

## **Gospel Truths That Will Heal a Hurting Heart and Cure a Condemning Conscience**

### **I John 3:18-24**

**Introduction:** 1) The human heart is a tender, vulnerable and complex component of every single human being. Who we are on the inside, what we sometimes call “the real you”, is a gracious gift from God when it is functioning as our Creator intended. It helps us, as an ethical barometer, to make moral choices. It also allows us to express emotions and feelings, and to be self-reflective. Sometimes we like what we see when we look on the inside. At other times we are wounded and even crushed by what we find. Our inclination is to “trust our heart,” and “let your conscience be your guide,” but God tells us in Jeremiah 17:9, “The heart is more deceitful than anything else, and incurable—who can understand it?”

Interestingly, the answer to this much often quoted verse is found in the very next verse in Jeremiah, “I, Yahweh, examine the mind, I test the heart to give each according to his way...” (Jeremiah 17:10).

2) From a pastoral perspective we should recognize there can be a number of reasons why a person may have what John calls a “condemning heart” (*HCSB*, “a condemning conscience”). James Boice notes that, “self-condemnation can be due to a number of factors. It can be a matter of disposition; some people are just more introspective and melancholy than others. It may be a question of health; how a

person feels inevitable affects how he thinks. It may be due to specific sin. It may be due to circumstances. But whatever the cause, the problem is a real one and quite widespread. How is a believer to deal with such doubt?" (*The Epistles of John*, 121-22).

3) The apostle John recognized that those who have believe in Jesus (v. 23) could still suffer from a hurting heart, a condemning conscience. He also knew there were some basic truths, all grounded in the good news of the gospel, that could provide healing, the exact cure that is needed. Some basic knowledge of what God has done and is doing in the lives of those who have trusted in Jesus provides the precise remedy for this all too common heart condition. The medicine is strong, but the outcome for the patient is more than worth it.

### **I. Love for other reassures our hearts we belong to God     3:18-19**

1) Once more John uses a "hinge verse" to connect two related passages that have a common subject. The verse is verse 18. The subject is love. When we love "in deed and truth" (v.18) this reassures our heart before him, before God, that we are of the truth (v.19). Assurance will spring forth in the heart, in the conscience, when we demonstrate genuine and authentic love for others. It assures us that we are a child of God. We have confidence in His presence that He is our God and we are His children.

2) Loving others as God in Christ has loved us strengthens our hearts and gives us assurance. Indeed by loving others in truth (v.18) we come to know “that we are of the truth” (v.19). However, we must be honest. Loving others is not always easy. Clearly it is “easier said than done.” After all, at the heart of love is serving others as we have been served by Jesus.

Sometimes this service is public, noble and newsworthy. Sometimes it is private, humiliating and unnoticed. It can be a challenge.

3) Richard Foster nails it when he writes in *Celebration of Discipline*,

“In some ways we would prefer to hear Jesus’ call to deny father and mother, houses and land for the sake of the gospel than his word to wash feet. Radical self-denial gives the feel of adventure....But in service we much experience the many little deaths of going beyond ourselves. Service banishes us to the mundane, the ordinary, the trivial.” (Harper Collins, 1978, 126-127).

4) Yes, love requires service. Service involves humility. And, loving others in humble service gives us assurance that we belong to Jesus. That sounds like a life worth living, a path worth pursuing. And don’t miss this: it is by this knowledge and truth in our minds that assurance is planted and flourishes in our hearts.

## II. God is the perfect Judge who sees everything      3:20

1) This is a tricky and difficult verse to interpret. Its basic meaning is clear, the difficulty is in the details. The basic truth is we may experience a condemning heart, a guilty conscience, something the great and omnipotent God does not want us to have. The question to be asked and answered is this: Is my condemning heart a good thing or a bad thing? Does my heart condemn me justly for which the God of the gospel delivers me or does it condemn me unjustly for which the God of the gospel delivers me?

2) John addresses directly this condemning “heart” (4 times in vs. 19-21). In verse 20 he does so in the context of the omniscience of God. In verse 21 he will do so in the context of prayer.

3) My friend J.D. Greear wrote a wonderful book entitled *Stop Asking Jesus Into Your Heart: How to Know For Sure You Are Saved*. The book is not a rant against praying what is often called, “the sinner’s prayer.” Rather, it is a book on assurance in one’s salvation. We know that the Bible teaches that it is possible to be saved and yet have doubts and become discouraged. Take the 3-fold test we have seen in 1 John:

- Belief: Do I really believe enough and rightly about Jesus?
- Obedience: Am I really obeying God as I ought?
- Love: Is my love for others what it should be?

Sometimes I doubt. Sometimes I disobey. Sometimes hate comes out of nowhere. And, it bothers me. That is a bad thing, right? No, it is actually a good thing. Those who do not know Christ ask none of these questions! They do not bother them. But, they can trouble the Christian.

4) When our hearts hurt and our conscience condemns us, look to God, look to Christ and the gospel because He “is greater than our heart (*HCSB*, conscience), and he knows everything.” Now, exactly how does God apply the healing balm of His Word in such situations? In several ways I believe.

- When we do not love in action and truth (v. 18), God who is (1) greater than our hearts and (2) knows all things, deals with us.

Sometimes our heart rightly condemns us, blames us, judges us for not loving others in a real, true, and genuine sense. God in grace and mercy can help us overcome and conquer this. He will motivate us (v. 17) to just say no to a hard heart, an unloving heart. He sees everything and so He knows what is going on. Indeed, He knows our heart better than we know it ourselves. He will inspire us, encourage us, challenge us, to love others just like He has loved us (3:16). Our conscience, our heart, who we really are on the inside, can be too lenient in its verdict. But, it may also be too severe, forgetting that “there is no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom.

8:1). God is greater than all and He knows all. He is the perfect judge. None of the believer's failures or successes escape His notice. It is the difference between conscience and omniscience! He knows! He sees! Loving others as He loves us will provide acceptance in His presence. Remembering who we are in Christ will provide assurance as we stand before the perfect Judge, who also happens to be our Father! So, be honest. Tell God, "I don't know, myself, sometimes, why I do what I do (or don't do). But you do and so I commit all judgment to you! I put it all in your hands." Claim Psalm 139:23 where the Bible says, "Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts!" Trust what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 4:3-5, "But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive the commendation from God."

### III. Be confident that God answers our prayers

3:21-22

1) There is a beautiful and natural flow to John's argument in these verses. Loving others as we have been loved by Jesus assures us that we are in the truth, even when we don't love perfectly. God says trust me not your heart, which is not infallible and is not always correct. Now that we are confident before God (v. 20), we can be confident when we pray (v.21-22).

2) "Beloved" (*agapetoi*, 4:1, 7) is a term of concern and compassion for those struggling with a hurting heart, a condemning conscience. It is followed by words of encouragement. The sense of what John says is this: when we trust the judgment of our conscience to our great God who is omniscient about everything, our confidence shifts from our experience and feelings to God's Word and what He says about us. He tells me there is no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus (Rom 8:1, 31-34). Seeing who I am in Christ, I have confidence, boldness, "the boldness with which the son appears before the Father, and not that which the accused appears before the Judge" (Westcott, *Epistles of John*, 118).

3) This confidence before God, resulting from a clear conscience in Christ, provides motivation and assurance as I approach Father God in prayer (read v. 22). My request made in prayer flows from a heart and life that 1) delights in keeping His commandments and 2) does what pleases Him.

These provide the crucial theological context for the promise, “whatever we ask we receive from Him” (see 1 John 5:14-15).

4) The wonderful Baptist preacher Charles Spurgeon had words of wisdom that drives home the truths of these verses:

“If our heart condemn us not, then have we confidence toward God; and whatsoever we ask, we receive of him.” He who has a clear conscience comes to God with confidence, and that confidence of faith ensures to him the answer of his prayer. Childlike confidence makes us pray as none else can. It makes a man pray for great things, which he would never have asked for if he had not learned this confidence; and makes him pray for little things which a great many are afraid to ask for, because they have not yet felt towards God the confidence of children....

The man of *obedience* is the man whom God will hear, because his obedient heart leads him to pray humbly, and with submission, for he feels it to be his highest desire that the Lord’s will should be done. Therefore it is that the man of obedient heart prays like a prophet; his prayers are prophecies. Is he not one with God? Doth he not desire and ask for exactly what God intends? How can a prayer shot from



such a bow ever fail to reach its target?” (“The Conditions of Power in Prayer”, 3-23-1873, pgs. 176-77).

A believer with a clear conscience, confident access, and an obedient life that pleases Christ; such a person can be assuredly assured that God will hear and answer their prayers for their good and for His glory. After all, I am a trusting child coming to a loving Father, a Father who knows all my sins and imperfections and still loves me and accepts me anyway in His Son.

#### **IV. Believe Jesus is the Son of God and love one another 3:23**

1) This verse and the one that follows is quietly but clearly Trinitarian. And it provides what could be called “a grand and glorious summary of the Bible.” It is interesting how John packages this verse. Fundamentally there is one comprehensive commandment expressed in two parts. First, there must be an explicit belief in the Son, Jesus Christ (the doctrinal test). Second, there must be an active love for one another (the moral test).

2) God’s commandment is that “we believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ.” This is the first of nine occurrences of the word “believe” in 1 John (see 3:23; 4:1, 16; 5:1; 5, 10 [3x], 13). It means to trust or rely upon. “Name” conveys the person and work of Christ and all that He is and accomplishes. “Son” emphasizes His eternal deity and unique relationship to the Father. “Jesus” is His human name, equivalent to the Hebrew name

Joshua. It means “Yahweh saves” or “Yahweh is salvation.” “Christ” means “Anointed One”, the Messiah of God.

3) Let’s put it all together. To believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ is to place your trust, your faith, in Him and only Him and all that He is – the divine Son, the incarnate Deity, the sinless human, the perfect atonement for our sin, the Messianic Savior. You trust all of Him, not some, part or even most. You trust the biblical Christ or you trust in no Christ at all.

4) We also “love one another, just as he has commanded us.” This commandment appears repeatedly throughout the Bible. It’s most significant appearance probably is found in John 13:34-35 where Jesus said on the night He was betrayed, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” It appears again in John’s gospel in 15:12 and 17.

Warren Wiersbe nails the essence of this verse quite well for us: “Faith toward God and love toward man sum up a Christian’s obligations.

Christianity is “faith which worketh by love” (Gal. 5:6). (*Be Real* , 133-34).

John Piper helpfully adds, “The one all embracing commandment of this letter is that we believe and that we love. These are the foundations of our assurance because these are the evidence of God’s work, they are the

testimony of his Spirit.” (“Test the Spirits of See Whether They Are of God”, 5-5-85). This last statement provides a natural transition to our final observation.

## **V. Abide in God and know that God abides in us by the gift of His Spirit**

### **3:24**

1) John addresses our keeping the commandments of God for the 4<sup>th</sup> time in verses 22-24, but now adds an additional aspect or blessing that flows from our obedience. Working backwards and paraphrasing the verse helps us clarify what John is teaching us.

2) By the Holy Spirit whom God has given us as a grace gift, we know that God abides in us and we abide in God. And, the one who abides in God keeps continually, as a habit of his new life in Christ, God’s commandments.

3) John’s point is keeping God’s commandments and abiding in God always go together. Having the Spirit of God and abiding in God always together.

It is fascinating to note “abiding” occurs almost 120 times in the New Testament, over 65 being in the writings of John.

4) John clearly wants us to understand that the Spirit, the true Spirit who stand in radical contrast to the false spirits of antichrist (4:1-6), comes as a gift not an obligation. He is given to us as a grace gift, He is not something we can earn or merit. “Given to us” looks to the past and our conversion,

the moment in time when we believed the gospel. That is when we received the Spirit.

5) Verse 24 is the 1<sup>st</sup> direct mention of the Holy Spirit in 1 John. This 3<sup>rd</sup> person of the Triune God is essential to God abiding in us and our abiding in God. He is crucial to helping us discern the false spirits, the spirit of error, that does not confess Jesus is from God (4:3). John Stott puts this all together in the context of the text we have studied: “The Spirit whose presence is the test of Christ’s living in us, manifests himself objectively in our life and conduct. It is he who inspires us to confess Jesus as the Christ come in the flesh, as John immediately proceeds to show (4:1ff; cf.2:20, 27). It is also he who empowers us to live righteously and to love our brothers and sisters (cf. 4:13; Gal. 5:16, 22). So if we would set our hearts at rest, when they accuse and condemn us, we must look for evidence of the Spirit’s working, and particularly whether he is enabling us to believe in Christ, to obey God’s commands and to love our brothers; for the condition of Christ dwelling in us and of our dwelling in him is this comprehensive obedience (24a), and the evidence of the indwelling is the gift of the Spirit” (24b).

(John Stott, *The Letters of John*, TNTC, 154-55).

**Conclusion:** 1) A number of years ago I met a 55 year old man who asked if he could share his conversion testimony. I said, “Sure, I would love to hear it.” He

told me he had trusted Christ at the age of 50, just 5 years ago. He went on to say he was a recovering alcoholic and drug addict who had experienced several failed marriages, all of which were his fault. He said he blamed no one, that he had made bad choices and dumb decisions throughout most of his life. Then, with tears streaming down his face, he began to talk about his childhood and a dad who criticized and condemned him at every turn. He said, “You know all I can remember about my childhood was my daddy saying things like, “Boy you can’t do anything right. Boy, you’re just downright dumb. Boy, you will never grow up to amount to anything.” He then added, “I guess I grew up to be exactly what my daddy said I would be.” But then with a gentle smile and a twinkle in his eye he quietly and humbly whispered, “But 5 years ago when I met Jesus, I got a new daddy. And this daddy loves me. He believes in me. He thinks I can do things!”

2) In Christ we do get a new daddy, a perfect daddy, a perfect heavenly Father. This Father longs for you to have a healthy heart and a clear conscience. And we can! Recall who you are in Him through Christ and by the Spirit. Love others as you have been loved by Him. Obey His commands and please Him out of “gospel gratitude” for who He is and what He has done. These are truths with the power to save. These are truths with the power to heal.