

Does Your Heart Condemn You?

1 John 3:16-21

With Study Questions

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I. By This We Know Love

“By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down *our* lives for the brethren. ¹⁷ But whoever has this world’s goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him? ¹⁸ My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth” (1 John 3:16-18).

Affection Versus Love

How do we know what love is? Love is often defined as strong affection. And that may be one definition of love (but arguably a lower and more carnal definition.) But a higher and more Christ-like definition seems to be just the opposite. What I mean by this is that the overcoming of strong affection for the sake of doing what is right—right by God and by men—seems to be a more Christian love. As Jesus said, **“But if you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them” (Luke 6:32).**

I have heard people say they feel hypocritical when they demonstrate acts of love and friendship toward people for whom they have a visceral contempt (people they hate.) This, quite frankly, so far from being hypocritical, is a demonstration of the truly Christian and spiritual man.

The Epitome Of Love

In verse 16 John gives us the example of the epitome of love. It is Christ’s love for His church. Love is the subject of untold numbers of books, movies, poems, etc. It is said to be enigmatic and mysterious, and maybe to a certain extent it is. But if we want to know what love is, we must read the gospels.¹ We must examine the way Jesus loves us. And the obvious high-point of Jesus’ love for us is His death on the cross.

¹ By the way, we must read and seek to understand the gospels. Often, I have heard people make statements such as, “Nowhere in the Bible does it say that Jesus did such and such” or “Jesus constantly did such and such” only to find, upon reading the gospels, that such is not the case. There is very much an image of Jesus that the contemporary church has which doesn’t seem to be consistent with the Biblical Jesus.

The call to action here then is to love others the same way we have been loved. This very basic understanding of the Christian faith must never be neglected. Elsewhere our Savior declared that **“the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:28)**. This is the calling of Christians.

Alms Or Heaven?

Most of us, if not all of us, come into the kingdom crying for alms and receiving the ability to walk (A reference to Acts 3 containing the story of Peter, John and the man who was lame.) What I mean by this is that we have social or physical needs or wants, i.e., illness, relationship problems, loneliness, depression, confusion about who we are and where we are going in life, etc., and we call out to God for help. If God truly saves us we (should) soon realize that our need was much greater than we originally thought. Our very soul was in danger, for we were living a life of offense to the Creator—a Creator who was receiving very little of our thoughts or attention and none of our allegiance or faith.

Having Heaven But Still Crying For Alms

I don't assume to know what is happening in all the congregations in the land, but it does seem to me (at least in my interaction with Christians on the radio or in the community) that this particular concept is still quite downplayed in the church today. The concept that man has offended God, who is the embodiment (metaphorically) of what is good and right and true and just. And that God, instead of responding in wrath and justice (at least for the elect) has responded in mercy and in love. He, therefore, should be ever thanked, praised and glorified (and shortly we will see another response we should have as well.) But instead of responding properly, many of us continue crying for alms.

Intentions Don't Suffice

John tells us in this passage that we should come to the point where we start laying down our lives. The “my needs” rhetoric must be replaced with, “how can I meet your needs?” rhetoric. And, quite frankly, it is not enough to merely have good intentions. Recently I had a very warm thought toward a good friend. I was in a bookstore and saw a book I thought he might like, but for some reason I didn't buy it. Later I told him of my warm thought and my inclination to buy him the book (the book which I didn't buy.) He had a very honest and profound response. He said, “It doesn't count unless you buy it.”

Our Sacrifice Is Not Like Jesus'

Excuse this interruption, but I think it is important to note that though we are to imitate Jesus' act of sacrifice, our act of sacrifice (even if were to the point of death) would not produce what His death and resurrection produced. There is nothing inherently efficacious about a person dying for others and it certainly cannot atone (remove) for other people's sins. It is merely the archetype example of love.

I'll Be There If You Need Me

At the same time we must also avoid having messianic complex. The "If you really need me, I'll be there for you and die for you" mentality is a charade. This is where we neglect everyone all the time but swoop down in the last minute to save the day by risking our lives. First of all, what are the chances of that happening? Secondly, John rapidly moves from the drastic to the mundane when he states, **"But whoever has this world's goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him? ¹⁸ My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth.**

Love—Defined By Jesus

In short, love is defined by examining how Christ loves His church and then actually living out that love in our deeds. The mark of God must be on our foreheads (how we think) and on our hands (how we behave). It has very little to do with how we feel.

II. By This We Know We Are Of The Truth

"And by this we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before Him. ²⁰ For if our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and knows all things. ²¹ Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence toward God" (1 John 3:19-21).

Having explained love and our need to love in deed, John seems to indicate here that our assurance of being of the truth (genuine Christians) is tied to what he just taught—namely that we love God and our brothers.

Two Important Points

There are two things we must understand here. One, is the assumption John has of his readers, that they are believers in Jesus—lest we think we can have confidence before God by virtue (or merit) of our ability to love alone. Secondly, even for believers, our love for God and one another is not the basis of

our salvation but the fruit. As Calvin states, **“love is accessory or an inferior aid, a prop to our faith, not a foundation on which it rests.”**²

How We Assure Our Hearts—Two Interpretations

Having said this, John writes of how we can assure our hearts before God. This is a very confusing passage and has resulted in two basic interpretations by theologians.

Disregarding Our Heart

Some understand John to be reassuring his readers to disregard what their heart is saying. In spite of the messages somehow conveyed to us by our hearts, we can have confidence before God. Now to a certain extent this may be true. After all, my heart, being corrupt itself, is not the perfect judge. And if I am covered by the blood of Christ, how arrogant for my own heart to think it can disqualify the power of the cross. I can, therefore, say I agree with the concept of this interpretation. I must continually be aware of the fact that my own heart can deceive me and I must not give it more credit than it deserves.

But It’s Awkward

But however true that concept may be, it doesn’t seem to jibe with the context of the passage. It would make verses 20 and 21 awkward. John would, in essence, be saying, **“if our heart condemns us, we have confidence toward God and our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence toward God.”** It is not impossible that John might be saying this. But when you add to this the statement that **“God is greater than our heart, and knows all things”** it makes it read even more awkwardly. If John were promoting this concept here, wouldn’t he say something like, **“God is greater than our heart and forgives all things?”** This is why I side with the other position.³

Our Heart Condemns, But God Moreso

The other interpretation understands the condemnation of the heart as a warning to the believer to not fall into complacency. It would be understood thus: **“If your heart, being corrupt, is sensitive enough to condemn you, how much more is God, who is greater than your heart and more searching since He knows all things?”** In other words, If an unrighteous heart condemns you, how much more a righteous God?

² John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries, Volume XXII* (Baker Book House, reprinted 1993), p. 222.

³ A position held by the Reformers.

This seems to be more consistent with the tenor of this chapter, if not the entire epistle. Christians should beware of a false assurance before God. A faith devoid of love toward God and toward the brethren has been under siege by John and should be regarded as disingenuous. Most natural men, apart from Christ, have enough of conscience to know when they do something wrong, how much more those who are in Christ?

Christians Should Be The Finest People

Christian people should be the finest people on earth. We should not be living the kind of lives where our hearts are continually condemning us. For we do not serve something as lowly as our own hearts, but we serve our Father in heaven whose is more righteous and whose eyes are more piercing than our own conscience. But someone might say, "But my heart continually condemns me! What hope do I have?" To this I will defer to Calvin, with whom I wholeheartedly agree.

"Here, however, arises a greater difficulty, which seems to leave no confidence in the whole world; for who can be found whose heart reproves him in nothing? To this I answer, that the godly are thus reprov'd, that they may at the same time be absolv'd. For it is indeed necessary that they should be seriously troubled inwardly for their sins, that terror may lead them to humility and to a hatred of themselves; but they presently flee to the sacrifice of Christ, where they have sure peace. Yet the Apostle says, in another sense, that they are not condemn'd, because however deficient they may confess themselves to be in many things, they are still relieved by this testimony of conscience, that they truly and from the heart fear God and desire to submit to his righteousness. All who possess this godly feeling, and at the same time know that all their endeavours, how much soever they come short of perfection, yet please God, and are justly said to have a calm or a peaceful heart, because there is no inward compunction to disturb their calm cheerfulness."⁴

⁴ Calvin, p. 224.

Questions for Study

1. What is the difference between affection and love? Which is greater and why?
2. How do we know what love is?
3. Read Acts 3 and the story of Peter and the lame man. How do you see asking for alms as a problem in the church today?
4. How valuable are good intentions?
5. Discuss the “I’ll be there if you need me” charade.
6. How do we know we are of the truth?
7. Is our love the basis of our faith or the fruit of our faith? Explain.
8. In what respect should Christians disregard their hearts?
9. In what respect should Christians regard their hearts?
10. What if we examine our hearts and are found condemned, what should we do?