

Dealing with Doubt

1 John 3:19-24

Online Sermon: http://www.mckeesfamily.com/?page_id=3567

The Great Divide

What would it have been like to be part of one of the churches found by the Beloved Disciple John? While certainly his witness, teaching and miraculous signs would have been truly remarkable to see,¹ after having been expelled from the Synagogue, separated from their



homes and families (John 16:2, John 9:22), hated by the world (1 John 3:13),² and going through one of the most “fiercest of conflicts” and church splits (1 John 2:19) in first-century Christianity; I doubt anyone would say being a member of the Johannine community was easy!³ While the origin or theology of the group that split which many call the “secessionists”⁴ or “schematics” is not known,⁵ based on John’s teachings against this group much can be learned known about them. Due to their Docetic and overall gnostic beliefs this

group rejected the incarnation because to them the “divine Christ, the eternal Son of God only appeared to be human.”⁶ The Secessionists also claimed to be incapable of sinning (1 John 1:8-10),⁷ and like Cain, the evil and murderous (1 John 3:11-15), in their struggle for power they hated their former brothers and sisters of the Johannine community (1 John 2:9–11, 4:19-21),

¹ Thomas F. Johnson, [1, 2, and 3 John](#), Understanding the Bible Commentary Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 5.

² Thomas F. Johnson, [1, 2, and 3 John](#), Understanding the Bible Commentary Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 5.

³ Thomas F. Johnson, [1, 2, and 3 John](#), Understanding the Bible Commentary Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 1.

⁴ Thomas F. Johnson, [1, 2, and 3 John](#), Understanding the Bible Commentary Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 6.

⁵ Thomas F. Johnson, [1, 2, and 3 John](#), Understanding the Bible Commentary Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 6.

⁶ Thomas F. Johnson, [1, 2, and 3 John](#), Understanding the Bible Commentary Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 6.

⁷ Thomas F. Johnson, [1, 2, and 3 John](#), Understanding the Bible Commentary Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 8.

refusing to help them in their time of need (1 John 3:16–18)!⁸ In their struggle to “obtain perceived, spiritual power or superiority”⁹ they inflicted doubt on the Johannine community by stating they alone spoke by and knew the truth of the Holy Spirit (1 John 4:1-3, 2:20, 27)! To keep orthodoxy from being blurred¹⁰ and to reassure them his community they lived by the truth, John told them because these “secessionists” hated their brothers and sisters and did not believe in the incarnate Son of God, and claimed to be without sin¹¹ these falsehoods proved they were “liars” (1 John 1:6; 2:4, 22; 4:20), “deceivers” (1 John 2:26; 3:7; 2 John 7), “antichrists” (1 John 2:18, 22; 4:3; 2 John 7), “children of the devil” (3:10), “murderers” (3:15), and “false prophets” (4:1).¹² The truth by which they lived had truly set them free for Christ’s atonement was their grounds of being justified before a holy God!

Condemning Heart

If those being led by the “one Jesus loved” (John 20:2) had doubts about knowing the truth and being part of God’s kingdom, should it come as a surprise that doubt, guilt, and failure are not far from the minds of today’s Christians?¹³ While John talked a lot about “righteousness, love and truth”¹⁴ in his letter, he also felt an overwhelming need to address how Christians were to handle the “accusations of the conscience,”¹⁵ whether justified by one’s sins, imagined,¹⁶ or outright attacks from both unbelievers and believers. He who roars like a lion never stops seeking to devour (1 Peter 5:8) the faith of God’s own by filling their minds with the idea that they are somehow not worthy to approach God’s throne, even though it be one of grace (Hebrews 4:18) and eternally secured in the atonement of His very own Son! Self-doubt, self-

⁸ Thomas F. Johnson, *1, 2, and 3 John*, Understanding the Bible Commentary Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 8.

⁹ Gary M. Burge, *Letters of John*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996), 165.

¹⁰ Gary M. Burge, *Letters of John*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996), 28.

¹¹ Thomas F. Johnson, *1, 2, and 3 John*, Understanding the Bible Commentary Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 9.

¹² Thomas F. Johnson, *1, 2, and 3 John*, Understanding the Bible Commentary Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 5–6.

¹³ Glenn W. Barker, “1 John,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Hebrews through Revelation*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 12 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 337.

¹⁴ James Montgomery Boice, *The Epistles of John: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004), 98.

¹⁵ John R. W. Stott, *The Letters of John: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 19, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 147.

¹⁶ James Montgomery Boice, *The Epistles of John: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004), 98–99.



incrimination¹⁷ or false judgements from others not only leads to questioning whether or not one “belongs to the truth” (3:19)¹⁸ but can paralyze¹⁹ a person’s relationship with God to the point that one no longer dares to even talk to God in prayer!²⁰ Even though intellectually Christians know they are assured of the place in God’s family through Christ, they often go through long periods of time in which they doubt and need reassurance!²¹ In the rest of this sermon I am going to review 1 John 3:19-24 and suggest doubt can

be removed by: 1) seeking the truth, 2) seeking God’s wisdom, 3) receiving what we ask for in prayer, 4) being able to obey God’s commands, and 5) in commune with the Holy Spirit living inside of us!

Cure for Doubt #1 – Seeking the Truth

The first step in curing doubt is to seek and know the truth. Jesus told the Jews who had believed Him “if you hold to My teaching, you are really My disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:31-33). Since it is “in the mind’s knowledge by which the heart’s doubts may be silenced,”²² the only way to thwart the fiery darts of lies and accusations of the master deceiver is to take up the shield of faith (Ephesians 6:14-17) by meditating on the word (Psalms 4:4) and standing firmly on the promises of God (2 Corinthians 1:19-20)! Lest one rely on the Pharisaic misconception that knowledge alone proves holiness, to

¹⁷ Glenn W. Barker, [“1 John.”](#) in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Hebrews through Revelation*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 12 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 337.

¹⁸ Glenn W. Barker, [“1 John.”](#) in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Hebrews through Revelation*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 12 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 337.

¹⁹ Gary M. Burge, [Letters of John](#), The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996), 163.

²⁰ Glenn W. Barker, [“1 John.”](#) in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Hebrews through Revelation*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 12 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 337.

²¹ John R. W. Stott, [The Letters of John: An Introduction and Commentary](#), vol. 19, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 147.

²² John R. W. Stott, [The Letters of John: An Introduction and Commentary](#), vol. 19, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 147.



eliminate doubt one must use God’s word to accurately assess one’s walk with the Lord!²³ “By loving in deed and according to the truth, we will come to know by experience that we are sourced in that same truth.”²⁴ By loving our enemies (Matthew 5:44-48), not seeing God’s commands as burdensome (1 John 5:2-4), and through evidence of the fruits of the Holy Spirit in one’s life such as “love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness and self-control” (Galatians 5:22); one has sufficient evidence that one is living by

the truth. The ultimate knowledge that crushes doubts is to remember all the miracles God has done to and through your life,²⁵ for knowledge of holiness cannot be lived unless quickened and empowered by the Holy Spirit who seals us until the day of redemption (2 Corinthians 1:22)!

Cure for Doubt #2 – Seeking God’s Wisdom

The second cure for doubt is to remember that assurance is anchored in God alone!²⁶ While thinking one is unworthy could be considered a step towards humility it is very damaging to our relationship with God when one feels there is no hope because one has been condemned!²⁷ To combat such erroneous perceptions John told the church to rely on God and not our own assessment of our standing before Him. Since our “conscience is far from infallible,”²⁸ the only arbiter of truth in our lives must be God who knit us in our mother’s womb and knows everything about us (Psalms 139)! “Assurance is not a matter of convincing us, or of thinking positively about oneself; it is knowing the truth before God, or with God as a witness!”²⁹ When

²³ James Montgomery Boice, *The Epistles of John: An Expositional Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004), 99.

²⁴ Gary W. Derickson, *First, Second, and Third John*, ed. H. Wayne House, W. Hall Harris III, and Andrew W. Pitts, *Evangelical Exegetical Commentary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012), 363.

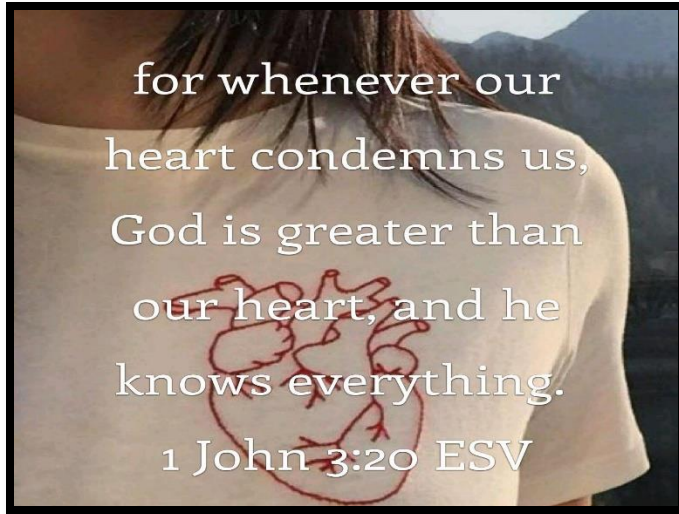
²⁵ James Montgomery Boice, *The Epistles of John: An Expositional Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004), 100–101.

²⁶ Gary M. Burge, *Letters of John*, *The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996), 164.

²⁷ James Montgomery Boice, *The Epistles of John: An Expositional Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004), 102.

²⁸ John R. W. Stott, *The Letters of John: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 19, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 148.

²⁹ Thomas F. Johnson, *1, 2, and 3 John*, *Understanding the Bible Commentary Series* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 88.



our consciences condemn us,³⁰ we are to turn to God who, while finding our words, thoughts and deeds far from holy, accepts and justifies our presence in His family not based on our filthy rags of service (Isaiah 64:6) but on our seal of redemption. While realizing that God knows all things, every past, present, and future temptation, and wilful sins³¹ of defiance can be quite frightening,³² it is also liberating, humbling and a reason for great rejoicing because despite knowing that no one is righteous (Romans 3:10-12) and the heart is deceptively wicked

(Jeremiah 17:9), the believer's mind, body, and soul rings with God's verdict of acquittal³³ found in the authority and atoning sacrifice of His very own Son (Revelation 12:10)!³⁴ If only there were more Christians being like King David asking God to search their hearts there would be far fewer doubting their position in His kingdom!

Cure for Doubt #3 – Receive What we Ask in Prayer

The third cure for doubt is answered prayers. John told the churches that one of the benefits of not having a heart that condemns is confidence that whatever they ask for in prayer will be granted³⁵ as long as one keeps God's commands and does what pleases Him.³⁶ Since no verse in the Bible should be read in isolation, other conditions for receiving what one asks for in prayer are: "praying in Christ's name (John 16:23-24), praying for God's glory (James 4:2-3), being cleansed from his/her sins (Ps. 66:18; Prov. 15:29; Isa. 59:1-2; Jas 5:16), forgiven and

³⁰ Douglas J. Moo, "[The Letters and Revelation](#)," in *NIV Biblical Theology Study Bible*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018), 2263.

³¹ H. D. M. Spence-Jones, ed., [1 John](#), The Pulpit Commentary (London; New York: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1909), 75.

³² H. D. M. Spence-Jones, ed., [1 John](#), The Pulpit Commentary (London; New York: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1909), 75.

³³ James Montgomery Boice, [The Epistles of John: An Expository Commentary](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004), 100.

³⁴ James Montgomery Boice, [The Epistles of John: An Expository Commentary](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004), 101.

³⁵ James Montgomery Boice, [The Epistles of John: An Expository Commentary](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004), 103.

³⁶ James Montgomery Boice, [The Epistles of John: An Expository Commentary](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004), 103.



forgiving others (Mark 11:25), believing God’s promises (Matt. 21:22),”³⁷ and asking according to His will (1 John 5:14).³⁸ “Whatever the child of God asks as such, he *ipso facto* obtains (John 15:7). This is the ideal condition of things; for the child of God cannot ask what displeases his Father.”³⁹ The efficacy of our prayers,⁴⁰ by this I mean how often we receive what we ask God for, goes a long ways towards “clearing our conscience and uncondemning our

heart”⁴¹ because answered prayers shows we have met the above conditions, the chief of which is to be so close to God that we know and are living out His will for our lives! For those who walk in the will of the Father doubt melts into the abyss and is quickly replaced by unspeakable joy (John 16:23-24)⁴² for nothing is withheld that is asked by those who seek what is noble, right, true pure or lovely (Philippians 4:8) in the eyes of their Redeemer!⁴³

Cure for Doubt #4 – Being able to Obey God’s Commands

The fourth cure for doubt mentioned in today’s passage is to obey God’s commands to believe in His Son and to love one another. While on the one hand confidence in our salvation rests solely on Christ’s atoning sacrifice (Hebrews 4:16), pleasing God is contingent on obeying His word (John 14:23–24; 15:7–10)⁴⁴ which begins by saying we are “to love God with all our

³⁷ John R. W. Stott, [*The Letters of John: An Introduction and Commentary*](#), vol. 19, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 150.

³⁸ Gary M. Burge, [*Letters of John*](#), The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996), 164.

³⁹ H. D. M. Spence-Jones, ed., [*1 John*](#), The Pulpit Commentary (London; New York: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1909), 75.

⁴⁰ H. D. M. Spence-Jones, ed., [*1 John*](#), The Pulpit Commentary (London; New York: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1909), 75.

⁴¹ John R. W. Stott, [*The Letters of John: An Introduction and Commentary*](#), vol. 19, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 150.

⁴² James Montgomery Boice, [*The Epistles of John: An Expositional Commentary*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004), 103.

⁴³ Glenn W. Barker, “[*1 John*](#),” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Hebrews through Revelation*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 12 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 338.

⁴⁴ Gary W. Derickson, [*First, Second, and Third John*](#), ed. H. Wayne House, W. Hall Harris III, and Andrew W. Pitts, Evangelical Exegetical Commentary (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012), 366.

hearts, all our souls, with all our minds and with all our strength” (Mark 12:28-31).⁴⁵ For John the ultimate way to show one’s love for God is by doing what the secessionist false teachers

“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 first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall **love** your neighbor **as yourself**.’”
Matthew 22:37-39

refused to do:⁴⁶ “accept Jesus”⁴⁷ as “the Christ” (2:22; 5:1; cf. 2 John 9) or ‘the Son’ (2:23); or, more elaborately, to believe ‘that Jesus is the Son of God’ (4:14; 5:5), and that ‘Jesus Christ has come in the flesh’ (4:2; 2 John 7).⁴⁸ The belief in Jesus, the Messiah as the divine atonement for one’s sins produces assurance in a believer because of their position as an eternal heir in God’s family (Romans 8:17)!⁴⁹ Showing our love for God is also expressed by our love for one

another!⁵⁰ Proof that the Holy Spirit had not spoken to the Secessionists and “God’s love was not inside of them”⁵¹ was that they did not love their brothers and sisters (2:9–11; 3:11–18)!⁵² In chapter four of this letter John states “whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother or sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen” (4:20)! “Love is the final objective test of our Christian profession, for true love, in the sense of self-sacrifice, is not natural”⁵³ but only comes from the power of the Holy Spirit sanctifying the believer. So, when the “crises of self-examination”⁵⁴ comes and doubt overwhelms our souls one can find security knowing that obedience, while

⁴⁵ James Montgomery Boice, *The Epistles of John: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004), 104.

⁴⁶ Thomas F. Johnson, *1, 2, and 3 John*, Understanding the Bible Commentary Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 91.

⁴⁷ John R. W. Stott, *The Letters of John: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 19, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 150.

⁴⁸ John R. W. Stott, *The Letters of John: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 19, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 151.

⁴⁹ H. D. M. Spence-Jones, ed., *1 John*, The Pulpit Commentary (London; New York: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1909), 75.

⁵⁰ Douglas J. Moo, “*The Letters and Revelation*,” in *NIV Biblical Theology Study Bible*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018), 2263.

⁵¹ Glenn W. Barker, “*1 John*,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Hebrews through Revelation*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 12 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 338.

⁵² Thomas F. Johnson, *1, 2, and 3 John*, Understanding the Bible Commentary Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 87.

⁵³ John R. W. Stott, *The Letters of John: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 19, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 147.

⁵⁴ Gary M. Burge, *Letters of John*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996), 163.

not being the criteria for salvation (Ephesians 2:8-9), is the good fruit of pleasing the Lord who is our portion (Psalms 16:5-11)!

Cure for Doubt #5 – Asking the Spirit

The final cure for doubt is the mutually indwelling of the Holy Spirit. “The concept of mutual abiding is derived from the Lord’s allegory of the vine and the branches in John 15.”⁵⁵ Those who “remain in Christ and I in you will bear much fruit” (15:5) because the Spirit of truth, the Paraclete,⁵⁶ lives inside and divinely aids the believer to do what they cannot on their own



might and power, to love God and one another (1 John 4:14; Galatians 5:16, 22).⁵⁷ The secessionists were wrong to claim the Holy Spirit told them to reject the name Jesus and hate their brothers and sisters because no one dares to claim Christ lives in them and wilfully opposes the commands written in His holy word!⁵⁸ So, how can we know that we are not like the Secessionists and being fooled by our own pretence of righteousness while at the same time opposing God’s holy word? John says it is ultimately through the Spirit we

know our position is right before God! While evidence of the Spirit living inside of us can be seen through our ability to love God and one another,⁵⁹ ultimately it is the profound witness of the Spirit that we know that Christ lives inside of us. The Spirit’s testimony is enough to compel us to stand before God who justifies our presence before Him through the atoning sacrifice of His Son, our Lord, Saviour and King!

⁵⁵ John R. W. Stott, *The Letters of John: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 19, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 151.

⁵⁶ Thomas F. Johnson, *1, 2, and 3 John*, Understanding the Bible Commentary Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 91.

⁵⁷ James Montgomery Boice, *The Epistles of John: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004), 104.

⁵⁸ John R. W. Stott, *The Letters of John: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 19, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 152.

⁵⁹ John R. W. Stott, *The Letters of John: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 19, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 152.

Let us finish with a prayer:

Lord you know that in our fallen nature, filled with insecurities and blindness from sin, we often doubt our relationship with You! When these times come may we seek and know the truth so that the fiery darts of our enemy the Devil might be thwarted by taking up the shield of faith, meditating on Your word and standing firmly on Your promises. When our hearts condemn us from real or imagined offenses against You, may we repent when having sinned and never forget we are justified by the atoning sacrifice of Your very own Son! May the efficacy of our prayers be evidence that we have received from You that we have asked for because we know and desire to follow Your will in our lives. May evidence of our obedience to love You and one another squelch all doubts that only a good tree bears good fruit! And finally, and above all may we never stop listening to the council of the Holy Spirit who communes and testifies with our spirit our eternal and glorious position in Your kingdom ... Amen and Amen!