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# *The Epistles of John*

“Let Your Conscience Be Your Guide?”

## **1 John 3:19-24**

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**W**hen children are beaten and accused of being wicked, they believe the accusation. From the child's perspective since the accuser is the parent the accusation must be true. Children often carry their guilt through the rest of their lives.

*When the daughter goes to the mother, telling of the abuse by mom's boy friend, she may be believed. But then mom tells her that she must have acted in some way to encourage the man's attack. And since the young woman is already feeling dirty and guilty, she accepts that it must be her fault. She may carry a false view of her sexuality through the rest of her life.*

*Accusations fly in family relationships and for one reason or another the target of the accusations accepts them as truthful and struggles with false guilt for many years to come.*

*The message from the pulpit is a wife must accept anything her husband requires of her. So the woman in the pew feels guilty because she wants to get out of the house where she is being beaten. She either returns home, out of guilt, to face more abuse, or struggles with guilt for years to come over her failure to return.*

*The parents hear if they obey the Lord in bringing up their children their children will be obedient and will turn out fine. But they have just discovered their son has been using drugs. Obviously it must be their fault and they feel guilt. Their guilt will follow their son's messed-up life for the foreseeable future.*

*Those in the pew are told how if they were being obedient to the Lord they should be willing to give of their money even if it means doing without some of the necessities of life. They find themselves feeling guilty. The guilt comes either from giving and seeing their family going without, or from not giving to excess. Consequently, they begin to feel resentment of the church, the Lord and even against their faith. The damage of the falsely received guilt will affect them for a long time.*

*Messages fly through the church and for one reason or another the recipient of the messages accepts them as biblical and struggles with false guilt for many years to come.*

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### **I Introduction**

### **II God Knows the Truth**

**Verses 19-20**

### **III We Can Know the Truth**

**Verses 21-24**

### **IV Conclusion**

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**I Introduction:** Is conscience to be a guide for the believer's walk? Apparently the false prophets, who were praying on the recipients of John's first epistle, were using attacks on

the heart, conscience, to try to bring these believers around to their way of thinking. But, John, who apparently had seen *Pinocchio*, said, “Don’t let your conscience be your guide.”

As we saw last time, in the next passage, John is concerned that as believers we learn to rely on the Lord to give us discernment in our life before him. We found that we are to test all we hear, read and see against Scripture. In this section John informs us that even our own conscience isn’t to be the final arbitrator of truth.

**II God Knows the Truth: Verses 19-20:** There is much confusion among Christians regarding the place of conscience in their life. Some equate it with the voice of the Holy Spirit. If their conscience convicts them, then they must be in sin. The problem is the conscience, heart, fell with the fall of humanity. It can’t be relied upon. Conscience is not the voice of the Holy Spirit.

Contextually we can assume the false teachers were making some kind of appeal to the “conscience” of these believers. The appeals were apparently effective. This bunch must have been the politicians of their day. Anyway, they found these believers’ hot buttons, because John has to warn his readers that their consciences were not the final arbiters of truth.

John states this in verse 19 of Chapter 3. The believer’s confidence must be in God and not in the voice of conscience. We can be convicted by our conscience of that which we are not guilty. But as Paul said:

*“Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1).*

Our conscience can tell us of guilt that we have already dealt with. This means that Satan can still use our heart to condemn us.

*“The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?” (Jeremiah 17:9).*

After all Satan is called the accuser.

*“For the accuser of our brothers, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down” (Revelation 12:10).*

But, John says that our conscience can be set at peace in the presence of God. We have the assurance that God is greater than the voice of conscience. He will clearly let us know when we are in sin, but He will also let us know when we falsely condemn ourselves. John says God is all knowing. Even when we seem to condemn ourselves correctly, we don’t always have all the facts. The bottom line though is that our sins are forgiven.

*“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).*

**III We Can Know the Truth: Verse 21:** A clear conscience is not based on the absence of sin in our lives. It is grounded on the knowledge that we are forgiven. We don’t have peace because of who we are, but because of Who God is. *How have you experienced this?*

***“Such confidence as this is ours through Christ before God. Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God” (2 Corinthians 3:4-5).***

He is the one who has paid the price of our sin. He is the one who has chosen not to remember our sin any longer.

***“For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more” (Hebrews 8:12).***

**Verse 22:** The benefit that comes from confidence in the Lord is, we are able to ask whatever we desire and He will give it to us. *Will God provide whatever we ask?* Isn't that what this passage teaches? This is not an unconditional promise. The fulfillment is a product of the believer's obedience to God's commands and a desire to please Him.

The answers to prayer then are a product of our prayers being consistent with our desire to be obedient and to please the Father. This means that we have the right to pray for healing for an example. But our primary concern shouldn't be the healing, but to live in our circumstances in a way that is pleasing to the Lord. We want the Lord to be glorified by His answer to our prayer, whether it is yes, no, or wait.

The heart broken spouse certainly can pray that God will intervene in the life of the other. But, the primary concern should be to be the kind of husband or wife the Lord desires in spite of the behavior of the other.

It seems that along with the message that how one lives isn't a factor of faith, the false prophets were proclaiming a “Name It and Claim It” gospel. This is a message of magic. If the right formula is used God must answer the requests, actually demands, on the one who is praying.

There is nothing in Scripture that promises God desires for our happiness, prosperity or comfortable circumstances. Remember that Paul said;

***“... I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength” (Philippians 4:11-13).***

**Verses 23-24:** The real concern for individuals is whether or not they even have a relationship with the Lord. God's command is to believe in Jesus Christ. Just as the test for orthodoxy of teaching is the understanding of the incarnation, so it is for the basis of salvation.

***“That if you confess with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (Romans 10:9).***

Of equal importance with a saving faith in Christ, is the necessity to love our brothers and sisters in the Lord. These two go hand-in-hand. Considering the importance Christ, John and

other New Covenant writers give to the expression of love within the church it is surprising how little attention this is given.

So much of people's pain is a result of inadequate relationship. It is only as we direct them to Christ that they can find the answer to meeting those needs. They must be saved and then turn to the Lord for a fulfilling relationship. And, we must all be able to experience a touch of the relationship with God in our relationships with one another.

Abiding in Christ then is a product of our obedience to Him, loving God, and loving each other. Clearly we can only experience the reality of our faith, as we abide in relationship through obedience to the Lord.

*What is the role of the Holy Spirit in the confidence of our salvation? And we have the confidence of this relationship, not from a clear conscience, but from the Holy Spirit, the one true comforter.*

***“And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever—the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you” (John 14:16-17).***

The final arbitrator of truth is not our conscience, but the Holy Spirit—the Spirit of Truth.

***“But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come” (John 16:13).***

And as we saw last time it is the Holy Spirit Who is to be the basis of testing not only our conscience, but what we hear, see and read. The Holy Spirit is the one Who gives us discernment to distinguish God's truth from that of the spirits of antichrist, out in the world.

**Conclusion:** John essentially makes two very important points in this section. First, as in everything else we are to depend on the Lord for the wisdom to know that which is right and that which is wrong. When Satan came to Eve he said,

***“For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Genesis 3:5).***

The problem, or maybe even the blessing, is that aside from the direction of Scripture and the Holy Spirit we don't always know the difference. This means we can get in trouble unintentionally. But praise the Lord we are forgiven. Again,

***“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).***

This also means we need to take the guilt we carry with us to the Lord and depend on Him to either show us we need to repent of something, or we are feeling guilt we don't deserve. Frequently this type of guilt is applied from the outside, not from the inside.

We feel guilty because someone says we should. Just as the abused children of our open illustration, we can feel guilty because others have transferred their justified guilt to us. In this way they strive to be free by binding us. But

***“ ... if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed” (John 8:36).***

We do not need to be bound by either false guilt... or guilt that has been dealt with. Because the other problem is Satan will constantly bring back sins to our mind. These will be sins that have been forgiven, but we will sometimes accept the guilt back and struggle once again. The prophet said;

***“ You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea” (Micah 7:19).***

I always liked the illustration that Corrie Ten Boom gave. Our sin is represented by the sounds of a large bell being rung. But when we are forgiven we stop ringing it. The problem is that there are sometimes echoes of the ringing even after we've stopped. Unfortunately we can confuse the echoes for the real thing. And, Satan is more than happy to encourage that confusion. We are forgiven. When we take our sin to the Lord it is removed. And when false guilt is exposed to the light of truth, then the Lord will help us let go of it.

We are able to turn to the Lord instead of our conscience as the basis for truth as we abide in Him and experience His love. And the reality of God's love in our lives is John's other point.

We have experienced God's love as the foundation for our salvation. In turn it is the reality of that love that is to be the demonstration of God's presence in our lives. Our obedience to God can finally only be shown by how we love Him and others.

We keep talking about the importance of love, *agapé* because it is talked about so much, and so often in a weak and non-biblical way. Remember *agapé* is grounded in truth, and it is the proof of God's presence in His body. All we do, all our relationships are to be lived out with the concern that we express God's love to others. Orthodoxy of theology is vital, but without God's love it is empty.

James talks about works being the validation of our faith. But works done without love are Phariseeism. These are the works of the cults. Everyone who believes in salvation by faith has works. But only those who recognize that salvation is the gift of God's love, will put forth fruit which includes love.

Let us pray that as we interact with one another here all we do and say will be motivated by God's love moving through us. Then we will have a peaceful heart, because we know that we too are loved and we can abide in Him.

***“ ... if anyone obeys his word, God's love is truly made complete in him. This is how we know we are in him: Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did.” (1 John 2:6).***

And so love and truth as seen in Christ, are the characteristics found in God that caused Him to provide our salvation. And so Christ Himself is the foundation on which we live.

***“Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash” (Matthew 7:24-27).***

*The church's one foundation  
Is Jesus Christ her Lord;  
She is his new creation,  
By Spirit and the Word:  
From heav'n he came and sought her  
To be his holy bride,  
With his own blood he bought her,  
And for her life he died.*

*Elect from ev'ry nation,  
Yet one o'er all the earth,  
Her charter of salvation,  
One Lord, one faith, one birth;  
One holy name she blesses,  
Partakes one holy food,  
And to one hope she presses,  
With ev'ry grace endued.*

*'Mid toil and tribulation,  
And tumult of her war,  
She waits the consummation  
Of peace forevermore;  
Till with the vision glorious,  
Her longing eyes are blest,  
And the great church victorious  
Shall be the church at rest.<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup>Stone, Samuel J., *“The Church's One Foundation,”* Public Domain.

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## **1 John 3:19-24**

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### **I Introduction:**

### **II God Knows the Truth: Verses 19-20:**

*(Romans 8:1; Jeremiah 17:9; Revelation 12:10; 1 John 1:9)*

### **III We Can Know the Truth: Verse 21:**

*(2 Corinthians 3:4-5; Hebrews 8:12)*

**Verse 22:**  
*(Philippians 4:11-13)*

**Verses 23-24:**  
*(Romans 10:9; John 14:16-17; 16:13)*

**IV Conclusion:**  
*(Genesis 3:5; 1 John 1:9; John 8:36; Micah 7:19; 1 John 2:6; Matthew 7:24-27)*

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Personal Application: Consider the ways in which we evaluate truth, conscience, the Holy Spirit, what we are taught, etc. How do we distinguish between these, actually finding truth?

**Prayer for the Week: Lord, may Your Spirit give me discernment as I hear Your word and my own conscience so I may not stray from the path of truth. In Jesus' name, amen.**