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Scripture Text: 1 John 3:19-24

Sermon Title: *A Heart at Rest: from Condemnation to Confidence*

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Sources cited in this manuscript are listed at the end.

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A Heart at Rest: from Condemnation to Confidence

Introduction:

Our study of John's First Letter has been a series of tests for determining the verity and 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. But as we have noted, even though these tests are repeated, it is not with meaningless repetition, but with new and deeper insight and understanding in the criteria by which we can determine if we have experienced saving faith and are experiencing its ongoing results.

I think at least some of you students agreed with me last Sunday that taking tests is not your favorite thing to do. And it seems that tests recur all too frequently, which is the feeling we may get in reading 1 John. But if there's anything worse than the stress caused by the frequency of tests it's the disheartening experience of failing a test, or feeling that, after writing a long and grueling exam, the teacher may not accept your performance with a passing grade.

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 (Smith, 187). And, like a caring teacher and pastor, he wishes to encourage those who might have been unnecessarily and unduly shaken in confidence. John doesn't want them to remain in "trembling anxiety but in calm confidence" (Morris, 1266).

Notice what John writes about the need to have hearts at rest, as I read **1 John 3:19-24**.

If you're like me, when you've worked hard and done your best in a course of study and still struggle with doubt that you'll finish with a passing grade, nothing grates on your nerves like "know-it-all," students who rarely attend class and finish writing their exams in half the time it takes you and most other students. It's even worse if you know these students have cheated by obtaining secret information or by copying someone else's work.

John was writing to people surrounded by "know-it-all" and cheating false teachers, who claimed to be above the need for even taking an exam and if they did, they would try to extort a passing grade. John is referring throughout his letter to Gnostic false teachers and their claim to perfect and esoteric knowledge (*gnosis*) that placed them in an elitist, separate category. To these false teachers and defectors from the true faith of the gospel, sinful, immoral behavior was in their minds either nonexistent or unimportant (Smalley, 168). In what is currently reflected in post-modern New Age philosophy, their moral values and behavior had nothing to do with their "pristine" and highly advanced spirituality. But just like a cheating, "know-it-all" student, these false teachers were absolute failures in Kingdom of God faith and life. Their hearts were sinful and condemned.

John writes to his serious "students," not with a soft "saccharine comfort," but with a "bracing encouragement" (Yarbrough, 208) that can set our hearts at rest on the truth of God, who enables us to pass these tests and learn from them.

The heart (*kardia*) is the seat of one's character (Westcott, 117), the essence of one's personality. John is ministering to those whose hearts might be hurting with a sense of condemnation and guilt, whether real or imagined. But a heart that is restless and uncertain, for whatever reason, is a concern to John as it should be to us. And even the best of believers at times need assurance and reassurance (Stott, 145). We can all benefit from a little heart support.

So today we look to see what God's word tells us about a heart at rest and 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" (Proverbs 21:2). Today we will open our hearts to the Lord and ask him to make known to us whether we are living with a condemned or a confident heart.

Note first what John says about...

A condemned heart

In verse 20, John says that our hearts may indeed condemn us (*kataginosko*), that is, “say something against” us (Robertson, 226). The omniscient God knows all about us, and Jesus said that after his departure the Holy Spirit would “convict the world of guilt in regard to sin, and righteousness and judgment” (John 16:8, NIV 1984 edition). Those who are outside of God’s work of saving grace have hearts condemned...

With real guilt

Jesus spoke against his enemies who claimed to have spiritual sight but in fact were blind to the truth of his saving power, and thus their guilt remained and their hearts were justly condemned (John 9:41). The only remedy for this guilt is God’s forgiveness that is received through belief in Jesus, who gives the free gift of eternal life. Apart from belief in Jesus, we stand condemned before God and are already under his wrath (John 3:18, 36).

The only remedy for our guilt before a holy God is belief in Jesus (John 3:16), repentance from sin, and receiving God’s mercy and grace with the free gift of eternal life (Acts 3:38; Romans 10:13; Ephesians 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 (Romans 5:1f; 8:31-34; 2 Corinthians 5:17). We are never more condemned because we are now God’s forever children. This is a relationship with which we can have complete confidence (John 10:27-30).

Yet we can never take eternal life and forgiveness for granted. We’re always challenged to examine ourselves (2 Corinthians 13:5) and make our calling and election sure (2 Peter 1:10), which is what John in fact challenges us to do with this first letter of his. There are usually people in the church who 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 (Matthew 13:24-30). Those in need of a new heart, whether inside or outside the church, must repent and get a new heart (Ezekiel 18:31).

The truly converted have a new heart and an everlasting relationship with God through Christ. Yet, as John says in earlier in this letter, our fellowship with Christ can be disturbed through unforgiven sin, such as the sins John mentions in 3:4-10 and 11-18, of ungodliness and lovelessness. So we who are born-again believers carry the real guilt for sin that we must confess to God (agree with God about) in order to have our fellowship restored. All of us, John says, commit these occasional sins, and need to confess them to our Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ, the

Righteous One (1 John 2:1). We can and must regularly and quickly confess our sins, and then thank God that, because he is faithful and just (having provided justice for us through the cross) to forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness (1:9).

But there are also those who are 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 a verse later he exclaims in victory, "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 7:24-8:1).

Yet, 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 they were still under condemnation. The great preacher of 19th Century London, Charles Spurgeon, noted that this false guilt continues in "a petty trial" of one's own conscience that is unnecessarily oblivious to the overwhelming evidence of God's forgiveness. He noted that many Christians frequent this "lower court" of conscience and fail to accept God's acquittal. This verdict of God's forgiveness can never be settled by feelings, but only by trust and rest in God's promises. He noted that this matter can and must be settled quickly and once and for all (445ff).

God can and will set our hearts, troubled by false guilt, at rest in his presence (19), as we learn to trust him and believe in his promises, such as in Psalm 103:12:

"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."

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 and the blessing of answered prayer (Barker, 337). 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" (Revelation 12:10). The devil wants to accuse us through false guilt, but we need to realize that he has been hurled down and defeated through the blood of the Lamb (12:11). Satan tries to accuse us, but God through his Son's sacrifice for us, pronounces us not guilty.

Even what others say against us carries no real weight against us, as Paul rightly says about himself: it doesn't really matter what others say about us:

"I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait until the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of the heart. At that time each will receive their praise from God" (1 Corinthians 4:3-5).

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 sinful (Wiersbe, 131).

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 (*parresia*) before God (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 an "unfettered access to God, who transcends hearts of self-condemnation" (Yarbrough, 212). John reminds us that God is greater than our hearts, which is an understatement. Moslems aver that Allah also is great, but their god offers no "personal point of contact" and is uninvolved in any personal relationships (Yarbrough, 211).

But our God is great, knows all about us (Psalm 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 (21). Although sins have degrees of consequences, God is able and willing to forgive all sins. Paul made himself "Exhibit A" of God's grace in forgiving him, the worst of sinners, he said (1 Timothy 1:12-17). If God could forgive him, a blasphemer and violent persecutor of Christians, then he could and would forgive anyone.

I have, throughout my pastoral ministry, been approached by people who tell me they fear they've committed the "unpardonable sin." I gladly tell them not to fear.

There is no unpardonable sin, only unpardonable sinners, who reject God's grace to the point of hopeless spiritual blindness and hardening (Matthew 12:30-32).

The omniscient God knows all about us and knows all our sins, yet he's willing and even yearning to be gracious to us (Isaiah 30:18). After being confronted by the prophet Nathan, King David, after having committed the double sin of adultery and murder, was immediately told, "The Lord has taken away your sin" (2 Samuel 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 (Hebrews 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 knows our hearts perfectly, but his knowledge of us is "not our terror, but our hope" (Barclay, 103).

As John says, "God is greater than our hearts" (20), 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 Timothy 2:19) and hears the heart-yearnings of even the mentally ill and handicapped who cast themselves on his mercy (Marshall, 199). I'm comforted to know that when I'm overwhelmed and confused, as I am quite often these days, God knows my heart and is able to understand my "wordless groans" (Romans 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 then tells us (22) that, with a confident heart, we will receive from God anything we ask, which is an "astonishing statement" (Marshall, 199). 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 (Yarbrough, 213). This promise of answered prayer is conditional upon a love relationship with God that is nurtured by obedience to God.

As John writes, we receive from God because we obey and please him (22). As with all Scriptural promises, God's blessings come to his loving, obedient children whose wills and desires are shaped by and consistent with the will of the heavenly Father. This is what is meant by praying in faith and in the name of Jesus. Walking with God in a love relationship inspires faith and confidence in prayer. The fruit of love is confidence (Westcott, 115), and our love for God is sentimental and even hypocritical without moral obedience and acts of love toward others. Prayer is hindered by un-confessed and un-forsaken sin (Psalm 66:18).

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 every request (John

15:7f). When we so abide in Christ, our very lives become a prayer that's pleasing to God and the word of God determines 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 cannot refuse. Obedient children of God are fruitful, Kingdom-useful people of God (John 15:8).

Prayer is defined in our text as good communication between God and his loving, obedient children. Here in verse 23 we have in "the name" of Jesus "a compressed creed" (Westcott, 120) by which we can live and enjoy answers to prayer. It's simply that we believe in the name of God's Son, Jesus Christ and love one another, as John has been saying in this letter. 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. The name of Jesus is his character and his power. To believe in his name is to trust his character of perfect love and his power to anything that accords with his will.

This good, ongoing and unbroken communication depends on a desire to do what pleases God. This means we go beyond the mere letter of the law and seek to obey the spirit and full range of God's law as Jesus spelled out in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:20ff). Good communication calls also for an ongoing relationship of continuous obedience to God's commands and love for his people, accentuated by the present tense of continuous action (Morris, 1266). Faith and love are inextricably bound together. In fact, as Paul says, the only way we can express our faith in God is by our love (Galatians 5:6b). And, as we recall from 3:11-18, love is God-like, selfless, sacrificial, and practical action in meeting the needs of others, regardless of their deserving of that love.

Something else is involved here in this good communication. 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 (Boice, 127). I know I'm delighted when I receive a letter that has a crayon drawing, even though it may be undecipherable, from my 4-year-old grandson. He wasn't required by me or anyone else to do it. He was just thinking of us and wanted to send something to us.

I heard a sermon by an outstanding African American preacher, Emmanuel Scott, who related how his grandson would frequently come and sit in his office while the preacher was studying. The grandson had been begging his mother for some time for a pair of *Air Jordan* Basketball shoes (when Michael Jordan was at the peak of his basketball career), but the request had been denied because of the expense. One day, Pastor Scott told his son, "Let's go to the shoe store and buy those *Air Jordans* for you, much to the boy's delight. When the boy's mother greeted them after this shopping trip, she protested, "Daddy, those shoes are just too expensive, and I could have gotten him some cheaper ones that are every bit as good. Why did

you do that?” The great preacher and good grandfather replied, “I got them for him because of all the times he has sat with me in my office and never asked for a thing.”

Perhaps this is the kind of communication we are to have that pleases God—that we simply learn to enjoy his presence and find our rest in him and not ask him for anything. Our love for him and delight in him is what perhaps pleases him the most and allows him to bless us fully. In the closing verse (24) John says a confident heart enjoys...

The Spirit's confirmation

Once again we have this theme in 1 John of mutual abiding—our living in God and his living in us (24a). 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” (White, 94). Some of God's greatest people often suffer a sense of being abandoned by God. The late Mother Teresa of Calcutta chronicled her besting 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 (Kolodiejchuk, 290, 284).

Some of the false teachers in the churches made an elitist claim to the Holy Spirit, much like the “super apostles” who boasted of their spiritual attainments they claimed made them superior to the apostle Paul (in 1 and 2 Corinthians). The people John addressed claimed to be enlightened without their lives being changed” (Comfort, 2144). But the apostles knew that the Holy Spirit was none other than Christ in them (Colossians 1:27) who gave them the distinctions as men who had been with Jesus; and because they had been with Jesus they were filled with the Spirit; and being filled with the Spirit they were filled with courage, boldness and confidence (Acts 4:13).

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 and those who will hear it. As Martin Luther said, the Holy Spirit is not a skeptic (quoted in Guinness, 34). You cannot live in the fullness of the Holy Spirit and remain long in doubt.

The Book of Mormon gives false assurance to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Days Saints, with their aberrant, unbiblical religion, with their claim to receive a “burning in the bosom” (Moroni 10:4). Likely they are using what the Emmaus disciples' expressed following their visit from the risen Christ (Luke 24:13-35, esp. verse 32, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?”) to claim as a normative, confirmative emotional experience for themselves. But as one critic of Mormonism remarked, “Jeremiah 17:9 warns that the heart is deceitful” and “Proverbs 28:26 warns that ‘He who trusts in his own heart is a fool.’ Emotions are no basis to validate truth claims. Emotions

should be a result of good evidence, not used as evidence themselves”

(<http://www.firmlids.org/feature.php?id=19>).

It's not by emotion or by claims to exceptional experiences that gives the confirmation of the Holy Spirit, but rather by his work in us to make us more loving like Christ and more confident of his presence and work in us and through us. The Holy Spirit's presence with us is not an emotion but an enablement (Smalley, 212), giving us confidence and power to obey the Great Commandment (Mark 12:28-34) and Great Commission (Matthew 28:16-20).

Conclusion:

There may well be hearts here today that are in need of being set at rest. Perhaps some of you need to ask the Father to remove your false guilt, forgiving you of unbelief and giving you the assurance of his love and forgiveness.

Others may well need to be forgiven real guilt. Ever have you turned from sin and unbelief, thanking Christ for dying for you and asking him to forgive you and give to you eternal life. He will then remove your sin and guilt and give you peace with God.

Perhaps we all need new confidence in God's presence with us and the power of the Spirit to give us the fruit of the Spirit, i.e. Christ-likeness, and the power we need to obey and live a life that honors and pleases him. Every one of us here today can and should accept the invitation of Jesus:

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:28-30).

We must “make every effort to enter that rest” so we will not perish in the wilderness of unbelief and disobedience, as did the Israelites (Hebrews 3:19; 4:1-11). By grace through faith in Jesus and through a life of obedient love, our hearts are set at rest in God's presence. There is no reason to remain in doubt. In fact, it's foolish to allow our relationship with God to be in doubt. So, let's “approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need” (Hebrews 4:16).

I suggest we all look for the next opportunity to be still before God and let him set our hearts at rest. On this Lord's Day, this afternoon, I suggest we could all benefit from seeking a day of Sabbath rest. Christ himself is our Sabbath rest, and our focus and trust needs to be upon him. I think we would do well to meditate on verses like Psalm 37:4, about delighting ourselves in the Lord, and then trusting him to give us the desires of our heart. And just maybe that desire is for him to set our hearts at rest in his presence.

But even now there's no need for any hesitation. Jesus invites us to leave all our fears of condemnation and come into his loving arms, where he will set our hearts at rest.

Questions for personal reflection and/or group discussion:

1. What do you think is the reason that many professing Christians have a troubled conscience?
2. What is the difference between real guilt and false guilt?
3. What is the remedy for real guilt? (See 1 John 1:5-2:2)
4. What is the remedy for false guilt?
5. Why do some professing believers have difficulty believing and accepting God's forgiveness? Do you agree that "morbid self-condemnation" is sin? Why or why not?
6. What are the conditions for answered prayer that is assured to us (22)?
7. How does the presence of the Holy Spirit give us assurance and set our hearts at rest?

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