

1 John 3 – Part S

1 John 3:18-21

^{1Jn 3:18} My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth. ¹⁹ 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.

In analyzing these verses, something almost jumps off of the page. It is v20 when John begins to talk about the believer's heart condemning them. At first, it almost seems somewhat out of place. He has just talked in v19 about the believer knowing the truth and having assurance before God, but then in v20 he says **"if our heart condemns us"**. Look at the progression. John is addressing the issue of how a believer demonstrates the love of God for another believer who has a legitimate need in their life. In v18, John does what he can to make how that love is demonstrated something that is very practical – the believer loves **"in deed and in truth"**. The word for **"deed"** represents an effort, a toil, a labor, or a work.¹ In other words, the believer is sincerely doing something for someone that takes time and effort and even resources to help that person and they are doing it because they truly want to help. Then in v19 he communicates that by so doing that the believer can know that they are of the truth and that their hearts can be persuaded and convinced that they are genuinely saved. Then he talks about condemnation in a person's heart, and at first blush it seems somewhat difficult to make the connection.

Let me ask the question that maybe needs to be asked at this point. If we are truly loving other believers and demonstrating that by meeting some of their legitimate needs, and if we have assurance before God that we are saved, then what would cause our heart to condemn us? The Greek word for **"condemn"** is *"kataginosko"* which is just a variation of the word **"know"**, or *"ginosko"* in v16 and v19. The prefix *"kata"* simply means down or against, so it is the idea of knowing something against someone, or finding fault with – to blame, to condemn. In this case, it obviously is not God's condemnation of the individual, but a kind of self-condemnation.² So, under those conditions why would the believer's heart condemn them? If we do not find the answer to that question, then we will miss the meaning of the passage.

Now, what John has said up to this point is the fact that a believer who is truly helping other believers can know that God is abiding in them and that they are truly saved. However, just the fact that John has introduced the subject of the believer's heart actually condemning them adds another tone to the message. There are two primary perspectives on how these verses can be interpreted, and unfortunately they are the exact opposite of one another. The first way to look at these verses is that they provide great comfort to the believer, and even though the believer's heart may condemn them for something that is out of balance in their Christian life, God is greater than their heart and knows and is sympathetic to all of their weaknesses (v20). In other words, God understands the various sinful issues that the believer may be facing, but He is forgiving and compassionate to the errant believer. In reading v20 it is easy to discern why that view is supported by many people. The other view, however, takes the position that if our heart is actually condemning us for something, then most likely it is because there is something spiritually wrong in our life. If I know that, and if I know that there are things in my life that simply are not right and that they are prevailing in my life, then certainly God knows those things. God sees all of the things in my life that I do not want to see and at times am willing to completely ignore.³ Obviously,

those are the kind of things that God has to deal with in a person's life even though the individual does not want God to deal with those various sins in their life. The Scriptures are clear that the individual who covers their sin and simply ignores obvious sins in their life, that they will not spiritually prosper. [Proverbs 28:13](#) says it this way,

Pr 28:13 He who covers his sins will not prosper, but whoever confesses and forsakes *them* will have mercy.

In reading a verse like this, it must be kept in mind that God does not bless spiritual disobedience and rebellion against His Word. It simply is not going to happen. So the more that a believer ignores sin in their life, the more potential there is that God at some point will deal with them about that sin. A believer cannot simply ignore the Word of God. For instance, there is the spiritual law of sowing and reaping. Whatever a man sows is what he is going to reap. Sin always has a way of catching up with the individual. There are many people who outwardly and intellectually advocate and endorse biblical truth, but they consistently fail to appropriate that truth into their life – and sooner or later that disobedience will come home to roost in their life.

So, if we maintain the context of what John is saying and read v21-22, it should be apparent that the tremendous promise that God gives relative to answered prayer is directly related to two things identified in v22 – (1) obedience to the word of God, and (2) doing those things that are pleasing to God. These two verses seem to provide the proof of how to properly interpret the preceding verses. Think of it this way. God is not going to be casually answering the prayers of those believers who are continually disobedient to His word and doing those things that are not pleasing to Him. Once again, that should be obvious and apparent. The believer who can have confidence in prayer is not the believer who is living in sin, but rather the individual who has committed their life to Christ and is striving at every level to be as obedient as is possible to the Word of God.

The point in all of this is that if we interpret this passage as one of providing great comfort to the believer, then in essence what we have done is to actually negate and undermine the whole purpose of what John is doing. It would actually be like canceling out John's purpose. All the way through this epistle up to this point, John has been reproving, warning, and exhorting believers relative to crucial issues in their life related to sin. It would just seem to be a violation of that to interpret this passage as one that provides comfort to someone who is knowingly and habitually living in sin against God's Word. John clearly says the believer's heart actually condemns them. It would only do that if they were living in disobedience and they knew that they were living in disobedience to God's commands. It seems that the very reason that John is talking about helping other believers and using such strong words as "**shuts up his heart from him**" is because that is exactly what is happening. The word "**shuts up**" literally means to close and as was seen earlier in the study of that verse it means to slam a door shut or to lock someone out. It is the idea of not having any meaningful compassion toward someone who has a legitimate need. John would not be writing about these issues if they were not an actual problem.

It seems that the problem is one of people not taking various known sins in their life seriously, and in the process they just casually and superficially think that all is well when it is not all well. This is John's point. It has been his message all the way through this letter. So if the passage is interpreted as one of comfort, then in essence it is in contradiction and opposition to John's overall purpose of helping people

know with great assurance that they are saved ([1 John 5:13](#)). What happens if we take that position is that we may be very guilty of silencing a person's conscience. It is like the person who is always talking about the love of God, but never talking about God's other attributes. Everyone wants to hear that all is well, and one way to avoid any real conviction is to always be listening to someone who is telling you that God loves you and all is well.⁴

It would be very easy to take someone who is living in obvious sin without any kind of meaningful repentance and to tell them to just consider the death of Christ, His resurrection, and the forgiveness that all of that brings into the person's life. Now that may be fine for someone who is a non-believer, but it can be a very dangerous thing to do for someone who professes Christ outwardly, but is not devoted to Christ in their life. John is consistently providing real life examples of what it means to be a Christian, and if those characteristics are not a normal part of an individual's life, then in essence it should be obvious that the individual may not necessarily be saved. This is not a message of condemnation that John is providing, but rather it is a message of clarification and explanation. Throughout all of Christianity, the tendency that many have had is to separate justification and sanctification. In other words, the tendency has been that if someone has had some kind of spiritual experience in the past where they communicated that they had accepted or received Christ, then that experience trumps the fact that there may be no meaningful evidence of genuine salvation in their life. That is spiritual suicide to do so. It is not biblical to separate a person's confession of Christ from their life, yet that is exactly what many people do. Many people place the individual's initial salvation experience above a lifetime of evidence contrary to what the Word of God says is the biblical evidence of genuine salvation .

John is not trying, nor has he tried in any other message that he has provided up to this point, to just sooth someone's conscience who is living in sin. I love the way that John reiterates this in v19 when he introduces his conclusion by using the words "**And by this we know...**" We know what? We know that we are "**of the truth**" and that we are truly saved because we care deeply about other Christians. John simply says that the proof is visible in the person's life. The word "**know**" is actually not translated properly in the NKJV. It is a future tense, indicative mood verb. In other words, it is stating a fact about something that comes about in the future in a person's life. As previously studied relative to the word "**know**", this is not a knowledge that someone gains intuitively, but it is an assurance that they grow in because they are continually putting into practice what they say that they actually believe. The more that they demonstrate love for other believers, the more assurance they have. That is why the word is in the future tense. The AMP, ESV, NASB, ASV, ISV, and RSV all pick up on the use of the future tense by using the word "**shall**" or "**will**" in the translation.

So, if you think about what John says in v22 about answered prayer, then none of that would even make sense if a person was continuing to live in known sin and not make any spiritual adjustments to rectify those issues. It does not make sense that John would give assurance about answered prayer to someone living in sin. In fact, in v21 he addresses the individual who can actually have confidence in prayer by saying "**if our heart does not condemn us...**" To whom can he say that? He can say that to the believer who is living a life of obedience to the Word of God. Some people only turn to God when they want something from Him or when they are in trouble, and that is the kind of person that John is calling out. If we read between the lines, John is saying that kind of person simply may not be saved.

Based on John’s content in these verses, it is important to address the issue of biblical assurance as it relates to salvation. Without overstating the issue, the most practical way that people develop assurance in their life is through how they live. Jonathan Edwards, who was one of the greatest theologians America has ever had, often talked about what he called “holy affections”. In his presentation of the gospel, he consistently called on people to believe the gospel message and then to validate their faith through obedience to the Word of God and by persevering to live out a holy life that would be honoring to Christ. That was the heart and soul of his message. However, one of the fallouts from his preaching was that people often times doubted whether or not they were truly saved because their life was not reflecting their confession. So what Edwards did was to teach that the greatest proof of genuine salvation in a person’s life was based on a very zealous and biblical inclination towards doing what was right in God’s eyes, and included in that was an inclination and proclivity to doing good works. The problem that arises is that many people have some kind of initial experience relative to salvation, but then their interest in spiritual matters greatly wanes and diminishes over a period of time. Most likely what that says is that the individual was never truly saved. Someone who claims to be saved, but has no inclination for living out a holy life simply misunderstands what salvation is and how it affects an individual.⁵

[James 2:17](#) says,

Jas 2:17 Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

It is hard to misunderstand that biblical salvation invariably results in godly living. It has to, or it simply is not salvation. It could be said this way - there is no such thing as salvation without a personal transformation. That is what salvation is and that is what it does in a believer’s life. The error that many people fall into, and it is an eternally tragic error, is that they base their assurance on the fact that they had a one-time experience in the past. If genuine salvation has taken place, however, then there will be evidence of that salvation demonstrated in that individual’s life.

In [1 John 3:20](#), John makes the statement “**if our heart condemns us...**” Everyone has been given a conscience by God. It is a very important element of a person’s emotional and spiritual makeup. [Romans 2:14-15](#) says the following,

Ro 2:14 for when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do the things in the law, these, although not having the law, are a law to themselves,¹⁵ who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves *their* thoughts accusing or else excusing *them*)

What Paul says in this verse is that God has written His law in every person’s heart and that their “**conscience**” bears witness to them as to whether or not they are actually living in alignment with God’s law. Everyone understands that some things are right and some things are wrong simply because God has placed that in their heart and mind. So, when a Christian is obedient to God’s Word, their conscience bears witness with their heart and mind that they have done the right thing. The result of that is twofold: they have joy and they have godly assurance related to salvation. By the same token, when a believer sins against God their conscience bears witness to that as well, and if they ignore God’s work in their life and often times His discipline, they will lose their assurance and become fearful and depressed. The result of losing one’s assurance is that they begin to question whether or not they are even saved.⁶ So a genuine believer cannot lose their salvation, but they can certainly lose their assurance of salvation.

Why? It is because if there is consistent sin in their life, then their conscience is constantly accusing them. It is not that God is accusing them, but their conscience is accusing them. In fact, [Romans 8:1](#) says the following,

Ro 8:1 *There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit.*

The way that the conscience works in a person's life is that it is like a warning device. If you were riding down the road in your automobile and the car started to overheat, a warning light would immediately come on to let you know that your engine was in trouble. It must be appreciated that the conscience must have the right standards, or it will invariably develop the wrong convictions and eventually that leads to doing things that are outside of God's boundaries. At a personal level, I have known many people who have consistently violated their conscience and in the process have come to a place where they completely reject the truth and have no remorse in doing so. Just think of the cultural acceptance of homosexuality, lesbianism, and pornography that has developed in the American culture in the last 25 years. Marriage has been redefined. The family has been redefined. The Bible and its truth have been completely ignored and ultimately rejected.

It is my opinion that often times believers struggle with biblical assurance simply because their conscience is accusing them of things that they have done in the past, and they have never reached a place where they fully accepted God's forgiveness and God's cleansing for their past mistakes. They never reach a place of peace and confidence relative to their "**no condemnation**" status before God, and the result is that they are constantly struggling with biblical assurance. So what John is doing is giving the practical outworkings of genuine salvation to help solidify the believer's conviction and personal assurance of their salvation. He is trying to convince them that true believers consistently demonstrate genuine evidence of salvation in their life, and if that is true of an individual's life then they can be assured of their salvation.

ENDNOTES

¹ Strong, 1111.

² Strong, 1166.

³ Jones, 372-373.

⁴ Jones, 373.

⁵ MacArthur, 140.

⁶ MacArthur, 142.

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