

1 John 3:18 Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth. 19This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence 20whenever our hearts condemn us. For God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. 21Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God 22and receive from him anything we ask, because we obey his commands and do what pleases him. 23And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us. 24Those who obey his commands live in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us.

Dear Friends in Christ,

CONFIDENCE BEFORE GOD

Doubt makes you stand in the aisle at Lowe's like a dummy wasting time, wondering if you really need primer or if you can save some money and just buy the paint, so you stand there in a cloud of doubt. Doubt makes you not reach out to people who need an encouragement. Doubt makes you not say what needs to be said. Doubt made me *not* write back a certain girl I liked, after she didn't respond to the birthday card I sent her. (Actually five years later she did write back, and now we are married. But there were five years of doubt!) What do you think about doubt?

A renowned teaching expert once said, "Pray for doubt." (Jane Vella, *On Teaching and Learning*, Preface). Why would she have said, "pray for doubt"? She *wasn't* talking about doubt in general. She was talking about doubt in teaching and learning. Her point was that you can only learn when you have a little bit of doubt. If you are completely self-confident, you can't learn.

So, I suppose that doubt, in small doses, in the proper places, can be good. But there are some places we don't want a smidgen of doubt. Do you want a doubting surgeon? (Right kidney or left? Whichever.) Do you want a doubting bomb-defuser? (Red wire or blue wire? Let's see what happens!) Large amounts of doubt spell despair, depression, failure.

Defining the Doubt of 1 John 3:18-24

That unhealthy, unhelpful kind of doubt in our relationship with God is what the apostle John addresses. "***Dear children... This is how... we set our hearts at rest in [God's] presence whenever our hearts condemn us.***" John hints at something that I thought (saying this tongue in cheek) didn't exist in believers: doubt. I thought Christians are always confident, certain, victorious people. Not always. John says that even we might have times when we need to set our hearts at rest. He talks about times when we mentally stand before God and we wonder and we feel kind of ashamed at what God sees in us. Sometimes our hearts do condemn us, we doubt our relationship with God.

There might be *some* Christians who never doubt their relationship with God. There probably are a few whom God has blessed with such a childlike faith, that they always trust, always believe, never doubt their relationship with God. If that is your blessing, God bless you! God *has* blessed you.

Some Christians are continually plagued by doubt. Martin Luther, before he came to understand the true good news of Jesus was plagued by doubt. Martin Luther had a monster under his bed, and it kept him from sleeping. He called this monster Uncertainty. (Actually, he called it the Latin name *monstrum incertitudinis*). He would confess his sins to his confessors for hours on end. He would flog himself for his sins. He would sleep on cold stone floors without blankets. Doubt was the plague of his life. It destroyed his health. The spiritual heritage of the church he grew up in praised doubt as a

virtue. It said that no-one could ever be certain of salvation.

Do you think that is what God wants? Does God want us uncertain?

Most of us probably fall somewhere in between the two extremes. Most are not plagued by doubt like Luther. Yet I would guess that most of us have had times in life when we were wondering: “Can God love me, even with all the times I have messed up?”

Doubts about This Word of God

That doubt arises in our hearts because God’s Word says things like, **“Let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth. This then is how we know that we belong to the truth.”** Love truly. Don’t speak religious platitudes. Don’t say, “God bless” and walk off unconcerned. That’s hypocrisy. If we truly love God, we will truly love people, and it will show in more than words. In the sports world, an agent for an athlete will say to a team owner, “Show me the money.” Owners praise athletes for their ability, but the agent knows that words are cheap. “Show me the money!” (Jeske, Mark. p.242)

“Let us not love with words...but in actions. This is how we know that we belong to the truth.” Really?

I am going to level with you. This is one of those Bible passages that is difficult for me. It doesn’t sound like our typical Lutheran way of looking at things. That is not to say that Lutheranism and this Bible passage are at odds with each other, but this Word of God is challenging us with a different way of looking at a situation than the way we usually state our theology.

Here is why this passage is difficult for me. It points at my own actions and then says, **“This [my actions] is how we know that we belong to the truth.”** If this is supposed to encourage me, it doesn’t work. I know that I sin daily. I know that I am not always overflowing with deep concern for other people, much less willing to spare no expense in helping them. Instinctively, this is exactly the place I *don’t* want to go to have confidence.

And so it can happen that the Monster Called Uncertainty creeps under my bed. I know the good I was supposed to do but didn’t.

We can doubt for other reasons too. When we look at other people who do so much good, who live godly lives, who have a faith that can move mountains, who are always building other people up, who work tirelessly to fulfill their obligations, I can doubt whether I am God’s.

When I think that if I don’t have this saved feeling down in my gut, then I can start to doubt. Surely a Christian should be full of joy and hope right? And if I don’t feel these things, is God really with me?

Comparing what God wants and what I do—the last thing it does is make me confident. At first blush, this reading leads me to doubt!

Getting Confidence from This Word of God

With our reading it is so very, very important to remember an important principle about reading our Bibles: context. We need to know what came before this passage and after it.

While our reading talks about good deeds, we should look two verses before our reading. In verse 16 it says, **“This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.”** It says it again in verse 23 of our reading, **“This is [God’s] command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another.”** What John is saying is, “It is important to love other people. It is necessary to love other people. But before you can do that, you have to know what real love is: Jesus loved us, died for us, forgave us, and saved us. Then you can do what God wants.”

Jesus saved us and now we are concerned about doing what God wants. Sometimes we joyfully do God's will. Sometimes we timidly do God's will. Sometimes we don't want to, but we realize that we should, and so we overcome and do God's will. Whenever we do God's will because it is God's will, that proves that we belong to God. So John is saying that while our good deeds do not save us, they still can give us confidence. They can help slay the doubt monster that arises within us. How does that work?

Think about it this way: What kind of person cares about what you think? What kind of person cares about your opinions? Do people who dislike you care about your opinion? If they do, it is only so that they can do the opposite of what you want. Like the bully who will steal your lunch, not because he wants to eat it, but because he wants to make you miserable. Like an antagonistic spouse who hates the news but watches the news just so you can't watch your favorite show. Like the classmate who takes the last cookie in the lunch line; he doesn't like cookies, but he knows that you do.

But people who *do* care about you share their lunch with you after yours gets stolen, they tell you about the show you didn't get to see, they share their cookie with you. They are concerned with what you want.

And that is where the Apostle John is getting at in this reading. He is saying: People who hate God couldn't care less what God thinks. Oh sure, sometimes they do decent things. But it's not because God told them to. But you, *you* think about God's will. You wonder what God wants. You sometimes ask pastor what he thinks God wants in certain circumstances. You, when you don't do what God wants, you are sorry for it. You are concerned about God's will. That's significant!

What kind of person is concerned about what you want? Not people who hate you, but people who love you. And what kind of person is concerned about what God wants? Not people who hate God, but people who love him. That is the Apostle John's comfort here. If you are concerned about God, about his will, then you are a child of God. It is not to say that you are perfect in carrying out what God wants. And it isn't that your efforts save you, but that you are concerned about God shows that you are God's.

That is what I see before me. The fact that you are here this morning is proof that you are God's. Your church attendance does not save you, but you know that. It does prove that you belong to God. Your love for God's word that brings you to Bible class early on a Sunday morning, that proves that you are God's. That love for the Gospel that led about a dozen of you to be here yesterday for that School of Outreach, that proves that you are God's. And that you helped out your neighbor, not because they helped you in the past or because it made you feel good, but because you know that is what your loving God wanted you to do, that proves that you are God's—all of it is a witness that you are God's.

Of course, the greatest comfort of all is to look at the cross of Christ who saved us. Nothing can take that place. That is the first place we should go in our times of doubt. Remember Jesus' ultimate display of love for you, no matter what you have done, what you are like. But when wonder if you really do love God, the fact that you love God's will is a testimony that God's Holy Spirit lives within you.

Maybe it is a bit like a parent who finds a downcast child who has made Mom angry. And the child, in the moment, feels like he has ruined his relationship with Mom. And she tucks a finger under his chin, lifts his eyes to hers and says, "I know that you messed up but I also know that you care. Remember that birthday card you got me last week? I do." And the testimony of what he did returns begins the return of confidence.

Is doubt a good thing? I ask you this question: What parent wants their child to doubt a parent's

love? Any parent who looks at his or her child and says, “I hope that child doubts whether I love her”—would that not be an evil parent? Do you think our heavenly Father wants us, his children, to doubt our status with him?

And so in our reading we are told, ***“Let us love in truth... This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence whenever our hearts condemn us. For God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.”*** He knows. He knows that though we fall and sin often, we love him. He knows that though we at times don’t live like it, that we do trust Jesus. He knows that we do love his word. And that makes us want to love him, to follow him all the more.

Confidence, in our Heavenly Father. Amen.