

Prayer

Lord Jesus, my Saviour and my Friend; help me communicate with you with honesty and integrity, and remove the barriers that have clouded my mind, burdened my feelings and blocked my spirit. May I speak to You plainly and listen to You carefully; so that having heard what You have to say, I may act on it willingly and tell others gladly what You have revealed. Thank You Lord Jesus: AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Water

Pray today for countries where natural water resources are scarce, and water supply presents a logistical and technological problem. Pray for people who live with little water.

On-going prayers

- Give thanks for neighbours, friends, and people you meet regularly
- Pray for justice and personal freedom in the countries of S.E. Asia
- Pray about the issue of wasteful packaging and its consequences

Meditation

Lord of all and great Creator of our world
Open the eyes of the blind so all may see

Your judgement falls where moral law is cast aside,
Your censure convicts the rich who oppress the poor
Your anger thunders where the evil grasp at power
Your wrath consumes where leaders ignore injustices
But Your Kingdom grows where people choose another way
Your salvation comes to those who turn aside from self
Your healing rescues those who place their trust in You
Your blessing rests on those who live by faith and love
Your holiness is found in those whose 'self' is crucified.

Open the eyes of the blind so all may see
Your work and constant love for all humanity

Bible Study - 1 John 3:18-24

¹⁸ Little children, let us love not by means of word or speech, but through truth and action. ¹⁹ For this is how we know that we have found the truth, and find reassurance in our hearts before Him ²⁰ whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts and He knows everything. ²¹ Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us we have confidence before God; ²² and we receive from Him whatever we ask, because we keep 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. ²⁴ All who obey His commandments abide in Him, and He in them; and we know that He abides in us because of the Spirit that He has given us.

Review

John's letter is undoubtedly a great treasure of God's Word, and it speaks in a remarkable way about Christian life and the importance of Jesus' command that we should 'love one another'. Indeed, John refers to this in our passage (3:23). Today's reading begins by commending the idea that true love is shown in deeds rather than words (3:18), it continues by asking a question about whether our consciences can judge what is right or wrong (3:19,20), commenting that God is our ultimate judge, and we are truly blessed if what we do reflects His will (3:21,22). Its conclusion is that the only sure path of Christian discipleship is to stick close to the two principles taught by John throughout his writing; faith in Jesus as God's Son and obedience to His command to 'love one another' (3:23), which is achievable by the work of the Spirit within (3:24).

Although this may sound clear enough, you may be a little uncertain about how I have managed to come to these conclusions from this text. If you read the passage again, some of the sentences feel more confusing the more you read them, especially around verses 19 and 20! In some places within his letter, John writes Greek sentences that are almost impossible to understand, and the translators of our Bible versions have great difficulty producing clear readable text. Verses 19 and 20 are an example of this, and the translation above is my best attempt! If you were to read the same verses in another Bible version, not only would you find them different from my version above, you would be likely to remain as confused about the true meaning of the text as ever!

If we place to one side the technical difficulties in Greek (to look at this would take a more substantial study), verses 19 and 20 appear to ask a searching question that we have all asked from time to time. How do we know whether what we are doing is right or wrong before God? If love is to be expressed in deeds more than mere words (see 3:18), then it is rather important that we do what is right. Now, although we can obviously weigh up these things by talking to other people, one of the most important checks on our actions is the conscience within us. Most of us have inner feelings 'in our hearts' (as John says) about what we do; though people can block off from this 'inner voice' and continue to do what is wrong, by sheer desire or will power. However, if we have submitted to Christ, then our hearts are always searching to know His will.

So what does John say in verses 19 and 20? He asks how we may find reassurance about what is right or wrong on those occasions when our consciences are perplexed or uncertain. His answer is that if we are living close to the Lord and doing all we can to keep His commandments, then if our hearts 'do not condemn us' (3:21), then neither does God. In other words, God does not play tricks with the spiritual and mental signals He gives us. What John does not do is to explain the consequences of this, which are that if our consciences are perplexed about something and our hearts are troubled, then we would be wise to assume that it is wrong and should not be done. This is an important piece of advice from scripture, and although it needs some deeper explanation from the Greek text, it is perhaps too important a point to be put on the shelf of theology marked 'uncertain'.

It is understandable that after explaining this, John should reiterate the two classic themes of His preaching and ministry as found in his Gospel (3:23); firstly, the essential Christian faith in Jesus as the Son of God (as summarised in John 20:31) and His call to 'love one another' (John 13:34, 15:12,17). These are the guiding principles for all Christian deeds because they point us both to Jesus as our standard moral example and also to His unique commandment requiring us to do everything with the highest standards of Godly love.

Some are scared by the implications of such a call. Surely this is too much for any mortal to bear; but as John has pointed out many times in his Gospel and in his writings; these things are achievable not in our own strength, but through the Holy Spirit who dwells in those who have given themselves to Jesus and opened their hearts to Him.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. In your group, read through this section of text and then discuss what you think verses 19 and 20 are saying.
2. What part does the conscience have in informing us of God's will? Are there a danger people might allow their consciences to become a substitute for God's will?
3. How do we know that the Holy Spirit dwells within us, or 'abides' in us, and what does this mean?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

The more I think about it, the more I reckon it is true that we assume God speaks to us through our consciences. All of us live from moment to moment without being able to spend lengthy periods of time assessing what could or should be done at any moment, and we act according to what we 'feel' is right. Indeed, we only stop when our 'inner voice' objects and we start to consider whether we should be doing something. It is best to think of the conscience as a means that God uses to communicate with us; it is fallible of course, and sometimes needs to be educated through listening to God's Word.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Over a period of a day, try to be conscious of what your 'conscience' is telling you about the things you do. Consider whether the things you do as a matter of course are 'right' or 'wrong' before God, and whether a small voice inside you feels it necessary to comment on what you do and why you do*

it. It can be a little time consuming, but worth it. We all need to check ourselves out from time to time!

- *Pray for those who have been forced to push their consciences to one side in order to keep going in difficult times, or perhaps survive a difficult childhood. Pray for those who work to help people become conscious of themselves and their feelings again after difficult times.*

Final Prayer

This day is Yours, Jesus my Saviour. You gave it, you help me as I live through it, and at its end I will give it back to You. May I always remember that what I think is mine is really Yours, and when I mistakenly think that I control my day, remind me of my frailty and turn me back to You. I owe You everything, Jesus my Saviour: AMEN
