we have this week's sermon, preached by Tim LaCroix, our senior pastor. Join us for worship each week at 10 o'clock at 950 Danby Road, Ithaca, New York. You can also visit us on our website, www. Now here's this week's sermon.

00:43

A reading from the first epistle of John, chapter 3, verses 10 to 24.

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This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are. Anyone who does not do what is right is not God's child, nor is anyone who does not love their brother and sister. For this is the message you heard from the beginning, we should love one another. 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 brothers were righteous.

01:21

Do not be surprised, my brothers and sisters, if the world hates you. We know that we have passed from death to life because we love each other. Anyone who does not love remains in death. Anyone who hates a brother or sister is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life residing in him. 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 and sisters.

01:51

If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech, but with actions and in truth. This is how we know that we belong to the truth and how we set our hearts at rest in His presence. If our hearts condemn us, we know that God is greater than our hearts and He knows everything. Dear friends,

02:19

If our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God and receive from Him anything we ask, because we keep His commandments and do what pleases Him. And this is His command, to believe in the name of His Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as He has commanded us.

The one who keeps God's commands lives 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. This is the word of the Lord.

02:53

Last week, Pew released the results of their latest religious landscapes survey. They do this every 10 years or so. And what they do is they do an in-depth study of the religious landscape in America. They cover things that the census does not cover.

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like Americans beliefs, their practices and so forth. This is a massive study, the one that they just recently released at almost 37,000 people that participated in it. So with that kind of size, it has some very valuable data. And there's a lot of things that we could draw from this study, and I'm sure we'll be mining this data for months to come, learning things about it that could be helpful for the church and could also be helpful for the country in general.

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The headline is this. The headline is that the decline of Christianity in America is over. What the study found is that the number of adherents of Christianity has been declining for about 30 years.

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It had gone from about 80% and it dropped down to about 60%. But over the last five years, it's been holding steady at about 60% to 64%. And the results of this year's study said that there were 62% of Americans adults that adhere to Christianity or identify as Christians. Now that's good news.

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Certainly good news, but if we drill a little deeper and we look a little bit more in more detail in this study, we find both things that are concerning and we also find some things that are opportunities. So 62% of Americans, the study found, profess or identify as Christians. But what it also showed us, what it also found, is that about

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half of them, a little less than half of those who profess Christianity, a little less than half go to church at least once a month. So 48%, only 48% go to church at least once a month. That's what

would be called regular attendance today. So about half of folks that say they're Christians go to church somewhat regularly.

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The survey also found that amongst those who say that they are Christians, who identify as Christians, about 64% said the Bible is very or extremely important. So about two-thirds of those who filled out the survey would say that the Bible is very or extremely important. There's a couple of other data points, and these next two data points I would acknowledge, depending on your, you know...

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politically political viewpoint and nuance there are different nuanced opinions of these two items But I think with the other data they kind of point to my overall Observation the study also found that about of those who profess Christianity that more than 50% support Abortion being legal in almost all circumstances, so that's half of those who profess Christianity and the same with Support full support of gay marriage now like I said you can have their nuance

06:12

positions on those last two and I'm sure as we as we go into the data the granular data we'll find more about the specific beliefs of people but what we find is basically I mean if we draw it down about 30% of those sorry about 50% of those who profess faith or profess to be Christians are are religious who actually follow the teachings of Christ follow the teachings of the Bible

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and attend church regularly. That makes it about 30% of our country. Now...

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Another thing that also, the study also found, and this is where I think it would be well for us to pay attention, is that when you consider those who have no religious affiliation, so those who would check no religion or none when they're asked what religion they are, the survey found that about, of those folks who say they have no religion, religiously unaffiliated people,

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in God, there are 54% of those who are religiously unaffiliated who believe in God.

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And so that shows us that folks still believe in God, the existence of God, even though they do not have any affiliation with church or religion. But we also see that with regard to those who are religiously unaffiliated, they, with regard to the Bible, they see the importance of the Bible is very low. Seventy-seven percent said not important at all. And we also see that a vast majority of these folks would say they are spiritual.

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but not religious. So a lot of them would say I'm spiritual but I'm not religious. Now, there's two ways to look at this I think. One way to look at it is to kind of come at it from a judgmental sort of attitude. And perhaps an application that we could draw from this as a congregation is that we go up here on 96B and hold up picket signs and say if you don't go to church you're not a real Christian.

08:18

Would that be effective? Would that be even what Peter says as we talked about two falls ago? Peter says that we are to be ready to have an answer, but we should do it with gentleness and respect. So is that what we should do with this data? We should be confrontational? How can we, how can we though view this as an opportunity as a church, as Christians? And I think, I think the way that we should view this information is exactly what Peter said and what John is saying to us.

08:47

So it's not that this information is more for us to understand where our friends and neighbors are and what they're thinking and and how best to reach out to them. Now you may be wondering you know this information you probably I know you've heard this before people say that they are religious they're spiritual but not religious they're Christians but they don't attend church regularly.

09:12

I'm sure you've heard these things before. You may be wondering, well, maybe that's fine. Maybe that's OK. So we have these questions that information like this brings up. The text that we read today actually gives us some answers, I think. It gives us an answer to the question of what do we do with this information.

09:32

Because I think that John is actually presenting to us in this text. We're going to be looking at 1 John chapter 3 verses 10 through 24. That was the first scripture that was read by Jim. What we're going to see here is that John is actually putting into practice what Peter said. He is approaching this in a way that is winsome and that is gentle and with respect.

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Now, this passage may be the climax of John, because here in this passage, he's actually getting to the point. He's actually being a little bit argumentative. But what we have to remember is that this has been building for two and a half chapters. John has been building this up. He's been kind of, he's been softly approaching the issue. One of the reasons why he's going in circles, as we've seen, he keeps coming back to subjects, I think, is to ease people into this idea.

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So I think he's kind of going circular so that he gets people ready to hear this message, this truth. And the message, this truth that he's saying today is there's not really a middle ground. You know, you can't be really spiritual and not religious. What he says is basically there's two ways.

10:40

And so today I have three main points today, and you can tell by looking at your bulletin that I might have got a little bit, prepared a little bit early because I actually have an outline in there. You'll find out why in a minute. But three main points today. The first is that there are two ways. The second is that there's true love, and the third is the triune assurance or triune confidence. So the first thing we see is this. There are only two ways. There's not a middle way.

11:09

John in his first few verses from verse 10 through verse 15 gives what a common theological motif we see it in the writings of early Christianity. We see it in the teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount and in several other places. There are two ways. There are two roads. Jesus says you're either for me or you're against me. The Didache which was a Christian text written in the first century has a whole section called the two ways or the two roads. Here we find there are two ways.

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What does John say the two ways are? We start in verse 10, and this is printed in your bulletin, you can follow along. The two ways, he says, it is evident there are children of God and there are children of the devil. So there are two ways. So there are those who are children of God and there

are those who are children of the devil. Two ways. Then he goes on to say there are those who are like Cain and those who are like Abel. What is Cain like?

12:08

Cain is, it says evil and he's a murderer. What is Abel like? It says, it doesn't use Abel's name, but it says he was righteous. So we have the children of God, we have the children of the devil, we have those who follow Cain and those who follow Abel. We have those who do evil and those who do righteousness. And then in verse 13 we have the world. So we have the world and we have the children of God or the people of God as opposites.

12:37

And then we have in verse 14, we have death and life as two ways. One of these ways leads to death and the other leads to life. And then we find that in verse 15 there was love and there was hate, two ways. And then 15 and 16 we have those who murder and those who willingly give their lives. So we see that very clearly in John's teaching that there are two ways.

13:08

There is not a middle way, there are only two ways. So that's the first point. Now what do we do with this? Like I said, we can use this and be confrontational, we can use this in a judgmental fashion, and I don't think that we should. What John is saying is this is information for people who are in the church.

13:30

Remember, John is preaching to the church. He's preaching to those who are coming to church. He's preaching to those who are inside the people of God. And he's giving them information that they need and that they've actually signed up for. And you gotta remember that, you know, as I've told you before, the situation in the first century that John is writing into is not that much different from the situation we find ourselves in today. John was dealing with some of the same issues in Ephesus that I've just been talking about.

13:58

The people that were splitting the church and the people that were leading folks astray in the first century were saying that being a part of the church was not important. They were saying there was no such thing as sin. And they were saying that Jesus Christ wasn't, He did not come in the flesh. Those are the three things that we see John repeating. He repeats all of those here in this passage. That Jesus Christ really came in the flesh. That there is such a thing as sin. And that...

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It is necessary to be a part of God's people and be in the church. And as I said, John is stating this for the people who are gathered. But what do we do with this information as we apply it to the rest of our lives, as we think about our friends, as we think about our neighbors, as we think about the world around us? I think the first, the point of application is this. When we think through how to persuade,

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how to approach others who don't believe in who we would like to talk to about it. There are two methods here that are presented. The first method is the negative. In other words, a reason not to disbelieve, if you'll mind the double negative. This is what the first point is. It's a negative. It's a negative reason. It's sort of a reason not to do something.

15:22

But as we come into the second point, we see a positive reason. So overall, the first point is for you to know. And I think the takeaway is do not be deceived. John said this in chapter 2. He says, do not be deceived. And so for us, the first point is not for us to go out and hold picket signs and tell other people that they're wrong. The first point is for us so we will know internally that there's only two ways. Do not be deceived. There's only two ways. That's for us.

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But as we move out to engage our friends and neighbors, we move to point two. And point two is true love. And so we move from a negative example or a negative reason to a positive reason. And I think this is what we should really do with this data. As we look at the Pew survey, as we look at other data, as we talk to our friends, as we talk to our family, what we find is there's a lot of people who believe in God but don't believe in the church. And the first thing we should feel about that is humility.

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We should be humbled by this. We should understand that there's a reason for this. And a lot of the reason is because the church has hurt people. John is saying, first and foremost, love one another. Jesus said this explicitly in John 17. They will know that you are my followers if you love one another. So what John is doing is he's setting a positive example for those.

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who don't think it's necessary to follow God, who don't think it's necessary to be a part of the church. He wants us to present a beautiful community. He wants us to show people the beauty of the church. And this is why he talks about loving one another in the context of the challenges that he's facing. In other words, if people don't believe, they believe in God, but they don't believe in the importance of Scripture, quoting Scripture does not going to matter a whole lot.

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If folks don't understand why we do any of this, and they see our practice of our faith is harmful or backward, again, arguing apologetics and quoting scripture are not going to get you very far. But what does resonate with almost everyone? Self-sacrificial love. This is what we see in verse 16. By this, we know love, that He laid down His life for us. And so we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers.

17:46

Self-sacrificial love is beautiful. And people recognize it. All sorts of people recognize it. I was reading an article this morning in the New York Times. And this was an article that was following a nurse in West Virginia. And she was going from house to house. Her job was to make house calls. And she visited people who were basically homebound, who had chronic illness.

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and who had, did not have the ability to buy nutritious food, either because it was too expensive, or because they live in a food desert and they didn't have transportation, and they didn't have money. And so she went from place to place, and she served them their medical needs. She spoke true to them, like, you need to eat some vegetables, you need to eat some fruit, you need to eat something that's not out of a box. But she also cared for them, and she gave herself for these folks

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And what was interesting about it, I always like to read the comments for good or ill, when I opened up the comments to this article, almost everyone was moved by her profound self-sacrificial giving of herself, of her life.

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for time, to go into these hard places and to try to help people, to try to help them get better, to try to move them with some better habits and some better diets. They were moved by this and they

thought it was beautiful. Several of them said they were moved to tears in reading that article. What's the point? Love is beautiful.

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Love is beautiful. It doesn't matter where you see it. It doesn't matter who does it. If someone exhibits the kind of self-sacrificial love like I've been talking about, people see it and they are moved by it. And this is where I think we find ourselves in this moment as a church. As a church that seeks to...

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reach out as a church that seeks to minister to those who are around us and wants to help bring people in and share the gospel and bring them along in discipleship and following God. The biggest apologetic that we have is to love each other. That's clear. It's clear from the examples we see around us and it's clear from what John is saying here. Self-sacrificial love is beautiful and everybody recognizes it.

20:10

We move to verse 17 and John gives us a practical example. He says if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need and he closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? How is it that we live self-sacrificially? John says we live self-sacrificially by giving of our self. A practical example, a practical example for the town of Ephesus and the...

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uh... first century AD as a rich place, emphasis was a rich city there was probably a lot of disparity of incomes the practical example that John gives is that we share of our worldly goods notice he says the world's goods in opposition to heavenly goods as he's already made the distinction between the world and between

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heaven and God. So if you've got worldly goods that are going to pass away, you can't take these things with you. If God has blessed you with worldly goods, share them with those who have need. That's a practical example that he gives. He says, little children, at verse 18, let us not love in word and talk, but in deed and in truth. This is the way that the church is to operate in love and sharing love with one another. And I want to

21:29

I want to commend you that I believe you've been doing a good job at this. I really believe you have. And here's an example. I won't share names or circumstances so as not to reveal identities. But someone shared with me recently that a friend of hers who is not a Christian, I met some people from our church and interacted with them on a regular basis. And she remarked to her friend who goes to our church that those are good people. Right?

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This person had seen the way we love each other, the way we interact, and had been impacted with it. The beauty was coming through, in other words, to her. So I want to commend you that this is happening. But let us...

22:09

Let us excel still more as Paul says in Ephesians. Let us continue to build on that love for each other. Let us continue to build on that beauty that we have in serving and loving one another. And let us maintain that as a congregation because that is what will make Christ beautiful. Jesus says it over and over and over.

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that when you love each other, when you love each other practically and outwardly, it attracts people. It attracts all kinds of people. And I think that is the apologetic of this age, the reason that people will have to believe in God. So we should make it beautiful, but we should also push against the ugliness. There's a lot of ugliness that has pushed people away from the church. There's a reason why there are...

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So many millions of people that believe in God but don't have anything to do with the church. It's because the church has hurt them. The church has not responded well to abuse. The church has not prevented it. The church has even covered it up. The church has been a place more broadly where people are hurt.

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Where people are disingenuous and whether hip or hypocritical now we're always gonna have people that are hypocritical in the church because That's not gonna stop happening until Jesus

returns because we're all sinners and we all behave selfishly And we all we all do things that we know are wrong or that others the others do that that we know are wrong

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But we can do our part as a church and as leadership of the church to push against the ugliness, to call out evil where it happens, to call out injustice where it happens. And one of the biggest ways that this is manifesting right now in our church culture is the issue of abuse.

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in responding well to it and preventing it when it happens, doing what we need to do as a congregation, as a people, to answer it and not to disbelieve, not to push it away, not to cover it up, but we have to push back against the ugliness. So we build a beauty, we build a beautiful church by loving each other.

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and we push against the ugliness wherever we can. And by doing this, we create a church that is attractive for all sorts of people to attend. So there are two ways. We use this information to exhort ourselves that we not be deceived. But we use this information then in turn to love each other and present a beautiful alternative, a beautiful alternative to what the world is offering.

24:41

And this leads us to the third point. The third point is that we have a triune assurance. As we go to verse 13, we move into John addressing a real pastoral concern. He's just laid this thing out pretty starkly. And maybe when you heard me talking about it, there's two ways. There's good and evil, the children of God and the children of the devil. Maybe that kind of hits you in a way. I'm sure it hit all of us differently.

25:10

John knows that. He understands that this is hard information, it's difficult to listen to. And so he comes back to this pastoral concern and that is our doubts, our fears, our guilt. Who of us measures up in this way? Who of us can say, you know, who of us can judge another person in other words? There's lots of things that kind of pop up in our hearts. As I was talking to the kids earlier,

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The things that make us afraid, the things that keep us up at night, our anxieties, our fears. And John is especially addressing the fact that he's just said that if you love, you're good. And if you don't, you're evil. If you're like Cain and you hate your brother, you're evil. And you're not going to have eternal life. And if you love your brother as you will. Many of us have sensitive consciousness. Many of us have anxieties that relate to spiritual matters. Many of us feel guilt. Part of it.

26:03

Maybe the way that you, the religious tradition you were raised in, that emphasized guilt, or maybe for some other reason. John is addressing that here. He understands that we feel these things very differently, but we feel them strongly. And so he comes back in verse 19 through 24 to give us some solid confidence, to give us some gospel assurance. He says in verse 19, By this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our heart before Him.

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So, he wants us to be reassured. He understands that these have been hard things that he's been saying. And he wants to address that fear, that doubt, that guilt that may be coming into our hearts. And so he says in verse 20, For whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart. And he knows everything. Whatever you're feeling, when you think about these issues, whether it's guilt, whether it's fear, whether it's, you know, whatever it is, those heart feelings...

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those anxieties, those reactions, John says, look, God is greater. God is greater. He can handle it. He knows everything. Why do you think he says he knows everything right there? Because he knows what you're thinking. He knows what you're feeling. He knows what you did in secret. He knows all those things. He knows the sins that you're going to commit in the future. By the way, this is a great proof text for the omniscience of God. God knows everything. It says pretty plain that God knows everything.

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But if God knows everything, okay, if He knows everything you have ever done and everything you will do, and He still says He loves you and He will forgive you and He is greater than all those things, shouldn't that give us some assurance? The fact that He knows those things already, He knows things that you don't know about yourself, He understands the depth of our sin better than we do, and yet He loves us, and yet He calls us to forgiveness and He calls us to this assurance that John is laying out.

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God is greater than those things. God is greater than those doubts. He's greater than those fears. He's greater than the guilt. He's greater than the anxiety. He's greater and He knows everything. Not only does He know everything about us, He knows everything about this world and that should give us confidence to trust Him. He knows everything. Beloved, He says, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God. And whatever we ask, we receive from Him.

28:32

So this is a phrase that's repeated often in the gospels. We have whatever we ask, we receive. And I've told you before, I've said plenty of times, this doesn't mean, well, if I ask the Lord for a brand new F-150, a crew cab, XLT, that I'm gonna get it. That's not what it means. We don't teach and preach a prosperity gospel.

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Whenever these statements are made, you have whatever you asked, they are always given in the context of a specific need. What is a specific need here? It is our lack of assurance. It is our lack of confidence. It's the fact that we have these guilt, we have these fears, we have these doubts. Maybe we don't trust the Word of God. Maybe we have issues with the morality that it presents. Whatever it is, we have...

29:24

What we ask, we shall receive. And that's the context for this phrase. We ask God for his help. We pray for his help. And so I say right now, Lord, I pray that you would help us with our lack of belief. I pray that you would help us with our anxiety, with our fear, with our doubt, with our guilt. And that's what John is saying. He's saying that if you ask that, you will receive. And what shall we receive? Well, first he gives a practical example of assurance.

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A lot of us struggle with assurance, and we struggle with doubt. He gives a practical one here at the end of verse 22. He says, we keep, because we keep His commandments and do what pleases Him. And then he says in verse 24, whoever keeps His commandments abides in God. And then he says in verse 23, and this is His commandment, that we believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ and love one another. So the answer is this.

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We know that we are of the truth if we love each other, if we keep His commandments, and we believe in Him. Now I've told you before, this does not mean we have to be perfect. John in the first

chapter says, if you say you haven't sinned, you've made God a liar. John is not preaching perfection. What he is preaching is faithfulness. Faithfulness and practice.

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What he's saying is if you believe in the name of Christ, if you believe he came in the flesh, which we're about to confess here in a few moments when we say the Apostles Creed. If you believe in Jesus and you practice, you practice His commandments, you believe that they are right, you believe that they are true, and you attempt to put them into practice in your life. That's what he's saying. If you do that, you can have assurance. You can have assurance. It's a very practical thing.

31:18

But what he's not saying is that everybody can have assurance. What he's not saying is if you aren't making an attempt, if you are intentionally rejecting those commandments or you're intentionally violating them, then we don't have that promise. And so he holds that out as well. But he wants us to have that assurance. He says, whoever keeps his commandments does what pleases him. And this is the commandment, that we believe in the name of his son Jesus Christ and we love one another.

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So that's the first bit of assurance, a practical measure. But the last thing I'll leave you with is this, that all of this depends on God, not us. We do not believe in works righteousness and neither does John. John is not saying that our assurance, our salvation depends on our works. He's giving us a practical reason why we can have some confidence. As John Calvin said, and this is a quote.

32:09

in your bulletin, and I love the basicness of this. He says, the fruit of adoption always appears in the life. The fruit of adoption always appears in the life. What that means is if you have been adopted, if you are truly a child of God, as John says, if you truly are a child of God, you will bear fruit. And that fruit is what gives us the assurance. That fruit is what gives us confidence. So we're not saved by works.

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But we will bear fruit if we are adopted by God. And what John is saying is if you see fruit, you believe in the name of Jesus, you trust in God, and you are attempting to be faithful to Him, you can have assurance. But the last thing he leaves us with is that none of this depends on us. He leaves us with

a triune assurance. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit all mentioned in this section. He says in verse 20, God is greater than our heart.

33:09

He says in verse 23 that we believe in the name of the Son Jesus Christ. And he says in verse 24 that we know we abide in Him by the Spirit that is within us. Our belonging to God depends completely and totally on God. And that's where John wants to leave us. Yes, we love each other. We must, you know, we work to love each other. We...

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amend our lives, we confess our sin, we try to obey God's commandments, we participate in the means of grace, words, sacrament and prayer, we do all these things, but we need to know that all of this, all of this depends on God. God is greater than our heart. He's greater than our heart when it doubts, when it fears. Jesus Christ gave himself as a sacrifice for our sin. And the Spirit of God residing in you

33:59

The indwelling power of the Spirit is what gives us that assurance. It's the Father, it's the Son, it's the Holy Spirit, it's His power, it's Christ's sacrifice, it's God's greatness and omniscience. That's our basis, that's our ground for assurance. Not on what we do, but on who He is and what He has done. If we believe and trust in Him, we can trust that we have that confidence before Him.

34:28

This week I had the honor and pleasure of visiting one of our former alumni. I went down and visited them, a former law student, and has become a very generous donor to our church. And I was talking with him and his family and just hearing the story of new life for them. Many people have a story of new life that they share, that they hold.

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For him, when they moved here, they were just out of undergrad, just newly married, and first year of law school he was diagnosed with cancer. And they were a part of new life. And the reason why they continue to hold this church dear

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even though they were only here for two and a half years, 20 years later, tears come to their eyes when they describe our church is because this church stepped up and loved them. She said our driveway never had snow on it. Someone was coming over and shoveling our driveway, that people sat with him while he was having his chemotherapy, and this had a huge impact on them. The simple loving of one another created a beautiful thing in their heart and a beautiful thing in their life that stays with them to this day.

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stays with them to this day. And I was able to share with them how their response to that love and their response to that kindness has blessed me. I was able to share with them. I said, look, I want you guys to know how many times I have come back from the mailbox, which is down the hall, and come back from the mailbox in tears because your gift met a need that we had.

36:14

and they were blessed by that. This is how the community of God's people moves forward. It's a beautiful thing. We love each other, we care for each other, we give self-sacrificially, and people are blessed, people are touched, such that 20 years later, 30 years later, 40 years later, people still hold those things to themselves. So this is what we aim for. We don't aim for those who are against things.

36:43

We aim to be those who are showing forth the beauty of Christ in our love for one another. And so we understand that we are not to be deceived. There are two ways. But we know what true love is and we seek to work it out in our body. And we rest in the triune assurance of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Let's pray.

37:08

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