

And He said to him, “YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND.” This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, “YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.” (Matt 22:37–39)

Those who seek to relegate the Torah to a by-gone era, teaching that Yeshua set it aside in favor of the commandment “to love God and neighbor,” have missed the point. The manner in which we love God and love our neighbor as God intends, is to do so by keeping His commandments. As Yeshua stated: “Why do you call Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I say?” (Lk 6:46)

18 Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth.

This is now the fifth time we have seen John referring to the people of his community as “little children” (cf. 2:1, 12, 28; 3:7), and we are to be reminded that this is a term of endearment. In admonishing them to love one another, he does so in expressions which bespeak his own love for them. Once again, John the elder stands as a good example for all who fulfill leadership roles within the body of Messiah.

Regardless of the era or culture, fallen humankind is given to expressing words of love or kindness which are not accompanied by loving actions. John reminds us here that love is not expressed merely in words or by the tongue, though words of encouragement and comfort can be very useful. But words alone do not constitute what love demands. James exhorts in a similar fashion:

If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and be filled,” and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that? Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself. (James 2:15–17)

Note that James, like John, teaches that the true character of faith in Yeshua is love that works, not just speaks.

How often in our times do we see the words exchanged in marriage vows offer hope for love that endures, only to be set aside and broken like pieces of porcelain on a stone floor. Why? How does the marriage relationship start with such beautiful promises and end in despair and hatred? The love that was promised, and in some measure even carried out, could not flourish in a situation in which always taking was not

accompanied by equal giving. Love, by its very nature, is giving and it is in giving that relationship is fostered and deepened.

And this is the very point John is making by reminding us that God's love is demonstrated in His having given Himself for us. "For God so loved the world that He gave..." (Jn 3:16). So John's point in our text is clear: Love that does not give of itself is not love at all. This reality has, in great measure, been lost by many in our modern cultures.

... *but in deed and truth.* – The word translated "deed" is *ἔργον (ergon)*, which is the common word for "work" or "action." But mere "action" or "doing," apart from "truth," can be just as or even more harmful than no action. Loving one's brother requires wisdom—wisdom that is derived from the truth. This means applying the truth of God to every situation and acting upon the truth by acting or doing in accordance with what God has declared and revealed to be good, right, and holy. By all means we must love one another, but if we are to do so in accordance with John's inspired admonitions, then we must love in action and in truth. Only as we do so will we see the divine blessing that accompanies true obedience.

19–20 We will know by this that we are of the truth, and will assure our heart before Him in whatever our heart condemns us; for God is greater than our heart and knows all things.

The Greek of these verses is difficult and as a result, the English translations vary. The primary issue is to determine the referent of the clauses that begin with the Greek word *ὅτι (hoti)*, which can carry the meaning of "that" (descriptive) or "because" (causative). The following is a wooden translation to show the connective use of *hoti* in the Greek.

And in this we will know that (*hoti*) of the truth we are, and before Him we will assure/persuade our heart when (*hoti*) our heart condemns us, because (*hoti*) greater is God than our heart and He knows all things.

Note the various English translations of our verses, and though they differ in minor ways, they all have essentially the same message:

And by this we will know that we are of the truth and will convince our conscience in his presence, that if our conscience condemns us, that God is greater than our conscience and knows all things. (NET)

By this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our heart before him; for whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything. (ESV)

This is how we will know we belong to the truth and will convince our conscience in His presence, even if our conscience condemns us, that God is greater than our conscience, and He knows all things. (HCSB)

By this we shall know that we are of the truth, and set our heart at rest before Him whenever our heart condemns us. For God is greater than our heart, and knows all things. (TLV)

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. (NIV)

And hereby we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before him. For if our heart condemn us, God is greater than our heart, and knoweth all things. (KJV)

We will know ... – Once again, John emphasizes that the believer has been given the gift of knowing the truth, and it is upon the truth that the life of holiness which characterizes a true child of God is founded and maintained. Indeed, John’s focus in these verses is that of perseverance in the faith, for the one who has been born from above has, in that rebirth, been changed inwardly—given a “new heart”¹ by which the desire to please God steadily grows and becomes the primary characteristic of the believer’s life.

Here John highlights an important aspect of the life of faith in Yeshua, for the believer’s life cannot be lived upon feelings, but feelings must be required to respond to that which is the truth. One cannot determine what is true by what makes one satisfied or happy. A follower of Yeshua must cause his or her feelings to align with the truth that God has revealed. Thus we find throughout the Scriptures the command to rejoice in what we know is true.

Now on the first day you shall take for yourselves the foliage

1 Cf. Ezek 36:26, which speaks of God’s divine activity in bringing the nation of Israel back to Him: “Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.”

of beautiful trees, palm branches and boughs of leafy trees and willows of the brook, and you shall rejoice before the LORD your God for seven days. (Lev 23:40)

Then Hannah prayed and said, “My heart exults in the LORD; my horn is exalted in the LORD, my mouth speaks boldly against my enemies, because I rejoice in Your salvation. (1Sam 2:1)

But I have trusted in Your lovingkindness; My heart shall rejoice in Your salvation. (Ps 13:5)

And my soul shall rejoice in the LORD; It shall exult in His salvation. (Ps 35:9)

Why are you in despair, O my soul? And why are you disturbed within me? Hope in God, for I shall again praise Him, the help of my countenance and my God. (Ps 43:5)

Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. (Matt 5:12)

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice! (Phil 4:4)

Notice that in all of these Scriptures, the child of God is characterized as having the ability to speak to one’s own heart or soul, and require it to rejoice in the Lord and in the work He has accomplished for His children. David even addresses himself to his soul! “Why are you in despair, O my soul?” And this is the very point of John’s teaching in our current text.

We will know by this that we are of the truth... – To what do the words “by this” (or “in this,” ἐν τούτῳ) refer? It seems evident that John is referring to the subject of the previous verses, namely, that what characterizes the follower of Yeshua is that he or she, having come to know the love of God in Yeshua, is known by their love for other believers. For having been changed through the self-giving love of God Himself, the believer, being a child of God, takes on the characteristics of their Father. In contrast, someone like Cain, who hated and thus murdered his brother, is born of the Devil (1Jn 3:10–12). Thus,

We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love abides in death. (1Jn 3:14)

It is thus by the changed life, the “new man” and the desire that the regenerated soul has to please God, that one is personally founded in the truth of God’s saving power. But John fully recognizes and thus affirms that such confirmation in the truth is not in any way a form of sinlessness or sinless perfectionism, even though the way he describes the child of God is cast in “either / or” language. But there is little doubt that John’s reason for using such bold language was to entirely dismiss the false teaching being taught by opponents of the Apostles’ gospel, namely, that since God had already forgiven all sins, to strive for a life of righteousness was not necessary.

Therefore, in these verses John addresses the question of those who, having truly confessed faith in Yeshua, may at times question the reality of their faith, having failed in one measure or another to live up to the standards of holiness expected of the children of God.

...and will assure our heart before Him in whatever our heart condemns us; – Note carefully that once again, John includes himself as one together with his readers, using the plural “our heart” and “condemns us.” Here we come face to face with the reality of saving faith and the path of persevering in that faith, for it is clear that all who are children of God do, from time to time, struggle with the incongruities between what one knows to be true and what one desires to be in terms of living righteously in God’s sight. When through weakness the believer sins, there arises the occasion for self-condemning thoughts. For when the believer sins, the enemy is ready to wage battle against the child of God, knowing that an ally resides within the believer, even his or her sinful nature, i.e., the “flesh.”

For those who are taught that the “true Christian” never struggles with the reality of his or her salvation, when such thoughts arise, it can be very troubling. Yet here in our text John, the chosen Apostle whom Yeshua loved, includes himself with those who experience the condemning activity of the heart. Thus, we see from our text that such struggles are part of persevering in the faith. Indeed, Paul teaches us that the war between the flesh and the Spirit is an ongoing battle within the child of God.

But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the *condemnation of the Torah*. (Gal 5:16–18)¹

1 I have added the words *condemnation of the* to v. 18, for it seems

Paul is essentially teaching the same lesson as we find John teaching in our text. The Spirit and the flesh are at war in the children of God. Not so for the unbeliever, who may be governed by social standards or by one's own desires, but is not committed to God's standards of righteousness. Thus, the very fact that there is, as John puts it, a struggle within one's own heart or mind in regard to one's position in the family of God only proves the very presence of the Ruach Who is intent upon conforming the believer to the very image of Yeshua.

What does John intend us to understand by the words "before Him" (ἐμπροσθεν αὐτοῦ) in the phrase "and will assure our heart before Him in whatever our heart condemns us"? Some have taken the view that "before Him" refers to the eschatological coming of Yeshua, as referenced in 2:28.¹

And now, little children, abide in Him; that, when He shall appear, we may have confidence, and not be ashamed before Him at His coming. (1Jn 2:28)

Others take "before Him" to describe the believer as cognizant of the fact that life is always lived before His watchful eye, i.e., in His presence. Another interpretation is that "before Him" is a reference to prayer.

On what sort of occasion did John's readers need this kind of reassurance? They want to set their hearts at rest "in His presence." ... the context here is one of prayer: dare we approach God with our requests if we feel guilty before Him? On the whole, it seems more likely that this is what is in John's mind (cf. 1Thess. 1:3; 3:9). We then have a smooth transition to verse 21.²

While this interpretation, that "before Him" describes prayer, does make a good transition to the following verses, it seems to me that all three options should be combined as the overall perspective of the child of God. Surely the believer is to live with the comforting truth of God's constant presence, all the while awaiting and looking for the

clear to me that Paul's use of the phrase "under the Torah/Law" (ὕπὸ νόμου) is to be understood as "under the condemnation of the Torah." For the study of what "under the Torah/Law" means in Paul's letters, see my *Ten Persistent Questions: Why We Keep Torah* (TorahResource, 2009), pp. 75-88.

1 See Yarbrough, *1John*, p. 209.

2 Marshall, *1John*, pp. 198-99.

promised coming of Yeshua. Likewise, a life of faith is also a life of prayer, and coming in prayer before the Lord is surely a time when introspection is necessary, and when the flesh could rise up with condemning thoughts. Thus, what John is teaching us here is that in any aspect of our life of faith, when our own failures and weaknesses arise in our hearts to condemn us, we may find true and lasting assurance in what we know to be true, namely, that God, in His mercy, stands ready to forgive us of our sins as we confess them to Him, and by the infinite and eternal value of Yeshua's own shed blood, to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Thus, though the Greek verb *πείσομεν* (< *πειθω, peithō*), translated above as “will assure,” could bear the meaning of either “to persuade, convince, and thus assure” or “to conciliate, pacify, set at ease,” it seems that this second sense is most appropriate in the context. For the assurance of faith comes from what we know to be true through the revealed word of God. It is the word of God which is the foundation for our assurance, and it is constantly affirming and confessing the truth of the word of God that dispels the condemning voice of the flesh. It is the abiding presence of the Ruach and His sanctifying work through the word of God that sets our heart at ease, resting in His grace and the promises He has given to us.

...for God is greater than our heart and knows all things. – What John means by these words is obvious: even when our conscience oppresses us and even seeks to condemn us for our own weaknesses, even our less than sterling attempts to love our brother in the Lord as we ought, God is greater than our hearts. This means that we are to stand firm upon what God has said and take His word as true rather than allowing the murmurings of our own hearts to drown out the voice of His Ruach. And what does His word teach us? That He will lose none of those who are His, who have confessed their sin and turned in faith to Yeshua, accepting the free gift of salvation, and thus are sealed by the Ruach for eternity (Eph 4:30).

What is more, John gives added assurance by stating that God “knows all things.” The omniscience of God surely proves His infinite greatness when compared to human finite knowledge. If God knows all things, and if He has declared the redeemed believer to be a child of His family, then this stands forever true and cannot be undone. It is not our own experience nor our feelings that form the basis or foundation upon which our faith and eternal destiny rest. Our lives, both now and in eternity, are founded upon God Himself Whose promises are “yes and amen in Messiah Yeshua” (2Cor 1:20).

Why then does the Apostle say, We shall assure our hearts before God? He reminds us by these words, that faith does not exist without a good conscience; not that assurance arises from it or depends on it, but that then only we are really and not falsely assured of our union with God, when by the efficacy of his Holy Spirit he manifests himself in our love. For it is ever meet and proper to consider what the Apostle handles; for as he condemns reigned and false profession of faith, he says that a genuine assurance before God we cannot have, except his Spirit produces in us the fruit of love. Nevertheless, though a good conscience cannot be separated from faith, yet no one should hence conclude that we must look to our works in order that our assurance may be certain.¹

21–22 Beloved, if our heart condemn us not, then have we confidence toward God. And whatsoever we ask, we receive of Him, because we keep His commandments, and do those things that are pleasing in His sight.

Once again, John includes himself together with the believers to whom he writes by using the first-person plural: “if our heart condemn us not.” Since he has just previously pointed to the guilty conscience of a believer, there may have been some in the community who, struggling with their own failings, were wondering if John was himself acting as their judge. He therefore begins this sentence with the endearing “Beloved,” and identifies himself with them as one who understands the weakness of the flesh and the constant battle against the flesh as one perseveres in their faith.

Thus, the striving against the flesh and persevering in trusting God’s word, along with exercising repentance and claiming the cleansing of one’s soul that comes by confessing one’s sin, the believer’s heart is freed from the inner condemnation of a guilty conscience. It is the very process of repentance, confession, and forgiveness that once again brings confidence of one’s true standing in God’s grace, and therefore one’s identity as a child of God.

And it is a cleansed conscience or heart that opens the path to the throne of grace where we may obtain mercy and help from God Who loves us. Consider these three Scriptures together.

If I regard wickedness in my heart, the Lord will not hear me.
(Ps 66:18)

1 Calvin, *1John*, p. 222.