

Don't Trust Your Heart | Reading: 1 John 3:19-24

The human heart is a funny thing. It can be full of compassion or it can be full condemnation, condemnation of others or condemnation of oneself. The human heart can be rightly moved by love or it can be wrongly moved by hate. It can be moved by empathy or it can be moved by envy. In many ways our beliefs, thoughts & actions flow from what goes on in our hearts. The heart is very central to who we are as people. This is why the Bible tells us in Proverbs 4:23 NIV says; **“Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it.”**

As well as this the human heart can be fragile, changeable & complex. When we honestly assess the nature of our own heart do popular statements like *“always trust your heart”* really work? Is that really good advice when we consider that our heart can be like an emotional pendulum? If truth be told; there is always a lot more going on in our hearts than we can understand! The prophet's words in Jeremiah 17: 9 are much more accurate when considering the trustworthiness of the human heart **“The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?”** The following verse basically answers: God! It's because of all this that the Bible doesn't teach us to follow our heart but instead teaches us that our heart needs led! Since our hearts can be so unreliable it doesn't make sense to *“always trust our heart.”* Sure enough sometimes our heart might be right, like when we are moved by obvious injustice, but surely honesty cause us to confess that our hearts can more often be wrong. They can be hurt, fooled, bitter, indifferent, selfish, even murderous like Cain. For this reason they need led by something or someone more reliable & trustworthy!

Is there anything or anyone we can entrust our hearts to? I believe these verses have an answer for us but before they lead us to think about something else our heart needs.

Our Hearts Need Reassured (19-21)

Hearts need reassured because they can easily become insecure & John particularly has in mind the hearts of Christians here (yet there is hope for every heart in these verses). Without taking away any of the challenging words in this chapter I believe John wants to point genuine Christians to the place of ultimate reassurance. His aim in the previous verses was not to unsettle genuine believers but to challenge fake Christians. Yet in so doing he is aware that true believers with sensitive consciences may be left feeling condemned by his heart-searching words. We are all too aware that we do not yet love one another as he has loved us. Genuine Christians will be & should be challenged by Christ's sacrificial love for them, by how far short we fall in loving our brothers & sisters in light of his great love, & we will have a desire to grow in loving like him. The true gospel leaves us without any loop holes out of loving but that could potentially lead us to feel condemned... However the true gospel also never leaves a child of God feeling condemned; it always leaves us with hope!!! That's how you know you've heard the gospel!!

John says here that we reassure our hearts by knowing God is greater than our heart, & he knows everything. Now this could make things better or worse depending how you look at it & people have interpreted these verses differently.

1. Some understand it in this way: If our heart condemns us then God is even more rigorous than our heart, but if our heart does not condemn us then we have confidence before God. Here's how one person sums up this view; *"Our conscience is but the faint echo of His voice who knoweth all things; if it condemn us, how much more He?"* In other words, if we look at our hearts & see love for our brothers & sisters flowing out of them that reassures us, but if we don't we're in more trouble than our already condemning heart is telling us. Of course it can be reassuring to see love growing in our hearts, & we ought to be seeing it grow in some measure, along with righteousness. BUT surely none of us who honestly search our heart find a perfect & complete love, surely we all see room for improvement, & surely even if we thought we did love sufficiently then God's more rigorous examination would quickly humble us & put such delusion to bed. So the second interpretation is much more convincing to me.

2. Others understand it this way: If our heart condemns us, God is greater in the sense that he is kinder & able to produce in our hearts the love that is lacking. This fits with the truth we find in verse 19 of the following chapter; **"We love because he first loved us."** John will wrestle with & unpack all this more when we get there. I also think this interpretation fits with John's words in 2:1 where he writes; **"My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous."** In other words I think John is saying something like this again regarding love. He has shown us how we ought to love one another, but when we are confronted with the challenge the honest Christian is aware of their lack of such love, & therefore we need to understand that God is greater than our heart & is able to produce his greater love in our heart.

This still leaves us without any excuse for not loving our brothers & sisters, & it leaves room for growth in love to evidence true faith, but it also gives us the great hope needed to face & free our hearts of any condemnation resulting from our obvious lack of love or righteousness. Condemnation has never produced one ounce of love in any one's heart but the great news God's forgiving & transforming love continually & powerfully produces love in the hearts of God's children. So we don't put our hope in our fragile heart, but in the God who is greater than our heart... Growing love can certainly reassure our heart that we are children of God, but more than this it is the greatness of God's love for us in Christ that is the foundation of our assurance. He is our Advocate, he is our atoning sacrifice, he is the true light, he is our life – we need him to be all this for the very reason we fall short – & therefore he is our confidence & hope. This is what silences a condemning heart & gives us confidence before God.

Our Hearts Need Led (21-24)

Not only do our hearts need reassured but they also need led – they need the leadership of the Triune God. These verses talk about keeping the commandments of God (22), believing in the name of the Son (23), & the abiding presence of the Spirit (24). So instead of trusting in our hearts Christians entrust their heart to the instruction of their heavenly Father, the name of his Son & the presence & power of his Spirit within. Christians do not trust in the goodness of the human heart, they trust in the goodness of God's heart! In these verses we also see John's three themes of belief, love & obedience being weaved together.

1. Trust in God's Commandments

Obedience is the skin & bones of a heart that trusts God. It is the visible evidence of trust in God, it's what trust looks like. John says; **“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 & do what pleases him.”** Trusting obedience starts with & effects our prayer life. We cannot effectively pray from a presumptuous heart but only from an obedient heart. In 5:14 John says that **“if we ask anything according to his will he hears us.”** The commandments of God are the will of God. God's will for how we are to live. When we pray them we are praying what is best for us & everyone, & when we obey them we are doing what is best for us & everyone.

I read this quote in an article I read by Jen Wilkin yesterday; *“Believers no longer live under the Law, but the Law lies under us as a sure path for pursuing what is good, right & pleasing to the Lord.”* God's moral instruction may have been repackaged for the Christian... it's been placed within a New Covenant in a new way... but it still has an important place in authentic Christianity. For the fruit of the gospel is never lawlessness, John has made that clear, but growing obedience from a heart that loves to please a good & trustworthy God. The gospel deals with not only with the burden of being under the laws condemnation but also with our inner mistrust of God's commandments... The truth is our hearts, which are prone to wander, need the clear path of God's commandments to lead them.

2. Trust in the name God's Son

In verse 23 John says; **“And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he commanded us.”** Within God's instruction we are actually commanded to believe in the name of Jesus the Christ. Not in ourselves but in Jesus the Messiah! And the other side of believing in Jesus is loving one another like Jesus! John ties these things together as one commanded for how can I truly believe in Jesus & at the same time withhold love from another? To believe in the name of Jesus the Christ is to trust in his character, his promises & all that he is for us as Lord & Saviour. It included trusting in his obedience to perfect ours. This is the only reason we are free from condemnation & the

reason we have such confidence before God. It includes the decisive act of giving our hearts to his rescue & Lordship & it includes the continuing commitment to love one another, just as he commandment.

3. *Trust in God's Spirit*

John finishes the chapter with these words; **“Whoever keeps his commandments abides in God, and God in him. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit who he has given us.”** Keeping his commandments shows that we abide in God, & it shows that God is residing in us. In other words; keeping God's commandments is evidence God's Spirit working within & it is only because of God's Spirit working within that we can keep God's commandments. In Christ God has taken away the Law's power to condemn & by his Spirit he has put within us the power to obey. In Ephesians 1:13 Paul tells us **“In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit.”** John wants us to know here that we know that God abides in us because he has given us his Spirit. Just as we need the path of God's commandments to lead us, so do we need the Sat-nav of his Spirit to keep us on his path in a world offering us many alternatives? The Spirit helps keep us on the right path not in a technical way but in a personal way. He never leads us away from God's instruction but personally helps us obey it by teaching us to love & trust the Father & the Son.

The Christian life is about trusting in the commandments of the Father, trusting in the name of the Son & trusting in the presence & power of the Spirit. The human heart needs nothing less that the instruction, salvation & presence of the Triune God.

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Chapter 3 in a nutshell: *Our loving Father has given us his Son, his Commands & his Spirit to fuel, nourish, reassure & guide our hearts in his ways of righteousness & love. Our part is simply to abide & trust in him!*