

NO MORE CONDEMNATION, NO MORE LIES

by Steve Zeisler

Most of my definitions of myself cast me as an answer man. I am the oldest child of my parents, the elder brother of my sisters. I am a husband, father, teacher, pastor, elder, and sometimes even coach. In most of those settings I feel responsible to have something to say; to set things right if they're wrong, to establish direction if it's needed. I've discovered, as a result, that it is very difficult for me to live with problems that don't have obvious solutions.

In the last couple of months my wife, Leslie, and I have engaged six or eight difficult problems---struggles on behalf of people we care about in the church and in other settings. None of them have obvious answers. All of them require trusting God, loving people, and learning to wait. None require the services of an answer man, which leads me to question my value. When I feel condemned I tend to either withdraw or dither, or both. I've noticed that when people seek help from our family, if the problem has an obvious solution, they're likely to call on me. If it doesn't, they almost always want to talk to Leslie.

The subject of self-condemnation ("our hearts condemn us," 3:20) is one of two issues we'll encounter in the section beginning at I John 3:19. If this passage were a Perry Mason mystery, it might be called The Case of the Condemning Heart. (Solution: "God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.") The second passage we'll look at begins in chapter 4, and it is The Case of the Worldly Prophet. (Solution: "You...have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world.")

Because some months have elapsed since we last studied 1 John together, let me review the letter as a whole before we begin. First John is one of the last books, if not the last book, of the Bible to be written. John was an old man when he wrote the gospel of John, the Revelation, and three letters--we don't know in exactly which order. At the end of his life, John was the only apostle left alive of the twelve commissioned by Jesus to found the church and to write the New Testament.

The book has a grandfatherly quality about it. John often addresses his readers as his dear children, his beloved little ones, and the like. This book also reflects the seriousness of someone who has lived the Christian life for a long time. John refuses to blur what needs to remain clear. He refuses to soft-peddle what needs to be declared with strength. So we find in this book challenges issued to false teachers, bad religion, phoniness, and immorality. And we also find the tenderness of a grandfather's loving arms.

There are two statements that are thematic of the whole book, and they gather up a great deal of what John has to say. In 1:5 we read, "...God is light; in him there is no darkness at all." In 4:16 we read, "God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him."

The statement "God is light" has profound implications. It means that truth is not the same thing as error. Where there is light, the darkness is dispelled, falsehood is unmasked, and truth is held high. The figure of light banishing darkness also has implications for moral living. Unrighteousness is rejected and righteousness is established, because God is light and in him is no darkness at all.

"God is love." This book contains a powerful exposition of the importance of our receiving love from God and passing it on to others.

The passage we come to now, 3:19-4:6, is a bit of a parenthesis in the middle of John's instruction on love. First John 3:18 says, "Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth." And 4:7 says, "Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God." In the middle he turns his attention to the need we have for assurance. As we face the call to love one another, the opportunities and responsibilities of real love and real family, we can be

daunted at times and feel inadequate for the task. Learning to love is a long and difficult business. What if we're not sufficient? John speaks a word of assurance both against the condemning heart and against false teachers, and then returns to the theme of love.

Our condemning hearts

I John 3:19-24:

This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence whenever our hearts condemn us. For God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.

Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God and receive from him anything we ask, because we obey his commands and do what pleases him. And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us. Those who obey his commands live in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us.

When your heart condemns you, you experience hatred of yourself from the inside. What you believe about yourself at some core level is that you're worthless, there's no hope for you, all your actions amount to nothing, you're inadequate. All of the terrible things that we see happening in society and in our own experience are an outgrowth of self-condemnation. Self-condemnation is the reason that nations are at war with each other and that laws do not protect society from criminals. Both the big problems and the small problems that we're aware of among human beings come back to the awful truth that people on a deep level condemn themselves and then act out of that self- condemnation.

Failure to please

We will use two words to think about the problem of self-condemnation: failure and defeat. Memories of failure may go back to early childhood. Our parents are the first authority figures in our lives. Even if they don't mean to disapprove of us, we may very well feel that we are not living up to their expectations, that they had hopes and dreams for us that we fall short of, that we disappoint them.

Other authority figures then follow, perhaps next are school teachers. I used to hate the word potential because teachers often sent notes home to my parents saying how much potential I had, the clear implication being that my performance was well below what they expected. Later in life, other authority figures (a professor, a boss, parents- in-law) may express disappointment. Each time, our hearts register that disapproval and the disapproval becomes fuel for self-condemnation.

We can also fail in the eyes of our peers--cut from the team, rejected by the popular crowd, left off the invitation list, etc. And once again our hearts condemn us. It proclaims that there is something deeply unattractive and inadequate about us, and that it's our fault that we weren't chosen or we aren't loved.

We can experience failure in our family, leading to self-condemnation. We're an inadequate marriage partner, an inadequate parent, an inadequate child to older parents, an inadequate sibling. It's our fault.

Lastly, we experience failure before God. He loved us so much that he gave the life of his Son, but do we care enough? Do we love him enough? Do we serve him fully? He has given us spiritual gifts that go unused. Quiet times are dry and infrequent. For all of these failures, our hearts condemn us.

Defeated by compulsions

Defeat is the other reason our hearts condemn us. Sinful habits defeat us time and again. We have compulsive behaviors regarding food, drugs, alcohol, sex, anger, or laziness. We act compulsively and then condemn ourselves for being defeated by the same problem over and over again. We may have failed relationships that follow the same ruinous pattern every time. Why are we compelled to live so badly? We feel defeated by these

compulsions, and the defeat is seen as our fault, and our hearts condemn us.

Worse, perhaps, is that our efforts to overcome the condemnation of the heart are themselves destructive. The very things that we try to do to silence the inner voice of condemnation, to stop the sense of disapproval and self-hatred that wells up within us, makes them worse. We blame other people, don't we? We're so sick of ourselves, we lash out at the people nearest to us. We may learn to lie. Pharisaism (ancient and modern) is an example of a wrong response to a condemning heart. We can't clean the inside of the cup, so we try to make the outside look good.

Lawlessness is another response to the problem of the condemning heart. We're so sick of seeing ourselves as an unrighteous, immoral failure that standards are forfeited. Our behavior is no longer immoral by definition; it's okay to live recklessly and selfishly, it's okay to be greedy and promiscuous. But we descend farther and farther into condemnation because it doesn't work. Perhaps we reach rock-bottom when we despair and give up every effort to believe anything else. In hopelessness, the condemning heart triumphs.

What is the answer to the condemning heart? John's answer is very clear. Interestingly, the antidote to condemnation does not distinguish between true and false guilt. John's answer does not even consider that question.

Neither does the answer to a condemning heart major on analyzing root causes. Sigmund Freud's early notion of psychoanalysis was based on the premise that if we could discover how we got messed up, that alone would solve the problem. If we could understand how all the interior development issues took place in our growing up, then we would understand why we are fearful or angry or withdrawn or destructive in other ways, and the problem would go away. Not so. Psychoanalysis, the discovery of why the problems are there, does not cure the problem. Some of the most depressed, compulsive, and destructive people I know are also the people who understand better than anyone else how they got that way.

The answer--God is greater

The answer to the problem of a condemning heart, John insists, is that God is greater than our hearts. He knows everything. The answer is to have a Savior who is greater than the voice on the inside that tells us that we are worth nothing. The answer is union with One who speaks of his love for us from the inside. It is another voice that is better and stronger and surer than the voice of self-condemnation.

An important point is made in the statement, "he knows everything." God knows things about us that we don't know. Our condemning hearts picks out failure and defeat and magnifies them. But God also knows what we're going to look like in glory, together with all the saints in the presence of Jesus Christ, clothed with new bodies, our sinful history left behind. He can see that already. He can see the end of the story that we don't see. He knows the good motives behind inadequate behavior. He knows everything. Our hearts do not know everything. What he knows about us is that in Christ we have beauty we can't yet see.

So the answer to the problem of a condemning heart is the gospel, the power of God, his word spoken into our experience.

Now, John does not here teach about the sanctification process. The answer to condemnation is clear, but it is not easy. Christians spend all their lives trying to learn to put off the old man and put on the new. We are subject to the wiles of the devil and the influence of the sinful nature. Learning to hear God, who is greater than our hearts, so that we believe him is a long, profound, and difficult process. But it's the only one that works.

A mature Christian

That is why in the next paragraph John describes what a mature Christian looks like. He doesn't dwell at length on the process of growing up, but simply tells us what a person looks like whose heart does not condemn them. Verses 21-24 of are one of the greatest short descriptions of what it means to be mature in Christ. Such a life, toward which we are growing, is the alternative to condemnation. Verses 21-23: "Dear

friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God and receive from him anything we ask because we obey his commands and do what pleases him. And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us."

The starting place is confidence before God---intimacy with him, freedom before him, an enthusiasm in entering into his presence, never once hesitating in fear. Anything we ask of him we receive, which assumes we have a rich prayer life.

We receive what we ask for because we are obedient people. We know what to ask for because we live our lives to please him; therefore the very things that we request are the best things for us, which he longs to give to us already.

The things that please him, his commands, are these: Believe in Jesus Christ, and love one another. That's it, the whole package. The Christian life cannot be described more succinctly than that.

John goes on to talk about this profound union with God in verse 24: "Those who obey his commands live in him, and he in them." Life is filled with the presence of God because he is in you and you are in him. "And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us."

Dealing with false teachers

A condemning heart calls for a word of assurance. The answer lies in this: God is greater than our hearts.

The other issue in which we need assurance has to do with false teachers, voices outside ourselves which falsely claim to be speaking God's truth. First John 4:1-7:

Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world.

You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world. They are from the world and therefore speak from the viewpoint of the world, and the world listens to them. We are from God, and whoever knows God listens to us; but whoever is not from God does not listen to us. This is how we recognize the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood.

John is describing what he calls false prophets in verse 1. He encourages us to identify them in two ways: by the content of what they say and the origin of what they say. False prophets may be brilliant. Very often they are. Very often they are attractive, dramatic, forceful, and popular. In fact that point is made: The world listens to them, they gain a huge following. But none of this is critical. What is important is what they say about Jesus Christ, and second, whether they recognize apostolic authority. In this book John is primarily concerned with gnostic heretics. In general, gnosticism drives a wedge between the spiritual nature of God and the reality that God became man in Christ. They speak of a new-age-like "christ idea" that never challenges or saves flesh and blood human beings living in the real world. Their teaching is false and can be recognized as such by their rejection of the authority Jesus gave his apostles to tell his story.

John declares in verse 6, "We are from God, and whoever knows God listens to us." The pronouns "we" and "us" refer to the same people as in the opening verses of the book, where John says, "We saw him, heard him, touched him," and so on. These are the apostles. He is the last one living, but he still thinks of himself as part of a community of men who were given responsibility from God to write the New Testament, to accurately teach the truth about Jesus. If any false teacher contradicts what the apostles taught, we are not to listen to them.

Following this is the statement of victory that I've already mentioned, "the one in us is greater than the one in

the world." We don't need to be afraid when confronted by false religion any more than we do when our hearts condemn us.

False teachers come and go. I have lived long enough to have seen many bad versions of Christianity fade away. There is always a new falsehood that comes along behind them; there will always be one or two on the market, but they don't last. They aren't true, and we don't need to be afraid of them. Greater is the one who is in us than the one who is in the world.

Thank God for these reminders that it is God's work, not ours, to speak to our hearts and to deal with falsehood in the world. With these reassurances, we can go on and learn the lessons of love.

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[Back to Index Page](#)

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