### “Our Hearts Do Not Condemn Us” Steve Finlan for The First Church, Apr. 21, 2024

**1 John 3:18–24**

18 Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. 19And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him 20whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. 21Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; 22and 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. 24All 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.

**John 10:11–18**

11 “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. 12The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. 13The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. 14I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, 15just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. 16I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. 17For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. 18No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.”

Good morning. I hope this *is* a good morning for you, and that “good morning” is not just a wish but a statement of fact. We can give thanks every day, and that makes it a good day.

Let’s look at our two Scripture readings. I see a puzzling problem or a difficulty in each of them, and I’ll try to set about to solve each difficulty.

Let’s start with John’s first statement, in his letter. He stresses genuine love, as opposed to pretended love. He says if we are ever inclined toward being condemned by our hearts, we should remember that God knows everything about us and can help us to obey his commandments. Now, why does the problem of self-condemnation come up at all? Possibly because we religious people are often inclined to judge and condemn themselves. We are often our own worst critics!

In verse 21, John says “*if* our hearts do not condemn us,” but in verse 20 he says “*whenever* our hearts condemn us,” so evidently, it *is* happening. We read a prayer of confession in our church service every week, and we find it often involves quite a bit of self-criticism and even condemnation. We are human, and a work in progress: it is considered to be a normal expectation that we should fail to live up to our ideals, that we should fail to be consistent and energetic disciples, and that we should often stray into selfishness or laziness. Presumably, when that happens, our hearts condemn us. We feel out of touch with God. We feel that we have fallen off the road of spiritual living. We can become dismayed and discouraged at our apparent failure to be true disciples. But this is actually good because it means we are becoming more spiritually aware.

When this happens, recognize it but do not linger there, dwelling in the problem. Indeed, it is a painful experience, but John wants to rescue us from it. John’s solution is that we should rest assured that we abide in Jesus, and he abides in us. John tells us to be confident of our abiding in the Son, shown through our obedience to the great command to love one another. He says “we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ, and love one another” (3:23).

So, the solution can be expressed two or three different ways. One is to believe in the name of Jesus the Messiah, which means believing in his power and authority. Another is to trust and believe that we abide in him, and he in us. You could close your eyes and imagine him dwelling within; imagine being surrounded by his words of comfort and support. Thirdly, it could be expressed in terms of obeying the love command: *If* we obey his command to love, then he abides in us.

So, either reconfirm your belief in the name of Jesus, or remember his indwelling you, or simply practice his command to love one another. Any one of those spiritual practices lifts you out of the doldrums of self-condemnation. Our self-critical clouds will lift. When we do this, then our hearts do not condemn us, and we can walk in the light. We can open our hearts to his healing, open our mind’s eye to see his love-energy radiating out to us. And that’s not all we receive from Jesus.

What do we see if we go back before the letter of John, to the time of Jesus’ life in the flesh, as pictured in our gospel passage? There we see Jesus emphasizing his role as protector and leader. He says the true and good shepherd protects the sheep at all costs. He says nothing about paying a debt of sin or satisfying God’s wrath. It is only about the love and protectiveness of the Son, who is the true shepherd. “The hired hand runs away” (John 10:13), but the shepherd does not. And Jesus’ death *did* protect his apostles and buy some time for them. The Sadducees thought they could crush the movement by killing its leader, but they were wrong. The faithful people remained and gathered together to share the Good News.

But we have another problem if we read one part of the gospel closely, and that is the question of who raised Jesus from the dead. The Acts of the Apostles and the Apostle Paul say explicitly “God raised him from the dead” (Acts 13:30; Rom 10:9; see Acts 10:40; Rom 8:11; 1 Cor 6:14). But John records Jesus as saying very clearly that *HE* *himself* has the power to raise himself up! He says, “I lay down my life in order to take it up again . . . I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again” (10:17–18). That’s headline news!

No other part of the New Testament says as much about the special powers of Jesus as the Gospel of John. In this gospel, Jesus clearly says that he will raise himself up again. This gospel makes it clear that Jesus is the life and the light of the world (John 1:4, 9). Further, “the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him” (1:10). He is the creator of the world: “All things came into being through him” (1:3). Now, God had a role in the creation, as it says in Hebrews: “in these last days [God] has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds” (1:2) Later in Hebrews, it says: “the worlds were prepared by the word of God” (11:3).

I think the Resurrection wording in the Gospel of John has to take priority over the passages that say God raised Jesus from the dead. It’s not that the latter passages are *wrong*, but I think they are incomplete, failing to articulate the fact that Jesus himself had Resurrection power within him. As he told Martha in John 11: “I am the resurrection and the life” (11:25).

Now, either you can say that John and the author of Hebrews invented these powers of Jesus, extending his divinity beyond what was previously believed, or you can conclude that they were indeed stating what the original apostles knew and believed, but didn’t spell out in the first three gospels. Those three gospels tend not to focus on what Jesus said about himself.

There are hints of Jesus’ resurrection power, though. The idea that God’s power was fully *in* Jesus is seen in the passage in Luke: “if it is by the finger of God that I cast out the demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you” (11:20). In the Gospel of Mark, when Jesus foretells his death and resurrection, he uses the active form of the verb for “rise again” (Mark 8:31) instead of the passive, “he will *be* raised.”

The fourth gospel gives the most information about Jesus’ private talks with the apostles, and his teachings about himself, including his power to raise himself from the dead.

First John tells us our hearts will not condemn us if we “believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ,” if we know that we abide in him, and practice the love command (3:23–24). So there is believing, abiding, and loving. Remember these three, and you’ll never have your heart condemn you again. All three involve staying plugged in to Jesus. Stay connected, as a branch is connected to the vine.

And then watch as you begin to bear the fruits of the Spirit. For, with faith, all things are possible.