

# 1 JOHN—WEEK 4

## THE HEART OF FAITH



F. Michael Slay

*A DEEP Study*

**The Fellowship of Ailbe**

*The Cover Picture is by Jan van Eyck (1390–1441)*

*On display in Ghent at the St. Bavo Cathedral, it looks like a statue, but it's a painting.*

Christians are called to love one another enough to lay down our lives. And if our hearts condemn us, know that God is greater. Jesus abides in us and us in Him. We have His spirit in us.

False spirits, and those who have them, are distinguished by their inability to confess Christ and even to hear what His people say.

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1 John, Week 4 — The Heart of Faith

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1 1 John 3:16–18

*By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But whoever has this world's goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him?*

*My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth.*

The phrase “Actions speak louder than words” is said to be “hundreds” of years old.

<https://grammarist.com/proverb/actions-speak-louder-than-words/>

Ha. Saint Hilary of Arles said that of 1 John 3:18 almost sixteen “hundreds of years” ago.

John is calling us to actions that speak very loudly. He gives Jesus laying down His life for us as the example by which *we know love*. Then John challenges us by saying that *we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren*. It doesn't get much louder than that.

But what makes this passage so bold is what it doesn't say. John admonishes any Christian who *sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him*. Okay, but where's the mention of the brother deserving any help? Where's the mention of the brother even asking for help?

They're not there. The context for this passage is Romans 5:8.

*But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*

God sets an incredibly high standard of love for us.

And there's another little unexpected tidbit in this passage. Notice what it says about the Christian who *sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him*. What is that person missing?

Not obedience (though that's implied). Not charity. No, what's missing is *the love of God*. Loving your brother is really all about loving God. This brings the whole thing full circle.

Actions speak louder than words, but our actions toward our brother speak to our love of God.

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And loving your brother has a curious twist in practice. The Christian who *sees his brother in need* may have had to look hard to find him. People in need hesitate to ask for help. Thus, churches often get requests for help not from the people who need help but from their friends.

So, active love actively looks for people who need help. This leads to a great irony.

In the midst of the incredible challenge of laying our lives down for our brothers, the easiest recruiting in all of Christendom pops up.

“Help me find people who need help.”

*And by this we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before Him. For if our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and knows all things. Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence toward God.*

This passage seeks to *assure our hearts before Him* by saying that it's okay either way, whether our heart condemns us or not. This is a sophisticated point, so let's start unpacking it.

First off, “*by this*” is referring to 1 John 3:18. *My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth.*

That's how *we know that we are of the truth*. Just paying lip service to love doesn't mean much. One must love in their actions.

And our heart means our conscience; it's a standard colloquialism. But why would our conscience condemn us? And if that happens, why is it okay? What does John mean by our heart condemning us? What does he mean by our heart not condemning us?

Taking these in reverse order helps. Someone who isn't condemned by his heart would not be someone who thinks he's perfect, but someone who feels comfortable with his spiritual state. Much of 1 John is written to make people comfortable with their spiritual state.

*These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you may continue to believe in the name of the Son of God. — 1 John 5:13*

So, those are not the people the passage is written to comfort. No, the target audience is those who are condemned by their hearts. While an active conscience is a good thing, the pain of guilt can get severe. John comforts these people by noting that God knows everything our hearts know and more, and He *is greater than our heart*.

His forgiveness is final.

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One of the cornerstones of Christian theology is that forgiveness is not the same as acquittal. Forgiven people knows they're guilty. Notice how Jesus handles this with the woman caught in adultery.

*And Jesus said to her, “Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more.” — John 8:11b*

There's no hint that her actions were okay. The condemnation is gone, though the guilt remains.

The English word for this, “*grace*,” is such a lovely word. The Greek word for grace (χάρις “*car-iss*”) is equally lovely. The first definition in the BDAG lexicon is, “*graciousness, attractiveness.*” The second is, “*favor, grace, gracious care or help, goodwill.*”

His forgiveness isn't just good; it's beautiful.

3 1 John 3:22–24

*And whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do those things that are pleasing in His sight. And this is His commandment: that we should believe on the name of His Son Jesus Christ and love one another, as He gave us commandment.*

*Now he who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him. And by this we know that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us.*

This passage starts out sounding like the key to answered prayer is obeying the Ten Commandments.

But John immediately clarifies what he means by *His commandment: that we should believe on the name of His Son Jesus Christ and love one another*.

This is not about works; it's about faith. Believing in Jesus Christ and loving one another are the key characteristics of a Christian. Doing these things is not only possible (unlike obeying the Ten Commandments) but they come naturally to the regenerate person.

And this is because the regenerate person *abides in Him, and He in him*. Jesus takes His seat on the throne of Lordship in the Christian.

And that's in the form of *the Spirit whom He has given us*.

*In Him you also trusted, after you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation; in whom also, having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, — Ephesians 1:13*

That *Holy Spirit of promise* is how we know that *He abides in us*.

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This passage sets up the spiritual descriptions in tomorrow's DEEP. We know first-hand what the Spirit of God is like. This will prove useful.

There's another piece to this that's subtle but important. Some things vary from Christian to Christian and some things don't. It's important to know which things are essentials of the Christian faith and which things just denote different "flavors" of Christianity.

This passage notes three things that are essential: belief in Christ, love, and the abiding Spirit. Some references, such as Romans 10:9, add a public confession of faith to this list of essentials.

*...that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. — Romans 10:9*

Everything else is just flavoring.

4 1 John 4:1–3

*Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God. And this is the spirit of the Antichrist, which you have heard was coming, and is now already in the world.*

How can we test a spirit? What does that even mean? How would we cross-examine a spirit?

John provides the answer with, “*because many false prophets have gone out into the world.*” We aren’t expected to chat directly with spirits; only Jesus did that. Rather, it’s people who claim to speak for God (prophets) who should be “tested.”

And the test is simple and unambiguous.

*Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God.*

Paul wrote the same thing in 1 Corinthians 12:3.

*Therefore I make known to you that no one speaking by the Spirit of God calls Jesus accursed, and no one can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit.*

Thus, John is saying something rather aggressive. If someone is a false prophet, he won’t be able to make a proper confession of faith.

False prophets can talk incessantly about expecting to go to heaven, but they cannot confess Jesus as Lord. They’ll dodge the question every time.

Don’t let them.

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As noted in yesterday’s DEEP, we know first-hand what the spirit of God is like. Thus, it shouldn’t be too hard to tell if a spirit is bogus.

Except that it is. A false spirit will, of course, try to conceal its nature. It is false, after all. That’s why it’s important to press “prophets” on the issue of who Jesus is. So how does one apply this in practice? Should you just challenge people?

Of course not. Getting someone to confess Christ is the goal for a wide range of cases. This should always be done with tact. You can ask people about Jesus without it sounding like a cross-examination.

Confrontation is not how evangelism works.

5 1 John 4:4–6

*You are of God, little children, and have overcome them, because He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. They are of the world. Therefore they speak as of the world, and the world hears them. We are of God. He who knows God hears us; he who is not of God does not hear us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.*

I like to say, “Christians are from another planet.”

Of course, “planet” isn’t the right word; we’re from another “world,” or “kingdom.”

But “planet” conveys the right feel. “World” and “kingdom” don’t get anyone’s attention. “From another culture” is even weaker.

We think the thing to say to someone we just met is something like, “Do you know about Jesus?”

Okay then, but if the person says, “No,” the follow up should be, “Take me to your leader.”

All kidding aside, the culture gap between believers and non-believers is huge. John is trying to convey a sense of that in this passage.

It’s not a language barrier; it’s a hearing barrier. *He who knows God hears us; he who is not of God does not hear us.*

And this leads to an extra test for discerning whether a spirit is of God or not.

*The spirit of error* will have a curious deafness problem.

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In practice, the deafness will be in the person with the spirit of error. The spirits hear just fine.

But the art of deception often keys on preventing communication. The word of truth presents unpredictable dangers to the forces of darkness. For them, deafness is safest.

This is wonderfully illustrated in Letter IV of *The Screwtape Letters* by C.S. Lewis. Screwtape, a senior demon, advises Wormwood, a junior tempter, with this pearl.

*It is funny how mortals picture us as putting things into their minds: in reality our best work is done by keeping things out.*

The challenge in evangelism isn’t in getting someone to agree with you; it’s in getting them to hear you. And this isn’t literal deafness. They hear your words, but they can’t make out what you’re saying.

As John notes in today’s passage, if they don’t hear you that’s a red flag. However, what if you want them to hear you—say it’s a loved one—what can you do? What can you say that overcomes deafness?

Nothing. Prayer is the only way.

*Questions for reflection or discussion*

Note: some of these questions may seem to have obvious answers. That's by design. Those answers should be a good springboard for discussion.

1. Have you helped someone ask for help?
2. Is there something that differentiates grace from mere forgiveness?
3. Are belief in Christ, love, the spirit, and public confession the complete list of essentials?
4. Have you ever thought you detected a false spirit in someone?
5. Have you ever been frustrated by someone's inability to hear you?

*Items for prayer:*