

1 John 3 – Part T

1 John 3:21-24

1Jn 3:21 Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence toward God. ²² And whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do those things that are pleasing in His sight. ²³ And this is His commandment: that we should believe on the name of His Son Jesus Christ and love one another, as He gave us commandment. ²⁴ Now he who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him. And by this we know that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us.

No matter how someone actually views the Christian life, there are certain non-negotiable attributes of how the Christian life is to be lived. Certainly, John has been addressing some of those non-negotiable issues throughout this letter. Here is what John has said so far. He has clearly stated that true believers do not continue to habitually live in sin. He spent nearly 2 ½ chapters saying the same thing over and over and over. Secondly he has said that true believers have a genuine love and concern for other believers, and especially those who have legitimate needs. John has made both of those truths crystal clear. In [1 John 3:21](#) John addresses the issue of what it means to have “**confidence toward God**”. Everyone should clearly understand that if someone is living in habitual sin and they have no Christlike concern for other believers, then certainly it would be rather foolish for them to even think that God would just casually give them whatever they wanted. Yet that is exactly how many people seem to both think and live. They think that God is like a genie in a bottle – poof and there He is. They have this highly mistaken notion that they can live however they want to live and then when things do not work out the way that they had planned that they can just say a little prayer and God comes running. I certainly doubt that!

The word for “**confidence**” refers to a kind of spiritual assurance that has been developed in the believer’s heart over an extended period of time. If a believer’s heart does not condemn them (v21), it means that for the most part that they have consistently been yielding to the work of the Holy Spirit in their life. So when John uses the word “**confidence**” it means that the obedient believer has the freedom and the assurance to come to God with a humble conviction that God will hear their prayer for His work in their life. Please be assured that this passage, and especially v22, is not some kind of spiritual blank check for a believer to get whatever they may desire. Certain segments of Christianity have severely abused this verse and have made it into a name it and claim it verse. In reality, this becomes a very dangerous verse if removed from its context. What many people have done is simply presume that this verse gives them the right to ask God for whatever they may desire, and the way that they interpret the verse is that God has obligated Himself to give them their request. Nothing could be further from the truth. The overriding context of these verses is very clear – the person is not living in habitual sin and the person has a deep and abiding love for other Christians with legitimate needs. Then, to add even greater substance to the passage, John says in v22 that in order to receive what someone may ask from God that the believer has to be keeping God’s commandments and doing those things that are pleasing to Him. So, if someone is carelessly presuming on God’s goodness, then in reality they certainly are not doing those things that are pleasing to Him.

Now, in looking at v22 it is important to appreciate what should be considered the operative word in the verse. It is the word “**because**”. It is a word that provides the foundation for something to happen. In other words, receiving from God is directly related to keeping His commandments and doing that which is pleasing to Him. Those conditions must be met before someone can have confidence that God will actually answer their request. [1 John 5:14](#) gives some further insight into this verse when it says,

1Jn 5:14 Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us.

The confidence that the believer can have is that when they ask God for things that are according to His will, then that is when God is actually responsive to their prayer. However, and this has to be kept in the spiritual mix, just praying and asking for something that is in accordance with God’s will does not guarantee that God will answer that believer’s prayer. Think of it this way. If someone is living in habitual sin, they have no basis and no foundation to have an expectation that God will respond to their request – even though it may have been in accordance with God’s will. He may answer their prayer, and certainly that is His prerogative, but most likely He will not grant their request. So, John outlines three specific elements to answered prayer: (1) obedience, (2) doing what is pleasing to God, and (3) asking in accordance with God’s will. All three of these must be in alignment in order to truly have confidence before God. Doing that which is pleasing to God is simply another way of expressing obedience. Obedience is the evidence that a person is at least trying to please God in their life.

One other aspect that must be understood is that in v22 the verbs for “**keep**” and “**do**” are both in the present tense which simply means that the individual has been obedient over an extended period of time and has been doing those things pleasing to God over an extended period of time. The tendency that many people have is to think that if they just have a momentary change of heart and if they ask for something according to God’s will that He will answer their prayer in a way that would be pleasing to them. However, that is not accurate. The present tense of those two verbs requires a long-term obedience in the right direction, and very often that is the one thing that is glaringly missing in a person’s life. Obedience is and must be the continuing habit of a person’s life if they have any reasonable expectation that God is going to answer their prayer. There must be a surrendering of the believer’s will to the will of God on a consistent basis in order for the believer to have any realistic hope that God will both hear and answer their prayer. Jesus said these words in [John 15:7](#),

Jn 15:7 If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you.

Once again, the operative word is the word “**if**”. It is the word that sets the parameters for God answering the believer’s prayer. The believer must be consistently and genuinely abiding in Christ, and the words of Christ must be abiding in the believer. These are very strategic elements to answered prayer. Based on [John 15:7](#), the believer must be in fellowship with Christ. It would be utterly foolish to think that someone who rarely ever has any meaningful fellowship with God and who is rarely, if ever, abiding in His word and learning from His Word can simply make a request and God grant that request. We do not do things like that, so why would someone think that God would? If your children were consistently disobedient to you, irreverent to you, and constantly argued with you, I doubt very seriously that you would even consider giving them whatever they may want. It would be utterly foolish to do so.

Now, without misstating the issue here, this is not really a passage on prayer. In its context this is a passage on the characteristics of a genuine believer, and that simple statement cannot be overlooked or under appreciated. The point that John is making is relative to the benefits that are accrued to a believer when their life truly reflects Christ and His will for their life. God will certainly address a believer's prayer when that individual is committed to glorifying Christ in their life, committed to promoting God's will in their life, and committed to actually doing the will of God in their life. The individual is decisively living for Christ. They would be considered to be a fully devoted follower of Jesus Christ. If these characteristics are the rule of a person's life, then God not only hears their prayer, but He will respond to the believer's prayer according to what He believes to be the best thing for their life. The confidence that the believer should actually have is that God knows much better what they need than the believer does, so they can rest in the sovereignty and wisdom of God being exercised on their behalf.

In [1 John 3:23–24](#) John provides further validation of what he is addressing. First, in v23 he says that **“we should believe on the name of his Son Jesus Christ”**. This can be put in the form of a question. What good would it do to constantly be making requests of God when in reality we do not truly believe that God's will for our life is good? Everyone seems to have their own personal ideas and perspectives on what God is like and what the Christian life is like, but unfortunately those ideas and perspectives are very often far beyond the truth. In today's spiritual environment, many believers are much more cultural in their beliefs than they are biblical in their beliefs. Believers are impacted more often by their culture than they are by the Scriptures. Too often believers are impacted by denominational traditions more than by the actual Word of God. Just think for a moment of all of the erroneous teachings that people have bought into because of their denominational affiliations. This could almost be considered a kind of spiritual suicide – to just blindly accept the teachings of a denomination. History has an overabundance of very painful stories related to this issue, and yet it is very prevalent in the culture in which we live. If someone is going to **“believe on the name of...Jesus Christ”**, then their life must be reflect obedience to His commandments. Consistently obeying the Word of God is evidence that someone actually believes the Word of God. If a person is living in habitual sin and immorality, then certainly it would be foolish for them to think that they actually believe on the name of Jesus Christ.

In order for prayer to be spiritually relevant, the believer must have an intimate and abiding knowledge of the word of God, as well as a deep reverence for the things of God. In my humble opinion, both of those elements are unfortunately absent in the lives of many professing believers. Rather than ordering their life in accordance to the word of God and in obedience to the word of God, they are simply living as they please. Christ, the Bible, God's church, obedience – they all become trumped by personal preferences, personal schedules, and personal goals, and are what actually remove the individual from the will of God. If a believer makes a conscious choice to live without regard to the word of God, then they have absolutely no basis whatsoever to expect that God will answer their prayers. Believing Christ and obedience to Christ cannot be separated, and no one should have an unreasonable expectation that God will either hear or answer their prayer without both of those elements being habitual characteristics of their life.

Secondly, in v23 John reiterates that genuine believers have a deep love for other believers. These are His commandments – to believe Christ and to genuinely love other believers. One is just as important as the other in reference to those qualities that identify genuine believers. In v24, John gives his

conclusion to all that he has been saying. John's conclusion is that if someone is truly obedient to Christ then they will abide in Christ and He will abide in them. The word for "**abide**" is a word that means to stay in a given place or a given relationship.¹ It is a word that signifies that someone will remain and stand in what it is that they believe. They will not be constantly wavering and vacillating, or be uncommitted, indecisive and hesitant in their loyalty to Christ. They will not always be finding reasons and excuses as to why they are unwilling to truly live for Christ. To the contrary, they continue and endure in following Christ. They continue to love and care for other believers. These are the marks of a true believer, and unfortunately the culture in which we live has created another definition of commitment, loyalty, and reverence for Christ that are far outside of God's Word.

One obvious benefit accrued to believers is found in v24 when John states that the believer can know that the Spirit of God actually dwells in them. Once again, this is a verse relative to personal assurance – this deep working of the Holy Spirit within the believer's life. In fact, this is the first actual mention of the Holy Spirit in [1 John](#). If a believer can truly see and observe the work of the Holy Spirit in their life, it should give them great confidence. Think of it this way. An individual cannot be a believer without the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. His presence in their life is the evidence that God has fully and completely accepted them into His kingdom. It is always important to simply ask the question "What is a Christian?" Is a Christian someone who simply goes to church, or someone who simply reads their Bible? Are they just a good person or a moral person? The answer to those questions are a resounding "No". Simply stated, a Christian is someone who has been indwelt by the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit is constantly leaving His spiritual mark on their life. There is always evidence of His work in a believer's life. The following are several evidences of this work so that a believer can have the assurance that they should have.

First, someone who has received the Holy Spirit knows and understands that God has been dealing with them. They know that God is working in their life. At times the Holy Spirit makes them extremely uncomfortable. They are disturbed about their life and about the things that are present and ongoing in their life that they know are fully outside of the will of God. The person is just living life the way they want to live life, and without any regard to the things of God, and suddenly they are arrested and disturbed by the Holy Spirit as He works in their life. A genuine believer knows and understands when this is taking place. This is a very common and meaningful work of God in the believer's life. We may call it conviction, correction, reproof, rebuke – but no matter what we call it, it is something that is always present when we step outside of God's boundaries for our life.

Secondly, someone who has received the Holy Spirit finds themselves taking a great interest in the things of God. This is inevitable. The Holy Spirit is the member of the Trinity that stimulates the believer in the things of God. He is the One who drew the believer to Christ initially, and after salvation the Holy Spirit is constantly drawing the believer to the things of God. The believer has a newfound love for the word of God, for its truth, and for its encouragement in their life. As a broad general statement, it is my opinion that someone who sees the Bible as boring and uninteresting, and someone who consistently finds no interest or spiritual stimulation when the word of God is being taught, in all likelihood that individual has never received the Holy Spirit. Someone who has been indwelt by the Holy Spirit finds it hard to believe that they ever lived their life without the Holy Spirit. In fact, they have no clue as to how they actually survived without His presence in their life. This individual could care less about being

religious, or even going through the mechanics of religion. They remain hungry for the things of God in their life, and the truths given to them by the Holy Spirit are constantly stirring their life and stirring their interest and stirring their heart into the deeper things of God. They can hardly wait to be with other Christians and to hear the word of God being taught. They are always growing spiritually.

Thirdly, the genuine believer simply sees themselves differently than they did before. They know that they are unworthy and that they were guilty before God. They know that now. They can see it and understand it. They appreciate the conviction of sin that God brought into their life. They have become a new creation in Christ and for the first time in their life they know that their salvation experience was real and has become so meaningful to them now. They are in Christ and they love it and appreciate it. They feel loved by God and that love constrains them to love other believers.

Now, what should be taken from this passage, and what should be gleaned from what John has been communicating? Clearly without overstating the issue John is still addressing how the Christian life is worked out in a person's life. Believers are obedient to the Word of God and they love other Christians. Obviously, Christ becomes our example. He obeyed God's commandments perfectly and because of that He received the Holy Spirit without measure and without reservation. In whatever He did, He was always guided and directed by the Holy Spirit into the will of God. When He knew what that will was, He obeyed it perfectly. No wonder that every one of His prayers was answered, and they were answered exactly as He requested. Everything about his life was dictated by His desire to be obedient to His Father and to be submissive to the work and the will of the Holy Spirit. So, the more that His example is approximated in our lives, the more confidence we can have when we pray.²

ENDNOTES

¹ Strong, 1229.

² Lloyd-Jones, 378.

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