

*In Ernest Gordon's book, "Through the Valley of the Kwai" – a true account of life in a World War II Japanese prison camp, there is a story about a man – who by giving it all away, literally transformed a whole camp of soldiers. The man's name was Angus McGillivray. Angus was a Scottish prisoner in one of the camps filled with Americans, Australians, and Britons who had helped to build the infamous Bridge over the River Kwai.*

*The camp had become an ugly situation. A dog-eat-dog mentality had set in. Allies would literally steal from each other and cheat each other – men would sleep on their packs and yet have them stolen from under their heads. Survival was everything and the law of the jungle prevailed – until the news of Angus McGillivray's death spread throughout the camp. Rumors spread in the wake of his death. No one could believe big Angus had succumbed. He was strong – one of those whom others had expected would be the last to die, but it wasn't the fact of his death that shocked the men, rather it was the reason for his death.*

*The Scottish soldiers known as "Argylls" took their buddy system very seriously, believing that it was literally up to each of them to make sure their buddy survived. Angus's buddy was dying, and everyone had given up on him – everyone but Angus. He had made up his mind that his buddy and friend would not die. Someone had stolen his friend's blanket, so, Angus gave him his own, telling his friend that he had "just come across an extra one." Likewise, at every mealtime, Angus would get his rations and take them to his friend, stand over him and force him to eat them – again claiming that he was able to get "extra food." Angus was going to do anything and everything to see that his friend got what he needed to recover.*

*But as Angus's friend began to recover, Angus collapsed and died. The doctors discovered that he had died of starvation complicated by exhaustion. He had been giving of his own food and shelter. He had given everything he had – even his very life, and his act of love had a startling impact throughout the prison camp.*

*As word circulated about the reason for Angus McGillivray's death, the feel of the camp began to change. Suddenly, prisoners began to focus on living beyond surviving. They began to pool their talents – one was a violin maker, another an orchestra leader, another a cabinet maker, another a professor. Soon the camp had an orchestra full of homemade instruments and a church called the "Church Without Walls" that was so powerful, so compelling, that even the Japanese guards attended. The men began a school, a hospital, and a library system. The place was transformed and a love for one another was revived, all because one man named Angus gave all he had for his friend.*

Last week, the Apostle John told us that as children of God, we are to love our brothers and sisters in Christ. We are to love one another just as Jesus willingly and sacrificially loved us, but then John explained that if we do not practice love for one another – it's hatred – going so far as to say that those who practice hatred are murderers at heart like Cain and eternal life is not abiding in them.

Well, after blunt words like that from John, and maybe in the throes of their own troubled relationships, some may have been saying to themselves, “**Do I love enough?** *I mean, I love my brothers and sisters – but not always. Sometimes I am unloving and uncaring and hateful. Sometimes I have turned away when faced with the needs of others – needs I could have easily met. I'm guilty as charged of loving only in word, but not in action. John says a child of God shouldn't act like that, **so am I really a child of God?**”*

You may be wondering the same thing for none of us love our brothers and sisters the way Jesus loves us. All of us have moments when we mistreat others by our words and our actions – neglecting them in their time of need, lashing out in meanness with cutting remarks, and failing to serve as we ought to. No, we may not be shedding blood in hatred like Cain did to Abel, **but are we really loving one another?**

Well, in our next passage, John apparently had the concern and the foresight to suspect that some would read his words and harshly condemn themselves – so much so, to even question their standing with God. So, in the next few words of his letter to the church, John seeks to address his concerns and provide some encouragement and assurance and confidence to those who might need it.

So, if you have your Bible, turn to **1 John 3** and we will begin with **verse 19**. John says,

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

As children of God, our desire should be to love one another just like Jesus loved us. Through our sincere and active love, John says **by this we know we are of the truth**. When we see love at work in our lives, we can have assurance of our salvation and confidence in our relationship with God. When we love as Jesus loved, we show to others and to ourselves that a new nature dwells in us – but, loving others is not always easy, and **what happens when we fall short? What happens when we fail to love?**

Well, John explains that our hearts may harshly **condemn us**. John has already told us that the world will hate us, but now this hatred for us seems to come from within – from the heart and it whispers, *“You’re such a failure. You’re an unloving hypocrite. You’re an imposter. You’re not a Christian.”* I’ve experienced that – I’ve heard those words on a few occasions – I think for all of us have at one time or another – our hearts have condemned us, sending us on a punishing guilt trip, leading us to doubt our faith, and to doubt if we really know God.

Now of course, no Christian should take sin lightly. No Christian should make excuses for their unloving attitudes and actions towards others, but at the same time, no Christian should be harder on themselves than God is. Yes, our hearts may condemn us, especially when looking at commands like – love one another, but we also know that our hearts can be deceitful and deceptive, and therefore, John wants us to know that our hearts are not our judges – God is.

God, who **knows all things** – knows us better than we know ourselves, knows the deepest things, knows the secret things – is **greater** than our hearts. He’s bigger than our feelings of doubt, and what God thinks carries more weight than what we’re feeling. God’s truth has the right to veto the condemning messages that our hearts are telling us.

Charles Swindoll explains that when sin finds its way into our thoughts, our words, and our actions, we can still have assurance before God, who is greater than our self-condemning hearts. God knows us. He knows the genuineness of our faith and love. He knows all about our bouts with evil and our struggles against habitual sin, and He provides the strength to overcome them by His Spirit.

To the believer John says, *“You’re not like Cain!”*

But a doubter might respond, *“You can’t see my heart, John. Last week I was really angry at one of my sisters in Christ!”*

*“No, no, no,”* John responds. *“Look at the totality of your life and consider all the times that God’s love actually flowed through you since you became a believer.”*

*“But I punched my brother in the mouth yesterday!”*

John shakes his head, *“Look, the fact that you feel remorse for these things means you’re definitely not like Cain. You’re not a child of the devil. The Holy Spirit is rightly convicting you and prodding your conscience. It’s a good thing. You just*

*need to respond and confess your sins against God. Reconcile with your brother and sister – sacrifice your stubborn pride, make amends, and move on.”*

You see, John’s not trying to make true believers doubt their salvation because of their sins. He knows we sin, but he also knows we have this nasty habit of being harder on ourselves than God is. *“O yes, I know God forgives me, but I just can’t forgive myself”* – as if we have a higher standard of right and wrong than God does. We hammer ourselves over and over again, but John is telling us to bring it to God – the One who knows everything about us, loves us, and has forgiven us. Let it go, return to fellowship with God, and start acting like who you really are – beloved children of your heavenly Father.

*There is a story of a Roman emperor who was parading through the streets of the capital in a victory celebration. Roman soldiers lined the parade route to keep back the cheering masses. At one point along the route there was a small platform where the royal family was sitting. As the emperor approached, his youngest son, who was just a little boy, jumped down, burrowed through the crowd, and tried to run out to meet him. One of the guards caught the boy by the arm and said, “You can’t do that! **Don’t you know who that is?** That’s the emperor!” But the boy quickly replied, “He may be your emperor, but he’s my father!”*

In a similar way, John says that as our condemnation gives way to confidence, we can approach our heavenly Father in boldness just like a child, and that’s where John takes us beginning with **verse 21** where he says,

**<sup>21</sup> Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God;**  
**<sup>22</sup> and whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do the things that are pleasing in His sight.**

Seeing who we are in Christ – children of God, according to the truth of His Word, we can approach our Father with confidence – we can come into His presence and we can ask of Him, but we need to be careful with this passage for some can wrongly conclude that our heavenly Father is like a “genie in a bottle” to be rubbed and we will get whatever we want.

The best way to interpret this passage is to compare Scripture with Scripture, and in my opinion, **John 15:7** is a great place to start. In John’s gospel, Jesus said to His disciples,

***“If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it shall be done for you.”***

When comparing these two verses, we see that our prayers are answered because our will is in harmony with God's will – a will that is expressed in His character and in His words. As we walk in close fellowship with the Lord, our hearts begin to reflect the things that are on His heart, and our prayers become the kind of prayers that Jesus would pray. In essence, our prayers become an echo of His heart, and therefore we get what we ask for.

Consider the model prayer in **Matthew 6** beginning with **verse 9**. The disciples had asked Jesus to teach them how to pray – the way He prayed, and so Jesus said pray in this manner,

*<sup>9</sup>Our Father who is in heaven, hallowed be Your name. <sup>10</sup>Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*

Before we get to *God give me this, and God give me that* – which is where we typically jet off to, Jesus first says I want you to think about who you're talking to. You are talking to the Lord God Almighty, He is the God Most High, He spoke the universe into existence, He's in heaven – sovereign over all, and yet, in a very surprising and intimate way, He has invited you and me to call Him Father.

Our heavenly Father knows what is best for His kingdom and His children, and Jesus says to His disciples, *“Before you get to your kingdom and your will, you should first surrender to His kingdom and His will.”* You see, prayer is not a blank check or a way to manipulate God to get what you want.

*A co-worker asked a friend why he bought donuts if he is trying to diet. The friend said, “Well, I came around the corner where the donut shop was, and I told God, if He wanted me to buy some donuts to have a parking spot in the front. On the eighth time around, there it was!”*

It's funny, but it's true. We try to bend God in our direction through prayer, while He is trying to bend us in His direction. Ultimately, prayer involves surrendering our will to His. *Lord, your will be done in my life, even if I hate it, even if I disagree with it, even if it costs me everything.* I think that is what Jesus is teaching us and you know what – that prayer is answered every single time.

A secret to prayer is seeking His will and obeying His Word, and that leads us to our last few verses. Beginning with **verse 23**, the Apostle John says,

**<sup>23</sup> This is His commandment, that we believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, just as He commanded us. <sup>24</sup> The one who keeps**

**His commandments abides in Him, and He in him. We know by this that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us.**

A secret to prayer is obedience, and a secret to obedience is love.

One day Jesus was asked by a religious leader what was the greatest commandment, and just so you know, there are 613 commandments in the Old Testament – so Jesus had several to choose from. Well, Jesus replied in **Matthew 22**, beginning with **verse 37**,

***<sup>37</sup> 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.” <sup>38</sup> This is the great and foremost commandment. <sup>39</sup> The second is like it, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’***

Jesus summed up the entire Old Testament in just two commandments – both motivated by love, and here John explains they are essentially two sides of the exact same coin. Faith in God is “heads” and love for others is “tails”. They can’t be separated, they sum up our obligations in this life, and as we trust and obey God and love one another, we receive the benefit of confidence from the abiding and empowering presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

So, in a nutshell, John is saying that those who love God – those who call themselves children of God, must live like who they are. They must not practice sin and they must not practice hatred, instead they must love their brothers and sisters in Christ – not just in words but also in deeds.

*Chush is a school that caters to learning-disabled children in Brooklyn, New York. At a Chush fundraising dinner, the father of a Chush child delivered an unforgettable speech.*

*After extolling the school and its dedicated staff, he said, “Where is the perfection in my son Shaya? Everything God does is done with perfection, but my child cannot understand things as other children do. My child cannot remember facts and figures as other children do. Where is God’s perfection?”*

*The audience was shocked by the question. “I believe,” the father answered, “that when God brings a child like this into the world, the perfection that He seeks is in the way people react to this child.”*

*He then told this story: One afternoon he and Shaya walked past a park where some boys Shaya knew were playing baseball. Shaya asked, “Do you think they*

*will let me play?" Shaya's father knew most boys would not want him on their team, but he understood that if his son were chosen to play it would give him a comfortable sense of belonging.*

*Shaya's father approached one of the boys in the field and asked if Shaya could play. The boy looked around for guidance from his teammates. Getting none, he said, "We are losing by six runs and the game is in the eighth inning. I guess he can be on our team, and we'll try to put him up to bat in the ninth inning."*

*Shaya was told to put on a glove and go out to play center field. In the bottom of the eighth inning, Shaya's team scored a few runs but was still behind by three.*

*In the bottom of the ninth inning, Shaya's team scored again. With two outs and the bases loaded, Shaya was scheduled to be up. Surprisingly, Shaya was given the bat. Everyone knew it was all but impossible, because Shaya didn't even know how to hold the bat properly, let alone hit with it. However, as Shaya stepped up to the plate, the pitcher moved forward a few steps to lob the ball in softly.*

*The first pitch came in, and Shaya swung clumsily and missed. One of Shaya's teammates came up to Shaya, and together they held the bat and faced the pitcher. The pitcher again took a few steps forward to toss the ball softly toward Shaya.*

*As the pitch came in, Shaya and his teammate swung the bat, and together they hit a slow ground ball to the pitcher. The pitcher picked up the soft grounder and easily could have thrown the ball to the first baseman. Instead, the pitcher threw the ball on a high arc to right field, far beyond reach of the first baseman.*

*Everyone started yelling, "Shaya, run to first. Run to first!"*

*Never in his life had Shaya run to first. He scampered down the baseline wide-eyed and startled. By the time he reached first base, the right fielder had the ball. He could have thrown the ball to the second baseman. Instead, he threw the ball high and far over the third baseman's head.*

*Everyone yelled, "Run to second, run to second!"*

*Shaya ran towards second base as the runners ahead of him circled the bases towards home. As Shaya reached second base, the opposing shortstop ran to him, turned him in the direction of third base, and shouted, "Run to third!"*

*As Shaya rounded third, the boys from both teams ran behind him screaming, "Shaya, run home!" Shaya ran home, and all 18 boys lifted him on their shoulders*

*and made him the hero, as he had just hit a “grand slam” and won the game for his team.*

*“That day,” said the father softly with tears rolling down his face, “those 18 boys reached their level of God’s perfection.”*

***Jesus would say to you and to me, “Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me.”***

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