

A Heart at Rest: from Condemnation to Confidence

John's First Letter has been a series of tests for determining the authenticity of our faith, and whether or not we have received the gift of eternal life. More than once John gives the test of moral behavior, right belief in Jesus and love for our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Being the pastor he is, John seems to anticipate that some in the churches of Asia Minor might have been disheartened, discouraged and perhaps shaken in confidence by the tests he has given. As one commentator said, John doesn't want them to remain in "trembling anxiety but in calm confidence."

John writes, not with a soft "saccharine comfort," but with a "bracing encouragement" that can set our hearts at rest on the truth of God, who enables us to pass these tests of assurance and learn from them.

John writes about the need to have hearts at rest in **1 John 3:19-24**.

¹⁹ And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him ²⁰ whenever our hearts condemn us, for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. ²¹ Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God, ²² and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him.

²³ And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. ²⁴ All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us.

My genetic inheritance from my father and grandfather included heart disease, which I had always sought to avoid. Both my father and his father were not practitioners of good cardiovascular and dietary practices, nor was my father amenable to the advice of his cardiologist. And so I've always determined to outdo my father and grandfather and be regular and disciplined about exercise, and to a lesser extent about good eating habits.

And so I was surprised to hear from my doctor in Belgium that she had detected an extra heart beat in my usually very slow pulse. I was examined by specialists, including a world-famous cardiologist who was mentoring a young Swiss doctor in our church. After a series of tests, the renowned professor of cardiology interviewed me and assured me my heart was fine, and that I should take just one prescription daily that might prevent stroke, since I was accustomed to strenuous physical exercise. I was greatly encouraged by this pronouncement from the esteemed professor/doctor, and continued to pursue vigorous exercise.

On September 9, 2009, in my devotional time, I read, among other passages, Psalm 51, turning verses from that great prayer of David into my prayer for the day. One element of that penitential psalm was David's petition for God to give him a clean, a

broken and a humble heart. And during that day I reflected on those words, asking God to give me a broken heart.

That Wednesday afternoon, after typing a good portion of my sermon for the following Sunday, I got on my bicycle to hurry home in time to leave for the subway station to meet a friend. As I cycled homeward, I noticed an achy feeling in my forearms, but dismissed the ache as a result of my workout at the fitness center that morning. But not far from the church office, alongside the road, I blacked out. I was roused by some bystanders and taken by emergency squad to the nearest hospital, where I was given tests that night in the ER room, told I had suffered a heart attack, and the next day given the first of two angioplasty procedures.

That day, a day when I had been praying for a broken heart, I became a heart patient, which wasn't exactly what I had in mind. I wasn't aware, nor was even the esteemed Doctor Pedro Brugada, the examining cardiologist, of the true condition of my physical heart.

The Bible uses the word for heart, primarily in a spiritual sense. In Scripture, the heart (*Greek-kardia*) is the seat of one's character, the essence of one's personality. John is ministering to those whose hearts might be hurting and even sick with a sense of condemnation and guilt, whether real or imagined. But a heart that is sick or restless and uncertain, for whatever reason, was a concern to John as it should be to us. And even the best of believers at times need a good diagnosis, treatment, and reassurance of our relationship with God and our hope for eternal life.

We look to see what God's word tells us about how God can set our hearts at rest. God knows the condition of our hearts far better than we do: "*A person may think their own ways are right, but the Lord weighs the heart,*" says Proverbs. 21: 2.

John says that our hearts may indeed condemn us (*Greek-kataginosko*), that is, "say something against" us (20). Those who are outside of God's work of saving grace have hearts condemned with real guilt. The only remedy for guilt before a holy God is belief in Jesus (Jn. 3:16), repentance from sin, and receiving God's mercy and grace with the free gift of eternal life (Eph. 2:8f). Only then are we made right with God and have a new standing with him as his forgiven and redeemed children—in fact, his new creations (2 Cor. 5:17). Our relationship with God is the foundation for complete confidence.

Yet we can never take eternal life and forgiveness for granted. We're challenged to examine ourselves (2 Cor. 13:5) and make our "calling and election sure" (2 Pet. 1:10). Many are deceived by a false sense of security, who have never been truly converted and their hearts remain guilty before God. Among other things he said about false "believers," Jesus told the Parable of the Weeds to describe how that spiritual pretenders can "grow up together" in the church, like weeds among the wheat, only to be revealed at the final Judgment (Mat.13:24-30). All of us, whether inside or outside the church, must repent and receive a new heart (Ez.18:31).

The truly converted have a new heart and an everlasting relationship with God through Christ. Yet, as John says earlier in this letter, our fellowship and peace with Christ can be disturbed through unforgiven sin, such as ungodliness and lovelessness (3:4-10; 11-18). So all believers carry the real guilt for sin that we must regularly confess to God (agree with God about) in order to have our fellowship and peace with him restored and maintained.

There are, however, true believers who sincerely desire to receive cleansing and forgiveness, but who feel condemned with false guilt. Paul writes about the turmoil of a converted heart that struggles against the old sinful nature and the frustration that comes when converted believers, who now have the Spirit, continue to live with dependence on their own efforts to overcome sin. Recounting his own struggle in the past, Paul says, *“What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? Thanks be to God,”* he continues, *“who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!”* And then he exclaims in victory, *“Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus”* (Rom. 7:24-8:1).

Even though the price has been fully paid for our rescue from death and acquittal before God’s court of justice, many believers continue to live with false guilt, as though still under condemnation. God can and will set our hearts, troubled by false guilt, at rest in his presence (v. 19), as we learn to trust him and believe in his promises, such as in the Psalm:

*“For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
so great is his love for those who fear him;
as far as the east is from the west,
so far has he removed our transgressions from us.”* (103:12)

To live with false guilt is to disbelieve God’s word, causing us to flee from him rather than to seek after and enjoy his fellowship. To be burdened down with false guilt is to succumb to the work of the devil, *“the accuser of our brothers and sisters, who accuses them before our God day and night”* (Rev. 12:10). The devil, though our defeated foe, accuses us through false guilt (Rev. 12:11).

For true believers, who have committed to follow Jesus as Lord, false guilt is unnecessary and even sinful—it’s practical paganism, believing in a false god, living and thinking as though the true God doesn’t exist, and is failure to believe in his promises and rest in the finished work of the cross. This “morbid self-condemnation” is not only unspiritual—it’s even sinful!

The good news is that real and false guilt can and must be quickly resolved and left behind, and we can and must enjoy a confident heart. Leaving this condemnation, guilt and fearfulness behind, we are given this blessing of confidence (*Greek-parresia*) before God (v. 21). Hebrews invites us to come before God with this confidence we have through Jesus, our great High Priest (3:6; 4:16; 10:35; 10:19).

This confidence is through a free access to God. John reminds us that God is greater than our hearts, an understatement if ever there was one (v. 20).

Our God is great, knows all about us (Ps. 139), and yearns to have a personal love relationship with us. And so we come to him with a confident heart having no hesitation. John notes that when we are freed from the burden of condemnation we have a confident heart that gives us access into God's presence (v. 21). Although sins have degrees of consequences, God forgives all sins. Paul made himself "Exhibit A" of God's grace in forgiving him, the worst of sinners, (1 Tim. 1:12-17). If God could forgive him, a blasphemer and violent persecutor of Christians, then he could and would forgive anyone.

Some have asked me about the "unpardonable sin," always with concern that they might have committed it. I assure them that the fact that they are concerned is evidence they've not committed it. The danger seems to be that habitual sin can produce hardened sinners; thus we all run the risk of becoming unpardonable sinners, incapable of repentance, resistant to grace, and hence ineligible for redemption, and finally resistant to the Holy Spirit (Mat. 12:31f). John warns us that we not allow unforgiven, habitual *hamartia* to perilously become *anomia*. So-called habitual "little sins" can lead to gross sins and to hardness of heart, producing unpardonable sinners who no longer care and who seem beyond redemption.

The omniscient God knows all about us and knows all our sins, yet he's willing and even yearning to be gracious to us (Is. 30:18). After being confronted by the prophet Nathan, King David, after having committed the double sin of adultery and murder, was told, "*The Lord has taken away your sin*" (2 Sam.12:13), even though David was to suffer grievous consequences of his sin. God is the perfect Judge, yet has taken care of our grievous sin problem so that we can enter the Sabbath rest for the people of God (Heb. 4:9) and approach his "*throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need*" (4:16).

"God is greater than our hearts" (v. 20). John's understatement which means that God knows and accepts our heart even when we lose the ability to think correctly. All we need to do is cast ourselves upon his mercy, even if we are no longer capable of "conscious faith." The Lord knows those who are his (2 Tim. 2:19) and hears the heart-yearnings of even the mentally ill and handicapped who cast themselves on his mercy. I'm comforted to know that when I'm overwhelmed and confused, God knows my heart and is able to understand my "wordless groans" (Rom. 8:26).

We may come into God's presence, despite our weakness, knowing he loves us and desires to have fellowship with us and offers to us good communication. John tells us (v. 22) that, with a confident heart, we will receive from God anything we ask, which is an "astonishing statement." This promise is not of some kind of "magical, mechanical or name and claim" formula by which we are given carte blanche promises of results, regardless of our relationship with Christ.

Jesus speaks of abiding in him as a branch abides in the vine, in a dependent relationship whereby his words remain in us and shape our requests (Jn. 15:7f). When we so abide in Christ, our very lives become a prayer that's pleasing to God and the word of God directs the way we pray and decides those things for which we pray. We so love and walk with God that his desires become our desires and prayers that he will not refuse (Jn. 15:8). The name of Jesus "a compressed creed" (v. 23). We believe in the name of God's Son, Jesus Christ, and love one another. In Scripture, the name of someone represents the essence of that person, and to use the name means to have access to that person through a personal relationship.

Effective prayer seems to require a heart that desires to please God, even when there's no commandment involved. A child who loves a parent or grandparent will occasionally do something totally unrequired in order to please them. I know I was delighted when I received a letter that has a crayon drawing, even though it was undecipherable, from my then 5-year-old grandson. I didn't ask it of him. He was just thinking of me and wanted to send me some expression of love.

Our love for Jesus and delight in him is what perhaps pleases him the most and allows him to bless us fully. The assurance of the Holy Spirit's presence to set our hearts at rest is not based on subjective feelings we call emotions. Feelings come and go and sometimes can play tricks on us and are insufficient evidence of grace. Scripture warns us that the heart is deceitful (Jer. 17:9), and "he who trusts in his own heart is a fool" (Prov. 28:26). Some of God's greatest people often suffer a sense of being abandoned by God. The late Mother Teresa of Calcutta chronicled her besetting sense of sharing the loneliness and forsakenness of Christ and often clung to him, especially in her latter days, by sheer faith and not by feeling. She had unwavering faith in God's presence.

The Holy Spirit gives confident hearts, confirmed by the presence of God, who reveals himself as adequate for our every need and able to fulfill the calling he has for us. The Holy Spirit assures us of the truth of the word of God and the message that saves us. As Martin Luther said, the Holy Spirit is not a skeptic. You cannot live in the fullness of the Holy Spirit and remain long in doubt.

Let's ask the Father to remove false or real guilt, forgive unbelief and give the assurance of his love and forgiveness, as we hear the invitation of Jesus:

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. (Matt. 11:28-30).