

Lesson 17: “God, Greater Than Our Heart”

1 John 3:19-24

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1 John 3:19-24 *We will know by this that we are of the truth, and will assure our heart before Him in whatever our heart condemns us; for God is greater than our heart and knows all things. 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 the things that are pleasing in His sight. This is His commandment, that we believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, just as He commanded us. The one who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him. We know by this that He abides in us, be the Spirit whom He has given us.*

The topic here is confidence, which is the theme of all of 1 John. “Knowing” with confidence is important to John, and we see the word “know” two more times in this passage – verse 19 and verse 24. And “confidence” in verse 21. Remember John’s primary purpose in writing this letter:

1 John 5:13-14a *These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life. This is the confidence which we have before Him ...*

The opening phrase in verse 19, “*we will know by this,*” can either be looking back to what came before, or forward to what follows. If we take it to be looking forward, it would be saying that our salvation (being of the truth) is confirmed by our heart condemning us. But that doesn’t seem to match the positive message of confidence, much less the heart of the whole of Scripture.

So it makes much more sense to take “*we know by this*” to be looking back to what preceded it. And that is what we learned in our last lesson from verses 16-18.

- ✓ **The Standard of Love (v.16)** – Jesus sacrificially dying on the cross for us
- ✓ **The Test of Love (vs.17)** – will we see the need with compassion & use our resources to meet the need?
- ✓ **The Principle of Love (v.18)** - not in word only or with lying tongue, but in action with truthful execution

So it is by our love in action that we will know that we are of the truth, that is, living a sincere Christian life. This is not to say that our faith in Christ is non-essential, for it is our faith in Christ’s work on the cross that motivates and propels our love in action to others. His sacrifice for us is the standard of our sacrifice for others.

I think it is fair to say that each of us sometimes struggles in feeling that we have not done enough to show our love to others. In other words, “*our heart condemns us*” in reminding us that we fall short of what we could and should be doing for Jesus. Verse 19 is telling us that our loving of others in deed not only assures us that we are of the truth – living a sincere Christian walk – but these deeds of love should assure us even when our heart is telling us that we have not done enough or have not done it well.

And the capstone on that thought is that “*God is greater than our heart and knows all things.*” Now this could be interpreted in a negative sense in that God condemns us in knowing all things. This would be a “disturbing of comfortable hearts.” But even though we all need some reminding of our inadequacy, this seems not to be the emphasis here. Rather, God is rather “comforting disturbed hearts.” (Credit to Steven Cole for these two clever phrases). God is here comforting our sincerely intentioned inadequacy.

That “*God knows all things*” should here be a precious reminder that God knows our true desires and intentions and conviction to love as Christ loved. He understands our failings in this area and appreciates our sincere loving of others that we do indeed carry out. What a loving God He is to give us confidence even in our partial fulfillment of His will, if not our complete fulfillment. Yes, if our heart condemns us in falling short, God is greater than our heart, and knows if we are truly trying and wanting to be better.

Remember that King David wanted to build a temple for God, but that privilege was left to his son, Solomon. Read what Solomon said on this matter:

1 Kings 8:17-18 *Now it was in the heart of my father David to build a house for the name of the Lord, the God of Israel. But the Lord said to my father David, "Because it was in your heart to build a house for My name, you did well that it was in your heart."*

When John says in verse 19 that we will "assure" our heart before Him, this is saying that our self-condemning heart can be persuaded, soothed and pacified by the reassurance that God knows our heart better than we know it. Our self-doubts are not to make us think that we are not His, or that we are not good enough. We are to "assure" our heart in His lovingly knowing the true desires of our heart.

Our salvation confidence must come from the 3 tests of authentic Christianity that John has been, and will continue to reiterate in his letter:

JOHN'S 3 TESTS OF AUTHENTIC CHRISTIANITY

1. The MORAL test of OBEDIENCE (2:3-4, 5:2-3)
2. The RELATIONAL test of LOVE (2:9-10, 3:14, 4:7)
3. The DOCTRINAL test of FAITH (2:22-23, 4:2-3, 5:1, 5)

And then in verse 21, John tells us that if our heart does NOT condemn us we have confidence in the following "handful" (5) of Christian imperatives (verses 22-24):

1. **Boldness in prayer** ("whatever we ask we receive from Him")
2. **Keeping of commands** ("because we keep His commandments that are pleasing in His sight")
3. **Trusting in Jesus** ("that we believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ")
4. **Loving one another** ("and love one another")
5. **Abiding in the Spirit** ("abides in Him ... by the Spirit whom He has given us")

CONSCIOUS OF CONSCIENCE

At this point, I think it would be helpful to say a word about our conscience, for when John is speaking about "assuring our heart" or "our heart condemning us" he is speaking about what we commonly call our conscience, and likewise the work of the indwelling Holy Spirit.

First, know that God gives all human creation a conscience – a natural, built in moral compass that informs basic right and wrong.

Romans 2:14-15 *For when Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them.*

Romans 1:18-19 *For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.*

Those who are not Christ-followers do not have the Holy Spirit within them, but know that they do have a God-given moral compass of general right and wrong.

One description I have heard is that our natural conscience is "an internal, rational capacity that bears witness to our value system." Now this value system, given by God, can be swayed and reprogrammed by parents, friends, teachers, and the world around us. It can also be ignored and rationalized to accept those things that are not according to God's plan – such as abortion, living together before marriage or the LGBTQ lifestyles. Thus, many feel they are "following their conscience" in accepting these deviations from God's plan. So "trust your conscience" is not always great advice.

Now those who have been born-again by trusting in Christ's provision for sin have the Holy Spirit within. (Romans 8:9) We have the "mind of Christ." (1 Corinthians 2:16). And our regenerated conscience is now informed by the indwelling Holy Spirit. Yet we must train ourselves to listen to that "still small voice" which

is the voice of God's Spirit to our spirit. This is our "heart" that either condemns or approves our choices, to which John refers in today's passage. Listen to Paul:

Romans 9:1 *I am telling the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience testifies with me in the Holy Spirit.*

Just as our conscience can be reprogrammed by the world, it can be given an "upgrade" by the Word of God. The conscience we were given at physical birth was a general moral compass, but it was not the fullness of God's revelation to us, which is the Bible, God's Holy Word. So as we read, study and allow God's teachings to inform our internal moral compass, our conscience becomes a more reliable guide. The Spirit of God within us can then bear witness with our spirit (conscience) of what is true and acceptable. So our conscience is as valuable as its training! It can be swayed by the whims of the evil one or by the will of God.

It should also be noted in the brief discussion of our conscience that to go against one's conscience is sin, even if the conscience is not fully informed. For instance, if one is convinced by conscience that one should not go to a certain event, even if other believers have the freedom to do so, he/she should not.

Romans 14:22 *The faith which you have, have as your own conviction before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves.*

And consider this scenario: You discover a wallet, find that it has money in it, and decide to take it for your own. Then shortly thereafter you discover that your wallet is missing and it is the very one from which you previously took the money. Is it a sin to have "stolen" your own money? Yes it is. God will judge you on the intention of your heart.

BEING FILLED WITH THE SPIRIT

We must acknowledge that having the Spirit dwelling within as a believer and being filled with the Holy Spirit are two different things. Every Christian has the Spirit dwelling in him/her. But Paul encouraged believers to "be filled with the Holy Spirit."

Ephesians 5:18 *And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit.*

I remind us all that being "drunk" and being "filled" are the same root word in this verse, meaning that we are not to be controlled by the influence of alcohol, but we *are* to be controlled by the influence of the Spirit. In the same way that alcohol will influence our physical behavior, being filled with the Holy Spirit will influence our spiritual behavior. So being filled with the Spirit is not automatic, it is a willful choice. God's command is "be filled with the Spirit," making it an act of our will.

And when we are filled with the Spirit, our conscience will be correctly informed. And when our conscience is correctly informed, our "heart" will not condemn us and we will have confidence before God to be (1) bold in prayer, (2) obey Him correctly, (3) trust Jesus in all things, (4) love one another in deed and (5) abide in the Spirit.

So how are we to be filled with the Spirit? Well the late Dwight L. Moody had a favorite way of illustrating this in his gospel rallies. He would lift up an empty glass and ask how he could best get rid of the air within it. One would suggest: "vacuum out the air." "But that would shatter the glass," responded Moody. When all failing suggestions ceased, he would simply pour a pitcher of water into the glass, dispelling all the air. "And this is an illustration of how you are filled with the Spirit," would teach Moody. You don't try to rid the soul of wrong-doing as much as fill it with the Spirit of right-doing. You confess away the wrong, and pray in the good."

This, of course, must be done diligently day by day and decision by decision. In this way, God, who is greater than our heart, will assure our heart that we are equipped and ready to represent Him faithfully and rightly.

Learn to listen to that "still small voice." And keep yourself filled with the Spirit of truth!