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DEFEATING THE TRAITORS

1 John 3:19-24

Vidkun Quisling was a Norwegian politician who tried to create a political party in Norway in the 1930’s that was basically a replica of the Nazi Party in Germany. In 1940 he attempted to seize power by way of a coup. His intent was to stop Norway from resisting the invading Germans and ally the country with the Nazis. His name has been turned into an English word for a traitor. In a speech in 1941 Winston Churchill referred to people who would cooperate with the Nazis, calling them, “A vile race of Quislings, to use a new word which will carry the scorn of mankind down through the centuries…hired to fawn upon the conqueror, to collaborate in his designs, and to enforce his rule upon their countrymen, while groveling low themselves.” No one likes a quisling, a traitor.

Unfortunately, all of us have traitors within our own hearts. They collaborate in the designs of our enemy and enforce his rule upon ourselves and others, making us grovel before him. What traitors am I talking about? William Shakespeare identified them in his play *Measure For Measure*. He wrote, “Our doubts are traitors, and make us lose the good we oft might win, by fearing to attempt.” Writer Arthur Golden said, “A mind troubled by doubts cannot focus on the course to victory.” Our own doubts cause us to lose the good we often might win. Today I am going to talk about doubts, but especially a particularly insidious kind of doubt. We will learn about this from 1 John 3:19-24.

DOUBT CAN BE A DIFFICULT PROBLEM

Because believing in Jesus is based on faith, there is always going to be some doubt. Faith can and should be reasonable, grounded in evidence. We believe God exists because we see evidence of him in creation, and we believe Jesus is God’s Son because he gave evidence for that fact by his resurrection from the dead. Faith is not a blind leap. But it is a step. There is a gap between what we can prove undeniably and what we believe. That doesn’t make it unreasonable, for similar gaps exist in most things in life.

So faith is not unreasonable. We must make steps of faith in many ways throughout our lives. But the fact that there is that gap between what we know and can prove on one hand, and what we believe to be true on the other, means there will always be an element of doubt. The doubt this passage addresses isn’t doubt about God’s existence or the identity of Christ and the effectiveness of his work. It is doubt about the application of those realities to our lives. In verse 19 John wrote, “This is how we know that we belong to the truth.” That is the issue. How do we know that we belong to the truth? We have good reason to believe the Gospel based on the evidence of creation and the life of Christ, but how do we know that we actually have it effectively working in our lives? How do we know there’s not something wrong with us and our faith that might disqualify us?

That doubt occurs because we see a gap between what we think a person who knows God is like and what we actually are. John has just written about how we should love one another. John asked in verse 17 how can the love of God be in a person who doesn’t have pity on and love others? We can all see many occasions in our lives when we have failed to love others like Jesus loves. So in verse 20 John addresses the question of what we do “If our hearts condemn us.” Something inside of us says, “You don’t measure up. You are so far from what God calls you to be. You call yourself a follower of Jesus, but you don’t look like one. You’re just faking it, trying to make it look like you believe, but you really don’t, or you’d be better than you are. There is no way that God could really love you.”

Many, maybe most, of us who believe in Jesus struggle at times with the doubts those accusations bring. That struggle can be defeating, discouraging, even crippling. It certainly does not bring joy and enthusiasm into our lives. John speaks to that struggle in this passage.

John was writing to people who didn’t have all of the Bible at their fingertips, didn’t have centuries of Christian theology developed. They were hearing from some people that what they believed wasn’t true, that others had more accurate divine knowledge than they did. They wondered, at times, if they were really on the right track. John sought to encourage them in these verses. His goal is expressed in the last part of verse 19. He wants to help his readers, including us, get to the place where “we set our hearts at rest in his presence.”

Having a heart at rest is a highly desirable thing. Have you ever had a relationship with a person that made you feel like you were walking on eggs? You had to be careful about everything you said and did, you had to consider every step carefully and only then would you softly put your foot down, but even then you knew it could still blow up on you. How do you enjoy that relationship? You don’t. It’s miserable. That’s what the kind of doubt John was addressing here does to us. There is no joy in it, and it makes a relationship with God torture. Doubt is an unpleasant house to live in. This past week I had to have a medical test done that I was dreading because I knew it was going to be unpleasant. I had already postponed the test once, in part because I would prefer to avoid it. But this time I gritted my teeth and showed up at the doctor’s office. They absolutely stripped me of any dignity in the process of preparing me for the test. Then the nurse said the doctor would be in shortly to perform the procedure. I waited for several minutes. Finally the door opened, but it wasn’t the doctor, it was the nurse. She said the doctor had been called to the hospital next door to deal with an emergency. It would take 30 to 45 minutes. I could either wait, or I could reschedule. I’m lying there half naked, all prepped. What should I do? I thought seriously about saying I would reschedule, leaving and never coming back. But I thought I had come this far. I didn’t want to have to go through this all again. I’d just wait. The nurse left, and then the doubts started. What if it takes longer than the doctor said? What if I wait around here and then he ends up not being able to do the test at all? I would have wasted all this time for nothing. But do I really want to reschedule and have this thing continue hanging over me? Back and forth I went. That’s a lousy place to be. And that’s what having the kinds of doubts John was addressing will do to us. Our hearts will never be at rest, which means we will never have joy. Fortunately John tells us we don’t have to live with that doubt.

Living in that condition of doubt is paralyzing and unpleasant. Yann Martel, author of *The Life Of Pi*, wrote, “To close doubt as a philosophy of life is akin to choosing immobility as a means of transportation.” This kind of doubt has very real potential for robbing us of power, energy, enthusiasm and joy.

WHEN OUR HEARTS CONDEMN US

Verse 20 says, “If our hearts condemn us.” Obviously if our hearts are condemning us, accusing us, then our hearts are not at rest in God’s presence. Quite the opposite. How do we deal with that? John tells us two things in that verse that are crucial for putting our hearts at rest. The first one is, “God is greater than our hearts.” This is obviously true, but it is easy to fail to think about the implications of that reality. What does John mean by that? Obviously we know that God has more power than our hearts. My heart cannot create a universe. My heart cannot control the power of the atom or the power of the sun. My heart can’t create earthquakes or thunderstorms. God does all of that, so clearly he is greater than my heart when it comes to power. But John had something else in view here.

Laurie has made a few minor efforts to introduce our granddaughter, Ella, to the piano. So far, Ella has mastered playing 3 notes in a row, C, D, E. But when Laurie has tried to push her beyond that, Ella has pushed back. She’s had a sort of “I want to do it this way” attitude. Let me ask you a question. Who’s ideas on how to play the piano are more reliable? Who is the greater authority when it comes to the piano, Ella, or Laurie? Obviously, the answer is Laurie. Laurie can play actual songs, including some of Ella’s favorite Disney princess songs, but Ella can’t get close. So if you needed some advice on playing the piano, who would you listen to? Do you listen to the person who can play C, D, E, or to the person who plays beautifully? I’m pretty sure you’d listen to Laurie, not Ella. When it comes to playing the piano, Laurie is way greater than Ella.

When John says God is greater than our hearts, he’s telling us that as Laurie is a much greater authority on the piano than Ella, so God is the much greater authority than our hearts. God always knows what he’s talking about, our hearts often do not. God always speaks the truth. Sadly, our hearts cannot be relied upon to always do the same even when they are speaking to ourselves.

The entertainment industry preaches to us incessantly that we need to listen to our hearts. We can’t go wrong, they say, when we listen to our hearts. This can be a problem for us at times because our hearts condemn us and tell us we aren’t worthy, that we are phony, that we don’t measure up. Listening to our accusing hearts can absolutely crush us.

There’s a truth Hollywood doesn’t like to admit. It is that our hearts lie to us. Researchers have discovered that we can’t even trust our own memories much, because our hearts edit them to fit a narrative that we prefer to be the truth. They do that without us ever making a conscious decision to do it, and without us ever even being aware that they’ve done it. Our hearts are not always reliable sources of information. A friend of mine just had a big milestone birthday. His wife asked many of his friends and family members to send him a note of greetings and congratulations. In my note to him I told him that I have known him longer than anyone else outside of my family. We went to high school together, and he is the only person I still have contact with that goes that far back in history with me. I reminded him of some things we used to do together in high school. Then I essentially said, “How did we get to be so old? It feels like just a few years ago that we were doing that stuff at East Bakersfield High School.” And it’s true. By anyone’s definition, I am an old man. But my heart doesn’t tell me that. I know I’m not a high school kid, but my heart doesn’t tell me I’m an old geezer either. My heart tells me I’m much younger. It’s lying to me. It is painful to see myself in a picture and think, “Who’s that ancient old codger?” And it’s me! My heart doesn’t always tell me the truth. But God never says anything but the truth.

John is asking a critical question. What are you going to believe, what your heart says to you, or what God is says to you? Sadly, those won’t always be the same. In John 1:12 the apostle wrote, “To all who did receive him (Jesus), to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.” Do you believe in Jesus? Do you believe he was the Son of God who died and rose from the dead to bring you forgiveness and eternal life? Well, yes, I do. Then what does God say of you? Um, I guess that I’m a child of God.

Yes, but sometimes it doesn’t feel like it. Sometimes I feel so unworthy. It feels like it somehow didn’t work for me. Maybe there’s something wrong with me. Hold on. Did you see any “Yeah buts” in that verse? I didn’t. There is a disparity between what God says and what your heart is telling you. Who are you going to believe?

I’ve started getting Social Security benefits. See, I told you I’m an old man, regardless of what my heart says. I understood I could either receive checks in the mail or have the government deposit them in our bank account. It’s paranoid, no doubt, but I was not anxious to give the government access to my bank account, so I opted for checks. But then a couple of months later included with my check was a notice that I am required by law to have them deposited directly into our account, and that I needed to set that up. So I did that. It turned out to not be as simple as they made it out to be. I hoped I did it right. Then I began to doubt it was really going to work. Maybe I did something wrong. Maybe I messed it up. Doubt set in. I started thinking about how I would handle it when I got neither a check nor a deposit. I’d have to go through the unwieldy and frustrating process of trying to get someone at Social Security to deal with the situation. I was trusting my heart and my doubts, and not trusting the government to deal with it. The time for the check to show up came and went, but no check came. But a couple of days later I checked our bank account, and the check had been deposited. By trusting my doubts rather than the government all I did was introduce unneeded stress into my life. We do the same when we listen to our doubts rather than God’s truth.

But I don’t see how God could really love me. Romans 8:38-39 says, “For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Yes, but I fall so far short. Fine, but is your falling short a part of creation? Well, obviously, yes. Then according to Paul, it cannot separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus, because nothing in all of creation can do that. So who are you going to believe, your heart and your failures, or God?

Do you believe God lies to us or do you believe he tells the truth? Here’s a news flash. Your heart lies to you sometimes, God never does. Living by faith comes down to believing that God does not lie, that what he says is true. He says because I believe in Jesus, I am his child, forever, so I can be at rest, as much as a child in the arms of a loving dad.

There is a second thing John says in this verse that is profound and has enormous implications for us. It is the little statement, “God knows everything.” Nothing is hidden from God. He is all knowing. Hebrews 4:13 says, “Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.” 1 Chronicles 28:9 says, “The Lord searches every heart and understands every desire and every thought.” Psalm 139:4 says, “Before a word is on my tongue you, Lord, know it completely.” Not only does God know everything, he knows it before it happens.

This is hugely important, because it reminds us that God knows everything about us. Every weakness, every failure, every ugly thing that we keep hidden and want no one to know about, he sees in living color. He knows it all, and he has known about it since before we even existed. This is so vitally important because it tells us that God knew all of that before we ever put our faith in Christ. None of our worst flaws and failings are hidden from him. Despite that, Ephesians 1 tells us that God chose us in Christ. He did it with his eyes wide open.

I have mentioned before that Laurie has an interesting aspect of her character. She likes to provoke reactions from people. I’m not sure why she does, but she always has. She has stories going back to her childhood where this trait landed her in some trouble. I saw it before we got married. There was a time she whacked me in the face in a restaurant because she wanted to get a reaction. There was more than one time when we were in the car stopped at a red light at a very busy intersection that she reached over turned the motor off, pulled the keys out of the ignition and tossed them out the window onto the street. So this quirk was no surprise to me. I married her eagerly, understanding that came as part of the package. God has adopted us, lovingly, eagerly, knowing what came with the package. None of it is a surprise to him. So when our hearts condemn us, we must remind ourselves that God knew all about it and loves us anyway.

In his commentary on this passage Gary Burge wrote, “Our assurance is anchored in God and God alone, never in our own ability to generate feelings of confidence. John is urging that God is the final arbiter of our personal spiritual well being.” The anchor for our peace with God is the character of God, which is unchanging. It is not our feelings, not our efforts to do better, not our merit, it is his character that is the firm foundation of our hearts at rest in his presence.

The fact that God knows everything is huge. I will return to that as we think about the implications of this passage.

WHEN OUR HEARTS DON’T CONDEMN US

There are times when our hearts don’t condemn us. John says it helps us feel confident before God when we keep his commands. But notice how John summarizes what he means by that. There are two ways we keep God’s commands. Verse 23 says, “This is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us.”

Remember when Jesus was asked what work God required of people he said in John 6:28 that the work was to believe in him. So we must always remember that this is the only work that God identifies as the qualifying effort for eternal life. Believe in Jesus. But he goes on to mention loving one another. If we do believe in Jesus we will believe what he says. He says it is crucial that we love one another. So if we believe in him we will do that. John was not, at that point, discussing how well we do it, whether we do it “enough,” just that our heart’s intent will be to love because that’s what Jesus tells us to do. John picked up on that one thing because as Paul said, loving others sums up the entire law of God. All of his commands come down to that. And that was a big element that was missing in the false teachers that John was opposing.

John was not saying that we earn God’s love and acceptance, that we earn confidence before him, by obeying those commands. He was saying that we can remind ourselves that we are God’s children because we believe and want to love as Jesus commands. These are evidence of the Spirit of Christ i us. The **basis** of our confidence before God is his character and grace. Our obedience is the **affirmation or reminder** of it.

The effect of that confidence is that we can pray, knowing that God will hear and answer those prayers, so we can go to him boldly in prayer. He’s not saying God hears our prayers because we obey. He’s saying obedience makes us feel more confident and bold in prayer. John says in verse 24 it the Spirit he gave us is a confidence builder. This is difficult for us because we tend to think the Spirit will produce some sort of mystical feeling that God really does love us, or give us a feeling, a sense that he is present.

The Spirit can do that, I suppose, but that’s not really how the Spirit confirms that he is in us most of the time. In 1 Corinthians 12:3 Paul wrote, “No one can say, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ except by the Holy Spirit.” He didn’t mean if you can just verbalize those words it’s because of the Holy Spirit. He meant you claim that truth, you believe that message to be true. If you believe Jesus is Lord, that is evidence of the presence and work of the Holy Spirit in you.

Remember that in Ezekiel 36:26-27 God said in the new covenant that Messiah would institute, God would put his Spirit in us, and he would give us a new heart that desires to do his will. We are not perfect. We aren’t always what God wants us to be. But if you are a believer in Jesus, you want to do what God says. You want to obey him, even if at times you fail.

In his book, *Life In Christ*, the late Martyn Lloyd Jones wrote, “Are you concerned about the life of your soul? Are you concerned about knowing God? Are you interested in eternity…I assure you that if they are, the Holy Spirit is in you.” All around you are millions of people who hardly give those questions a single thought. Why do you care? It is because the Holy Spirit has given you a new heart.

APPLICATION

For application let’s go back to the keystone of this passage. That is the fact that God knows everything. That truth has significant implications for how we live.

BE AT PEACE IN HIS PRESENCE

God knows everything about us. He always has. Yet he loved us anyway. Nothing we do, no way we fail or fall short, surprises him. He has always known it. And he chose us anyway.

Perhaps when you were young you went through the often torturous experience of “choosing up sides.” Captains were declared for two teams, then one by one those captains chose people for their teams. Do you remember the disappointment of never never being the first one chosen? Garrison Keillor wrote this, “The captains are down to their last, grudging choices: a slow kid for catcher, someone to stick out in right field where nobody hits it. They choose the last ones two at a time, ‘you and you,’ because it makes no difference. And the remaining kids, the scrubs, the excess, they deal for us as handicaps. ‘If I take him then you gotta take that guy,’ they say. Sometimes I go as high as sixth, usually lower. But just once, I’d like Darrel to pick me first and say, ‘Him! I want him! The skinny kid with the glasses and the black shoes. You, c’mon!’ But I’ve never been chosen with much enthusiasm.”

Ephesians 1:4 says God chose you in Christ before the creation of the world. He knew all about you then, just as he does now. And he said, “You, I want you. C’mon!” The fact that God knows everything and forgives everything and still loves, brings us an infinite amount of peace and confidence in his presence.

LET GOD JUDGE

God will make all things right. All of us will be brought to account for who we are and what we’ve done. No one will avoid that. God will judge on the basis of his perfect, total, complete knowledge. He sees everything, even the things we think we keep hidden. **Nobody gets away with anything**.

Psalm 9:7-8 says, “The Lord reigns forever; he has established his throne for judgment. He rules the world in righteousness and judges the people with equity.” Jeremiah 17:10 says, “I, the Lord, search the heart and examine the mind, to reward each person according to their conduct, according to what their deeds deserve.” Romans 2:6 says, “God will repay each person according to what they have done.” Then verse 16 says, “This will take place on the day when God judges people’s secrets through Jesus Christ.”

This is encouraging. One time a few years ago I got a call from Apple computers asking if we were trying to buy one of their computers in New York. Apparently someone was using our name and had our credit card number in New York and were trying to use it to buy a computer. I had no idea how that could have happened. They told me I needed to shut down that credit card, so I immediately called our credit card company and they closed the account. They sent a new credit card overnight and we got it late the next day. The following day I got a call from the company asking about a suspicious charge of $2000 on this new card. I hadn’t even had the card 24 hours and some crook was already trying to use it for fraudulent purchases. Once again the account was shut down and a new card was sent. We’ve had that happen on 4 separate occasions. There are people using every scheme they can think of to steal from us. In some cases they get away with it. But wait, no they don’t. Because God will judge they won’t get away with it, but will be judged for it. It is a comfort to know that when I get 4 scam calls in one day from people who are lying in an effort to steal, that they will be judged by God.

But there is an important way this truth applies to us. It is to remember that God has the perfect and full knowledge of all things that enables him to judge justly. We do not. Our knowledge is imperfect and pitifully incomplete. Earlier this year Toby and I were both happy when the NFL team that used to be here used its high draft pick to select Justin Herbert, a quarterback from Oregon. We were happy because we both had seen him play and were not impressed. He’s tall, athletic and has a great arm, but we had seen him make poor decisions and quite a few inaccurate throws. We thought the NFL team whose name we will not use had blown that pick and chosen another quarterback who would be a bust. That made us happy because we love to see that team fail. We both based our judgment on having lots of knowledge of quarterbacks. Imagine our chagrin now that Herbert has turned out to be a huge hit, even though the team has been terrible. We don’t really have the knowledge to make accurate judgments. And we humans don’t have the knowledge to make judgments about other people.

When we judge others, when we assign to them evil motives and censure them, we are taking on God’s role. We are claiming to have the kind of knowledge that only God has, to see inside the heart of a person. The omniscience of God, the fact that he is all knowing, and he is the only one who is all knowing, is what qualifies him to judge, and disqualifies us from judging.

Stephen Charnock in his monumental book, *The Existence and Attributes of God*, wrote that by censuring the hearts of others we are claiming to have knowledge that only God possesses. He says we, “erect a tribunal equal with God.” This, he says, is “intolerable pride.” James 4:12 says, “There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you, who are you to judge your neighbor?”

TRUST HIS PLAN

God is at work in the world and in our lives. Sometimes we won’t understand why he allows what he does. Perhaps you saw the story of the Adele family from here in San Diego County. They planned to go to Hawaii for a family vacation this year. They thrilled when Hawaii finally opened up to tourists in mid October. Hawaii requires that travelers get a negative covid test 72 hours or less before arriving in Hawaii. They have designated companies that provide the approved test. The Adele family went to CVS, one of the approved companies, and all got negative tests. But when they arrived in Hawaii they were informed that their tests were not acceptable and that they would have to quarantine for two weeks. They were told if their hotel staff saw them out of their room they would call the police who would take them to jail. Now that’s the aloha spirit. They quickly determined this would not work, so they decided to get right back on a plane and fly home. They were in Hawaii a total of 6 hours. The next day back home they received an email from the authorities in Hawaii. It said, “Aloha. Your covid test has been read and approved and you have been released from quarantine.” Somebody in the Hawaiian bureaucracy misread the test. Aloha indeed. Wouldn’t it be terrible if God was known for occasional bureaucratic lapses and bungling like that? But he is not. Ever. He always knows what is right and what is best.

It may feel like that from time to time for you. But listen to the words of the great Puritan scholar, Stephen Charnock. “There is nothing so little that it can escape his (God’s) knowledge…nothing can escape his eye, therefore nothing can escape his care.” God’s plan is based on perfect knowledge, and he is never surprised.

People will even plot to create trouble for us at times, but God knows all about it. In the 8th century BC Assyria was superpower in the world. When a new king named Sennacherib took the throne many of its vassal states tried to break free, Israel among them. Sennacherib sought to violently quell the rebellion. At one point he came with a huge army intent on ravaging Israel. He sent a threatening letter to Hezekiah, the king, telling him his God could not protect him. Hezekiah prayed and asked God to intervene. Isaiah 37:22-35 records the message God gave through Isaiah. Listen to verses 28-29. After recounting how the Assyrian king had devastated other people he said, “But I know where you are and when you come and go and how you rage against me. Because you rage against me and because your insolence has reached my ears, I will put my hook in your nose and my bit in your mouth, and I will make you return by the way you came.” In other words, I know all about you, and I am going to rain on your parade big time. Shortly after that 185,000 soldiers in the Assyrian army died. Isaiah says the angel of the Lord put them to death. Sennacherib had to retreat to his capital, and there two of his sons assassinated him.

God knew all about the most powerful man in the world at the time, and he had no problem solving him. What a comfort it is to know that God sees it all before it ever happens and has a plan for it. During this time of pandemic when the news media is trying to raise a panic, when gloom and doom is the motto of the day, we can be at peace because none of this has caught God off guard. He is working a plan. Whatever you think about the recent election results, remember that God has known about it since before we were born and has a plan.

Here’s what this means for us. When we complain or become impatient with our circumstances, we are denying the knowledge of God. The knowledge of God enables us to be content and patient, no matter what may be happening. The late Vance Havner said, “God just doesn’t operate on our time table. And some of his operations don’t add up on our computers. The little boy who didn’t understand why God put so many vitamins in spinach and didn’t put more of them in ice cream had a pretty good idea that it just doesn’t work out like you’d think.” No, it doesn’t, but it does always work out the way God thinks, and that’s what we need to accept.

EAGERLY OBEY

How can little Ella become proficient at playing the piano and be able to enjoy it? By doing what she feels like doing, what she wants to do, or by learning from her Nana and doing what Nana tells her to do? If she wants to master that instrument, she will need to start with accepting that Nana knows what she needs to do and is telling her the things that will enable her to reach her goal. And so it is with us. Will we master life by doing whatever we feel like doing, whatever we want to do, or by learning from the One who is all knowing and doing what he tells us to do? The lesson is the same. We need to know that God knows what is best, and follow his commands. In so doing we will become world class at living. To do anything else is folly.