

“If Our Heart Does Not Condemn Us” (1 John 3:19–24)

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We talk a lot about the heart. We say things like, “Follow your heart,” and “Well, her heart was in the right place,” or, “God knows your heart.”

But how well do we know our own hearts? And what is in our hearts? What do our hearts desire? How are they motivated? What do our hearts tell us? Can we trust the testimony of our hearts? What if our hearts aren’t in the right place?

There are very important questions, ones that we would do well to pay attention to. They are questions we should ask in light of today’s passage, 1 John 3:19–24. And, I must admit, though this passage is short, it’s difficult to understand. I’ll do my best to figure out what John intended his readers to know.

In order to know what this passage means, we have to pay attention to context. So, let me recap what we’ve read so far. John is an apostle, one of the men who witnessed Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. He was one of the men commissioned by Jesus to preach the gospel, which is the good news of who Jesus is and what he has done for us. John swears that his message is true because he is an eyewitness to Jesus. John urges his readers to walk in the light, which means to walk in the truth and to live lives that are pleasing to God. This means acknowledging that we have sinned against God, that God sent his Son, Jesus, to bear our sins, and that we must trust Jesus for our salvation. It also means living a life marked by love for God and obedience to him. That means we must obey his commandment to love one another.

Over the last two weeks, we have seen that John tells us that we should strive to be righteous as Jesus is righteous. We won’t be completely righteous like Jesus until we see him face to face, but we should move in that direction now. That means we should love God and love others, not just in word, but in deed. If we don’t love God that way, we’re children of the devil.

That’s a challenging message. At this point, we might wonder if we’re really Christians. And it seems that John wants to bring us to a point of certainty about whether we are God’s children or not.

So, with that in mind, let’s read 1 John 3:19–24:

¹⁹ By this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our heart before him; ²⁰ for whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he

knows everything. ²¹ Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God; ²² and whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him. ²³ And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. ²⁴ Whoever keeps his commandments abides in God, and God in him. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit whom he has given us.¹

This passage can be interpreted in different ways. The key to understanding it is to make sense of what John means about the “heart.” That word “heart” appears in each of the first three verses of this passage. John says our heart can be “reassured,” and may or may not condemn us.

A number of theologians believe that “heart” more or less means conscience. And they would interpret the passage this way: John has just told us that we should lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters in need. And, when we hear that, our conscience may feel condemned. We may feel like we’re not really loving other believers that way. But God is greater than our hearts, and if we have faith in Jesus, we’re not condemned. Therefore, we can approach God with confidence when we pray, so long as we believe in Jesus and love one another. We know that we live in God and God lives in us because we obey and because we have the testimony of the Holy Spirit.

In other words, you may feel condemned because you aren’t perfectly loving other Christians—just as you may feel condemned for not fully obeying God in other areas of life—but we must remember the gospel, that Jesus died for sinners and we are saved by his good works, not ours. When we remember the gospel and then turn back to God, obeying as best we can, we can be reassured that we are indeed God’s children.

There’s a lot of truth there and that may be what John is getting at. But there’s another reading of this passage that, in the end, is somewhat similar, but pays more attention to the text, and that’s what I try to do every week.² I want to make sure that we really understand what God has spoken through the apostle John.

To understand what John is saying, let’s think back to what he had just written prior to this passage. In verse 18, he said, “Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.” Then, in verses 19 and 20, he says, “By this we shall know that we are of the truth and

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

² The interpretation that I’m presenting here largely draws on Colin G. Kruse, *The Letters of John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 139ff.

reassure our heart before him; for whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything.” The “by this” at the beginning of verse 19 looks back to verse 18. If we love others we will know that we are of the truth. In John’s Gospel, when Jesus was on trial before the Roman governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate, he said, “Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice” (John 18:37). We know we are “of the truth,” which is another way of saying we are “of God,” if we listen to and obey *the* Truth, Jesus himself (John 14:6; cf. John 10:27). And if we are doing what Jesus wants us to do, then we can reassure our heart that we belong to him. The verb translated as “reassure” usually means “to persuade” or “to convince.”³ The idea seems to be that our hearts would need to be convinced “before God,” which probably means that in light of the fact that God is greater than our hearts, and that he knows everything about us, we should probably be concerned about whatever is happening in our hearts.

Why would our hearts need to be convinced? How would they condemn us? We could think of the heart as being like our conscience. But what if the heart relates more to our will and our actions? What if we’re told that we should love others in deed and in truth, but we don’t want to? At that point, our heart needs convincing. It needs to be told that God’s design is greater than what it wants. It needs to be reminded that God knows all things, including whether we want to give to our brother or sister in need and whether we actually do give to such a person.

John, a Jewish man very familiar with the Old Testament, may have a passage like Deuteronomy 15:7–11 in mind. That chapter deals with how Israelites were supposed to provide for the poor and the enslaved. In that passage, Israelites are warned not to harden their hearts against the poor among them. This is what it says:

⁷ “If among you, one of your brothers should become poor, in any of your towns within your land that the Lord your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against your poor brother, ⁸ but you shall open your hand to him and lend him sufficient for his need, whatever it may be. ⁹ Take care lest there be an unworthy thought in your heart and you say, ‘The seventh year, the year of release is near,’ and your eye look grudgingly on your poor brother, and you give him nothing, and he cry to the Lord against you, and you be guilty of sin. ¹⁰ You shall give to him freely, and your heart shall not be grudging when you give to him, because for this the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake. ¹¹ For there will never cease to be poor in the land. Therefore I command you, ‘You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in your land.’”

³ Πειθω (*peitho*).

You can see in that passage that there is a temptation for the heart to be hardened against the one in need. There is a temptation to have “an unworthy thought in your heart,” which anticipates the seventh year, when debts were released. If you gave to a poor person when that year approached, you didn’t have as much time to get the debt paid back to you. And if the seventh year arrived, then the debt would be forgiven and you wouldn’t get your money back. There was a temptation for the heart to give grudgingly, knowing that the gift would likely be unreturned. In other words, Israelites were warned against being greedy and not giving for the right reasons.

And perhaps that is just what John means. He has just told his readers that they should give to those in need. Their hearts might be tempted not to give, or to give with grudging hearts. And John is saying, “You may need to persuade your hearts to do the right thing. Remember, you stand in the presence of God, the Judge who knows everything and is greater than your heart.”

So, imagine this scenario. You see someone in need in the church, or perhaps a family member or friend or someone else you know. Say that person has lost his job, or she has had an unexpected health crisis that has cost her a bit of money. You are in a position to help, even if it means you have to make some sacrifices in order to give to that person. But you’re tempted not to help. You would rather have your money to spend on other things. You don’t want to make the sacrifice. You think that this person could never pay you back. In that case, your heart rightfully condemns you. You’re not loving your neighbor. Jesus said,

³² “If you love those who love you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. ³³ And if you do good to those who do good to you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. ³⁴ And if you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to get back the same amount (Luke 6:32–34).

Or perhaps you give, but you don’t do it for the right motivations. That’s what Augustine thought this passage was addressing.⁴ Jesus does warn us against giving in order to be seen as

⁴ “My little children, let us not love only in word and in tongue; but in deed and in truth;’ we ask, in what work, in what truth? Can there be a more manifest work than to give to the poor? Many do this of vainglory, not of love. Can there be a greater work than to die for the brethren? This also, many would fain be thought to do, who do it of vainglory to get a name, not from bowels of love. It remains, that that man loves his brother, who before God, where God alone seeth, assures his own heart, and questions his heart whether he does this indeed for love of the brethren; and his witness is that eye which penetrates the heart, where man cannot look.” Augustine of Hippo, “Ten Homilies on the First Epistle of John,” in *St. Augustin: Homilies on the Gospel of John, Homilies on the First Epistle of John*,

generous (Matt. 6:1–4). The apostle Paul says, “If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing” (1 Cor. 13:3). So, perhaps you decide to give only to be seen as generous, or you give only out of duty and not out of a desire to give something that someone else needs. God sees your motives. As King Solomon once said to God, “you, you only, know the hearts of all the children of mankind” (1 Kgs. 8:39).⁵ He knows your heart better than you do. And the wrong motives of your heart rightfully condemn you, too.

But perhaps you do love others in deed and in truth. In that case, your heart doesn’t condemn you. And what then? John tells us that you can approach God in prayer with confidence. Look at verses 21 and 22: “Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God; and whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him.” If the motivations or desires of our heart are not greedy, and not closed against our neighbor, then we can confidently approach God and receive what we ask of him. Why? “Because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him.”

Now, we must be aware that God is under no obligation to answer all of our prayers. And I don’t think, at the end of the day, he answers our prayers based solely on how obedient we are. Later in John’s letter, he’ll say more about prayer. In chapter 5, verses 14 and 15, he writes,

¹⁴ And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. ¹⁵ And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him.

We pray to God according to his will. When we do that, he will grant our requests.⁶ After all, Jesus asked the Father for his cup of wrath to pass from him (Matt. 26:36–46). He asked that if there was any way to avoid God’s wrath, to not suffer the punishment for guilt sinners on the

Soliloquies, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. H. Browne and Joseph H. Myers, vol. 7, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, First Series (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1888), 494.

⁵ See also Ps. 33:13–15:

¹³ The LORD looks down from heaven;
he sees all the children of man;
¹⁴ from where he sits enthroned he looks out
on all the inhabitants of the earth,
¹⁵ he who fashions the hearts of them all
and observes all their deeds.

⁶ See also John 14:13–14; 15:16; 16:23. To ask in Jesus’ “name” is to ask according to who he is and what he has done. It means asking God for things according to what Jesus taught. If we ask for things against Jesus’ principles, God will not grant us those requests.

cross. But he said that the Father's will must be done. Paul asked for the "thorn," whatever that was, to be removed from his flesh, but God didn't do that (2 Cor. 12:7–9). The point is that the more we are pursuing God and trying to obey him, the more likely we are to pray for things according to his will. And when we do that, he will give us what we ask for.

The Bible does teach that our sins can hinder our prayers. Consider Psalm 66:18:

If I had cherished iniquity in my heart,
the Lord would not have listened.

And Proverbs 28:9:

If one turns away his ear from hearing the law,
even his prayer is an abomination.⁷

The idea is that if our hearts are opposed to God, how can we then turn around and ask him for things? Why should we expect that he will respond favorably?

Instead, we should seek to keep his commandments and do what pleases God, as verse 22 says. Jesus always did things that were pleasing to God (John 8:29), and so should we.

How do we please God? We keep his commandments. And what is the commandment we're supposed to keep? Look at verse 23: "And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us." That may seem odd to think of believing in Jesus as a commandment, but in John's Gospel he says, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent" (John 6:29). We are supposed to believe in the name of Jesus. That doesn't mean only that we know of a person with a five-letter name, "Jesus." That doesn't mean we believe that certain facts about Jesus are true. Belief is trust. And in the Bible, the "name" of a person is his identity. We trust that Jesus is who the Bible says he is, and that he did what the Bible says he did. That trust includes obedience. Look at John 3:36: "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him." Notice that faith is contrasted with disobedience. They are opposed to one another. This is certainly not the only place in the Bible where unbelief is equated with disobedience (see Heb. 3:18–19).

Jesus expects total commitment from his followers. He said, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John

⁷ See also Proverbs 15:8; James 4:3; 1 Pet. 3:7.

8:31–32). He says things like, “Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and not do what I tell you?” (Luke 6:46). Jesus doesn’t just want our words; he wants our hearts, hearts that are willing to do what he says, hearts that motivate people to actually do what he says we should do.

Jesus says we should love one another. John has already talked about the need to love one another (2:10; 3:11). And he’ll talk about it more later (4:7, 11–12; 2 John 5). So, I won’t belabor the point. Jesus clearly taught that Christians should love one another. This is one of the marks of being a follower of Jesus and a child of God (John 13:34; 15:12, 17).

So, the one who obeys the commandment to believe in Jesus and to love others does what is pleasing to God and should expect to have his or her prayers answered. What else do we receive? John also tells us that the one who keeps Jesus’ commandments has a special relationship with him. Look at verse 24: “Whoever keeps his commandments abides in God, and God in him. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit whom he has given us.” To abide means to dwell, to live in. John has already talked about abiding in the light (2:10) and abiding forever (2:17), which is another way of talking about eternal life. He tells his readers that the teaching of the apostles should abide in them (2:24) and that the anointing they received, certainly a reference to the Holy Spirit, abides in them (2:27). But now John says that God himself will abide in them, and they will abide in God (see also 4:12). This is similar to what Jesus said in John 14:23: “If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.”

And the way that we know that we abide in God and he abides in us is that he has given us the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit testifies to our hearts that we are God’s children (see 1 John 4:13; also Rom. 8:14–17). The Holy Spirit gives us the power to trust in Jesus and follow him. The Holy Spirit gives us the ability to love God and obey his commandments (cf. Ezek. 36:27).

I’ve been holding back something deliberately. Up to this point, you may think, “Christianity is all about working harder and being a good person. If we’re good, God rewards us.” Well, if that were true, we’d all be in trouble. None of us have perfect hearts. None of us always please God. In fact, the apostle Paul says that it is impossible to please God “in our flesh” (Rom. 8:8). That is, apart from God’s grace, apart from the power that he gives us through the Holy Spirit, we cannot even begin to do things that are pleasing to God.

John says that if our hearts do not condemn us, we can approach God in confidence. But what if our hearts condemn us? If you have any measure of real faith, you’ve probably had

moments—maybe a lot of them—when you wonder if you’re really a Christian. You can’t take what John says seriously, and what Jesus taught seriously, without feeling convicted. When we’re confronted with Jesus’ teachings, we realize we don’t measure up. We become aware of how proud we are, how selfish we are, how unloving we are. And I didn’t want to soften the edge of John’s teaching today. I want it to sting us a bit.

But if I left us with that thought, there would be no hope. It wouldn’t be good news. The good news is that God knows our weaknesses. And God is a merciful and gracious God. Let’s consider Psalm 103:8–14:

- ⁸ The LORD is merciful and gracious,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
⁹ He will not always chide,
nor will he keep his anger forever.
¹⁰ He does not deal with us according to our sins,
nor repay us according to our iniquities.
¹¹ For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him;
¹² as far as the east is from the west,
so far does he remove our transgressions from us.
¹³ As a father shows compassion to his children,
so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him.
¹⁴ For he knows our frame;
he remembers that we are dust.

God knows our weakness. He does not treat us according to our sins. He is a forgiving God. Those who truly believe in Jesus do not stand condemned (1 John 3:18). As Paul says, “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1). Why? Because Jesus took that condemnation upon himself when he died on the cross. He took God’s perfect, just, holy punishment for our failure to love him and love others the way we should. And right as he was dying, he said, “It is finished” (John 19:30). For those united with Jesus, there is no more payment for our sin.

God’s word has a way of exposing our hearts. As the author of Hebrews says,

- ¹² For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. ¹³ And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account (Heb. 4:12–13).

Again, God knows our hearts better than we do. He knows everything.

But the author of Hebrews continues and says that Jesus is our great high priest. He is the one who goes between God the Father and us. He represents us. And because God the Son became a man, he knows what it is like to live as a human being. He knows our weakness and he helps us.

¹⁴ Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. ¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. ¹⁶ Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need (Heb. 4:14–16).

Because of Jesus, we can approach God’s throne of grace. We should never forget what John said at the beginning of this letter: “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). “My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous” (1 John 2:1).

The question for us is, do we truly believe?

Faith may seem easy to some, but it’s not. We’re trusting that because of Jesus, we really are in the right before God. Yet we won’t know for sure until we die and are in God’s presence. Our hearts are deceptive. We could fool ourselves into thinking that we’re okay with God when we’re not. So, trusting Jesus’ sacrifice actually covers up our darkest sins—and *all* our sins—is no small thing.

I suppose we could think of faith in Jesus the way we think of putting our faith in a surgeon. I don’t know if any of you have been scared to have a surgery. It can be a scary thing if you think about it. One doctor is going to knock you out and another is going to cut into your body. Yes, we know that surgeons have good track records. But we trust that the anesthesiologist won’t give us too much anesthesia so we die, or too little so we wake up in the middle of the surgery. We trust that the surgeon won’t sever important nerves or cut arteries. We have to come to a place where we trust these doctors even though we don’t understand medicine the way they do.

Trusting in Jesus is a bit like trusting in a surgeon. It’s like God is going to remove the massive tumor of sin that is destroying us. And we have to trust he will remove all of it. But what John wants to stress, I think, is that we should be good patients. If God has removed a massive

tumor from our lungs, we shouldn't continue to smoke. That makes no sense. In other words, we shouldn't want to go back to the thing that threatened our eternal lives. We shouldn't want to go back to sinning.

Again, do we really believe? Do we trust Jesus or someone or something else?

This week, I met a Catholic woman (some of you know who I'm talking about) who said she knew she was going to be with God when she died because she prayed the rosary every night. And she also talked a bit about her faith in St. Jude, whose image she wore on her necklace. I would hate to come to the end of my life and meet my Maker and say, "But God, I prayed this prayer every day, so you have to let me into heaven!" I would hate to say, "I'm with St. Jude. He'll get me in, right?" My only plea will be Jesus. I will have to confess that I have not done what is right. I haven't loved God with my whole being. I haven't loved my neighbor as myself.⁸ But I know that Jesus did. And he died for me. I trust that the Good Physician is the only one who can cure me. I can't trust in anything or anyone else to make me right with God.

If our hearts are convicting or even condemning us today, or any other day, let us do what John says. Let us confess our sins to God. Agree with God that you have a messed-up heart. Tell him that you know you've failed to love him and to love others. He knows already. But it's good to agree with him. If we agree with God, we'll do what he says. We'll confess our sins, and then we'll try to love God and love your neighbors. Love isn't just a feeling. It's an action. Love God by being surrounded by the things of God. Read the Bible, pray, be part of a church, serve in the church. And love others by trying to meet the needs of others. Think of others and their needs. Don't just think of your own. And when you pray, pray along the lines of what God wants. Don't just give him a laundry list of your wants, as if he were your butler. Talk to him as one who knows what he wants. Say, "Your will be done, not mine."

When we do these things, we know that we are on the right track. We have confidence before God. Trust Jesus. Live for him. Salvation is a gift, not something we earn. But it is a gift that is meant to be put into practice (Phil. 2:12–13). When we practice our faith, we know that he abides in us, and we abide in him. Our heart will not and cannot condemn us, because God is greater than our heart.

⁸ See Matt. 22:34–40 to find out what Jesus said about loving God and loving others.