

# “ABIDE”

1 John 3:18-24

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*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. 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.*

John...the “apostle of love,” has been driving home this issue of the importance of love, both horizontal as well as vertical. One might say John was even obsessed somewhat in this letter! But John saw that love was not only the central tenet of our faith, but also the supreme test of our faith position. John is saying that this is where our Christianity begins and ends! Therefore, grasping both the practice and the full understanding of just what this Christ love looks like, and acts like, has both present and eternal ramifications. Loving others...especially in our age of self-love...is becoming more than rare but even overtly shunned...even to our own hurt.

Time magazine recently wrote about the modern epidemic of self-love.

*“...self-sufficiency is celebrated as the ultimate achievement. To navigate the harsh terrain of radical individualism, self-love has emerged as our tool for survival. But it can come at a cost, especially when the type of self-love we turn to is the kind that has been manipulated by corporate ad campaigns and social media. In its commodified form, self-love is not really self-love at all; instead, it’s more like self-sabotage, convincing us to hyperfocus on ourselves at the expense of connecting with others.*

*Study after study shows that we’re living inside of a growing loneliness epidemic. In a recent survey conducted by Cigna, researchers found that almost 80% of adults from the ages of 18 to 24 reported feeling lonely. In 2018, even before the start of COVID-19 pandemic, one study showed that 54% of Americans felt like no one in their life knew them well.*

After nearly 3 chapters, John seems to pause to take a breath. It almost seems that he is taking a moment to ask the reader what they think about what he had been saying for 3 chapters...how his words and teaching have struck them: *were they therein confident and assured in their standing with Christ, or was their heart now troubled?* With so much riding on this business with Jesus, one would think that we would be driven to careful and regular review of our hearts and lives. And yet ironically, we seldom are so willing, and frankly most of us simply prefer to live in blind ignorance...or at least to attempt to do so. But we must realize that God does not

operate in such a manner. And no matter if we can dance through life avoiding all introspection and self awareness, that meeting with the master will take place right on schedule without exception.

**2 Cor. 5:10** *“For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.”*

**Rom. 14:10** *“... we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ.”*

**Matt. 12:36** *“...every careless word that people speak, they shall give an accounting for it in the day of judgment.”*

For the unredeemed, this should be a cause for fear. John certainly has given us all enough reasons in this letter to step back and evaluate where we stand in Christ! One would think that such a day of reckoning would in fact cause all of us to be greatly motivated to review and appraise our spiritual condition! If God's love is being perfected in us, we will have a confidence and peace that only God can bring us. If we are not in that place of faithful standing, then our hearts will be troubled and unrest will rule our lives.

Once again I am compelled at this point to remind everyone that we cannot in anyway earn our standing in heaven. We are not called to perform at some level in order to ‘buy boardwalk’ and live in heaven. To chase that ‘monopoly’ analogy, we could instead see it as if we have garnered a “get-out-of-jail-free” card! **Jesus** opened the floodgates...**He** did all the miraculous...**He** squared things in heaven for all of humanity, but folks, we still have to swim. Jesus brought all the water, but will we drown in that grace because we rejected human participation? Because grace has the effect of washing us white as snow, but it also can expose our rejection of such a gift. Grace is a powerful thing! 1John 4:18 *There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love.*

John has already told us that it is the presence and the legitimate exercise of ‘Christ love’ that confirms that we are ‘of the truth.’ But it is that same evidence that either condemns us or exonerates us. This is not a matter of I ‘sucked it up and did my duty to love’ but rather I was strangely and wonderfully compelled...often outside or beyond my natural tendencies, to love supernaturally both my Creator, and my brethren, thus proving that God is with me and in me.

There are those of us that indeed need that litmus test to confirm that we are not what we would like to believe we are and we need to even yet truly surrender our lives to Christ. There are others of us though that need that same test to settle our hearts and chase off the false accusations of the devil that are relentlessly pounding away at our confidence in Christ and ultimately our own salvation status.

This can be sometimes a difficult thing to discern. How can I tell if the Holy Spirit is convicting me, or if I’m just condemning myself? One way is to see the direction and the method in which you are being affected. If you are being led **toward** the Lord and the church body, it’s the Holy Spirit. If it’s driving you **away** from the Lord, and away from the church body, it’s either yourself or the devil. Both of the latter will be your end.

Indeed, sometimes our hearts are wrong in condemning us. The heart can be a pretty wicked thing –Jeremiah 17:9 says *“The heart is deceitful above all things, And desperately wicked; Who can know it?”* So, contrary to the world’s mantra, we should indeed not “trust ourselves!” We are constantly being barraged with the same message...telling us to “believe in yourself” ... “love yourself”...and that we really can only truly count on ourselves and depend on ourselves. I’m always flabbergasted at that. *“Seriously? Trust myself? Even after all the hurt and lies and disasters that have been meted out with these hands and this heart? You must be kidding...”*

Truth be told, no one has done you more harm, lied to you more, and misled you more often than you! Seems to me that you might actually be the last person you should trust...certainly without a second opinion from someone who loves you enough to be starkly honest with you! I could let my conscience be my guide but then I might turn out to be a sociopath! Ro 7:18 tells us “For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells...”

Sometimes, however, a person who is troubled with doubts and self-condemnation must take himself in hand and confront himself with what he knows to be true about God's work in his life and what is true of God's greater knowledge of his heart. He or she must seek the *evidence*...the 'fruit' of salvation that God says will come from a redeemed spirit-led life. Galatians 5:22-23 tells us, "*But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.*" This fruit of the Spirit is the result of the Holy Spirit's presence in the life of a Christian. The Bible makes it clear that everyone receives Holy Spirit access the moment he or she believes in Jesus Christ (Romans 8:9; 1 Corinthians 12:13; Ephesians 1:13-14). But *are* you accessing that Spirit, or are you still pushing Him away?

We need to understand that one of the primary purposes of the Holy Spirit coming into a Christian's life is to *change* that life. It is the Holy Spirit's job to "conform us to the image of Christ." To *make us more like Him*. That does not mean we will...even in the redeemed state, ever master such spiritual manifests. No, we will often fall short of such perfection. But are those spiritual manifestations present? And are they present in a greater degree than prior to my salvation? Are they present in a greater degree than previously in my walk? Am I growing stronger and more fruitful as I move through this life? Or am I slipping backward? The absence of the Spirit will result in the loss of conviction, an increasing distance from the voice of God, a spiritual dryness, an increased anxiety and strife, and a consistent compromise in my life decisions.

Galatians paints a vivid picture of what we can expect when we are not in right standing with God. Galatians 5:19-21, "*The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.*" Now, it would be dangerous to pick and choose here...saying, well...that's not me...I'm not involved in orgies and witchcraft! My conscience is clear! But what about jealousy...fits of anger...selfish ambition...discord...dissensions? These are also "acts of the sinful nature." These are signs that the "old man" is not dead...but in fact is alive and well!

And when we do fail, what is our reaction to such? Do we feel bad? Plenty of people "feel bad" about these things... even when they are clearly not of the family of God! This is the place that repentance and grace play out in our lives. Falling in such a way does not disqualify us from redemption standing. But does such drive us to the feet of Jesus? Do we seek Him out, seek forgiveness, restoration and maybe some discipline and some new passion? What about from the individual we sinned against? Or do we justify ourselves and defend our actions and move a little further away from God and His church?

Our "conscience" speaks of our self-awareness in the greater world. One cannot emphatically separate one's feelings or one's emotions from such, but those issues are fickle and susceptible to all sorts of stimulus that distort the facts. What we must be very concerned about is *truth*. And truth is based on evidence and facts. It is more than an autonomous view between a person and his or her world. Our conscious is also part of a larger relationship between us and God, as well as ourselves and the covenant community in which we participate.

This of course only strengthens the need for community and fellowship, for without such we ultimately become our own judge and jury. In 1 Corinthians 4:4 Paul reflects upon his own ministry and his own motives and "knows nothing against himself" (NIV says "My conscience is clear."), but he affirms that he is still subject to critique by God. Here Paul illustrates that conscience is not an end in itself, but is subject to review.

Conscience in scripture is consistently presented as a "witness" to something (cf. Rom 2:15 ; 9:1 ; 2 Cor 1:12 ; 4:2 ; 5:11), along with the implications of adjectives such as "good" or "clear" conscience. Conscience is not to be an independent authority. Conscience is not to be the judge in the sense of rendering a verdict. A witness does not create evidence, nor does it render judgment, but it is bound to testify to evidence that exists.

The conscience is not to dictate the content of right or wrong; it merely witnesses to what the value system in a person has determined is right or wrong. In this regard, conscience is not a guide but needs to be guided by a

thoroughly and critically developed value system. Our conscience reflects our worldview, but what determines that worldview? Unless it is God and scripture, then such is dictated by fluid morality or fickle feelings and emotions.

This is why we are compelled to read, to learn, to pray, to listen, to seek the authority of scripture and the counsel of our brethren. To grow and then grow some more. If our worldview is overtly excusing, then so is our conscience. If it is particularly legalistic and rigid, then again, so is our conscience. If our worldview is accurately based on Gods words, His character and His instruction, then our conscience is a useful and fairly accurate tool in our walk of faith. If it is not, then that very same conscience can take us on a crazy journey to distant places.

As a person's worldview is informed and changed, conscience will follow. Thus when a person's judgment is wrong in light of a biblically enlightened worldview, he or she should be given correct information and the opportunity to pursue maturity and life correcting adjustment. This is the way of love (cf. 1 Cor 8:1-3). The community endures the weaknesses of the spiritually young until they have had the opportunity to learn the correct way, and it becomes a new conviction for them. If they refuse to learn and mature, then they have shifted from the category of weak to that of the belligerent and rebellious, and thereby comes under new rules of engagement.

Being that it is the parents' responsibility to see that their children have the teaching and the surroundings in which to develop a mature divine conscience, I am constantly amazed when some attempt to give a "we just trust our child's decisions and they are very mature so..." ***Seriously?***

The fact is, many of us are beaten up by our consciences on a regular basis when we have no cause, and others are seemingly free from any 'inner voice' speaking against their lifestyle when they are factually still given over to the flesh. Verse 24 tell us "he who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him." Not, "he who feels bad is still lost and he who isn't bothered by his conscious is a saint." What do the facts say?

Conscience can never be the 'supreme court.' Is God's love present and in action in your life? Even inexplicably so? If this is not Johns point and is not his instruction herein, then why the very specific, detailed, and emphatic oration on the necessity of love's manifest in and through our lives for the last 3 chapters?

Verse 24 finishes up by saying "*by **this** we know that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us.*" We know we are abiding, not by our conscience, but by the living presence of the Spirit that He has given to walk this path with us. That Spirit communicates through the Word of God, the scripture and scriptural teaching, through grace and forgiveness, through discipline and correction, the fellowship of community, and yes, our conscience when it is developed and based on God's truth...on the facts of what is genuine.

So again...it is clear that John is drawing a "line in the sand." How do we know if we really love God? Our hearts will tell us...if we are willing to listen. One, we will love in deed, not just in words: vs 18-19. Two, God will know and will make every attempt to communicate that truth to us:vs 20-21. Three, we will "keep His commandments": vs 22. Four, we will keep the "supreme commandments" of "believing in Jesus, and loving one another": vs 23. And five, the Spirit of God will "dwell"...will remain...will "abide" in us: vs 24.

Thus we must always ask the voice on the other end of the line "who is calling please?"