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First John
IV. When Our Hearts Condemn Us
I John 3:19-24

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Humorist Garrison Keillor has said, *“We always have a backstage view of ourselves.”*¹ What he means is that we only ever let the audience around us see the neatly arranged stage, the carefully constructed set and props and costume of our public self. But behind the curtain, backstage, is where we really live. And behind the curtain of our self are all sorts of less presentable things: failures, hurts, guilt, mistakes, resentments, flaws, short-comings, oddities, betrayals. If someone were to walk behind that curtain, they would see the real truth about who we really are. And we would be horrified, wouldn't we?

“Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God . . .” But our hearts do condemn us, don't they? The little voice that speaks whenever we slow down enough to give it an opportunity: “If people really knew the real me, they wouldn't like me. I feel inadequate in regard to what is expected of me. When I look inside myself, I am not satisfied with who I am. I just can't measure up. And God must be disappointed with me.” *“Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us”* – but our hearts do condemn us, don't they?

Our hearts condemn us for who we are. Our hearts condemn us because we are too fat or too thin, too short or too tall, too loud or too shy. Through television and advertising and social media we are constantly bombarded with messages that inform us that whoever we are, we are wrong and deficient, don't measure up to current stands and probably smell bad too. And even when we know those messages about who we are are false and manipulative, still they get to us, they work on us – perhaps because, behind the scenes of the self, we are already predisposed to believe those messages. To believe them because we are already so practiced at feeling embarrassed, even feeling ashamed, simply for who we are.

Like this scene from one of the greatest comic strips ever, Calvin and Hobbes. Calvin's mother and father are sorting through the day's mail (this was back in the day when things other than bills still came in the mail!). Calvin's father says:

You got a “You're not attractive enough” women's magazine with an article on swimsuits that minimize all your body flaws. Here are some “You're not stylist or ostentatious enough catalogs . . . And here's our news magazine to identify the trend of the week we're missing . . . And I got a hobby magazine featuring new equipment I ought to have.

At which point he pauses, and then wonders out loud: “*Why do I get the feeling that society is trying to make us discontented with everything we do and insecure about who we are?*” And then, the last panel, the cartoon ends with six-year-old Calvin racing into the room, shouting “*Mom, I just saw a bunch of products on TV that I didn’t know existed, but now I desperately need!*”² Our hearts condemn us for who we are.

Our hearts condemn us for where we are – for where we are, or are not, in life. They condemn us for the price we have paid for our success, or they condemn us for our lack of success. Our hearts condemn us for rising above our peers or for not keeping up with our peers. They condemn us for the way we earn our living, where we work, how we work. They condemn us for being married or not married, with children or without children, living in this house as opposed to that house, near to family or far from family. And social media just amps up the self-condemnation – because we can never measure up to the perfect families or décor or style or dance-steps or vacations or restaurant entrees we see carefully curated and edited on TikTok or Instagram or Facebook. Our hearts condemn us for where we are in life, making us feel that wherever we are in our life’s journey, it is just not good enough, it is just not big enough, that we are somehow just not making the grade.

The wonderful Christian writer, Richard Foster, says it this way:

*I seldom find a place where people feel completely right and good with the place where they live, with the job they are in, or the family that they are with. And there is so much shame; and by and large it has no basis . . . Parents ashamed of children, and children ashamed of parents. Husbands ashamed of wives, and wives ashamed of husbands . . . And where we live isn’t right, the degree we got isn’t right, the place where we got it isn’t right, the job we are in isn’t right . . . And we are condemned.*³

Our hearts condemn us for where we are.

But maybe our hearts condemn us most of all for what we have done, and for what have left undone. Bad decisions we have made, accidents and injuries we have caused, opportunities we have let slip. Mean things we have said and wished we could take back; kind words that we never got around to saying and now it is too late. Failures at loving, failures at living. Indifference, infidelities, ineptitude, lies and mistakes. All those guilty things which sneak up on us from out of the past and prick at our conscience whenever we don’t have a screen in front of us to distract us. Our hearts condemning us for what we have done, and for what we have left undone.

Lewis Smedes tells of visiting his mother in the hospital towards the end of her life. At one point, as he sat beside her, her eyes began to fill with tears, and she heaved a great sigh and said, “*Oh, Lewis, I’m so glad the Lord forgives me all of my sins; I’ve been a great sinner . . .*” And Smedes was totally taken aback by this. Great sinner? All he could think of was how this wonderful woman had made so many sacrifices to raise five children all on her own. Great sinner?

She had been a saint. How could she possibly believe that she, of all people, had been a great sinner? But in the months following her death, he began to understand. He writes:

What she was feeling about herself in those last weeks was what she had been feeling most of her life, that she was just not good enough, not a good enough mother, or a good enough Christian, or a good enough anything she could think of. . . And “great sinner” was the only way she could . . . describe the heaviness she felt.⁴

Our hearts condemn us for what we have done, and for what we have left undone.

“Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God . . .” But our hearts do condemn us, don’t they? And if our hearts do condemn us, what confidence can we ever have before God? For if our own hearts condemn us – and, let’s admit it, that’s even after grading ourselves on the curve – if even our own hearts condemn us, then surely God – the only One who sees the backstage view of our hearts better even than us – if our own hearts condemn us, then surely God must condemn us even more!

But He doesn’t. Our God sees our hearts even more clearly than we ever see them – and He doesn’t condemn us, not at all. Where we would condemn ourselves, He chooses instead to redeem us. Where we would condemn ourselves, He chooses instead to heal us. Where we would condemn ourselves, He chooses instead to overflow our condemning hearts with His love, with His mercy, with His peace:

By this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our heart before him; for whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything.

“Whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart.” There is a divine word spoken over our hearts that is greater than any word we could ever speak over ourselves. There is a divine word spoken over our lives that is greater than any word anyone else has ever or will ever speak over us. There is a divine word spoken over our very being that is the greatest, most important word we need to hear about ourselves, and to take deeply into our hearts. And that word is “grace.” That word is “beloved child of God.” That word is God Himself saying to us, *“You are precious in my sight.”*

Remember the story of Jesus’ encounter with the woman caught in adultery – John chapter eight. The scribe and Pharisees had condemned her already, the crowd around her had condemned her already. They dragged her through the dusty street and threw her down before Jesus. Just imagine what was in the heart of that woman in that moment – the shame, the guilt, the fear. Jesus speaks, and slowly the chastened crowd walks away until no one is left but Jesus and this woman lying at His feet. He looks down at her and speaks to her, *“Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?”* She answers Him, *“No one, Lord.”* And then says Jesus, *“Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more.”* *“By this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our heart before him; for whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart.”*

Remember the woman suffering from a twelve year flow of blood⁵ – which rendered her ritually unclean, unable to participate in the religious life of the community. Which also rendered her alone, cut off from ordinary contact with others in her community – lest they too become unclean by their contact with her. So, not only twelve years of physical suffering and pain, but also twelve years of mental and emotional and spiritual shame, abandonment, and isolation. Until that day when Jesus passed by, and she – boldly, desperately – reached out her hand and took hold of the fringe of His robe. And suddenly felt herself miraculously healed in body!

But her joy at this instantly cut short by Jesus whirling around and asking, “*Who touched me?*” Imagine the embarrassment of that moment, of being singled out before the crowd – just one more humiliation. But she does the brave thing – she falls down before Jesus and confesses that she is the one who touched Him. And He looks upon her – as if all the way into the innermost recesses of our condemning heart. And then He lifts up her head and speaks to her. He speaks to her – calling her not “sinner,” not “outcast,” not “unclean.” He calls her “daughter.” “*Daughter,*” He says to her, “*Your faith has made you well.*” It is a double healing, you see. When she touched His robe her body was healed. But it was when He looked upon her with such love, mercy, and respect – and called her “Daughter” – that was the moment when at last her heart was healed. Healed by His love for her. “*By this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our heart before him; for whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart.*”

Or remember that story Jesus told about a prodigal son and his loving father.⁶ Having squandered his wealth and his life in a far country, at last that boy’s prodigal heart catches up to him. He has a moment of deep insight in a pig sty, in which he finally sees himself for what he has done, and for what he has become. Shame, remorse, regret – his heart condemns him. And he decides to go home, home to the only hope he has left – but knowing that he has likely already done so much damage that there can be no possible hope of things ever going back to the way they were before. For if his own heart condemns him, how much more so will the father he has so deeply wronged condemn him. Maybe, just maybe and at best, his father will permit him to stay around as a servant. Self-condemning heart in hand, he sets off for home.

“*But while he was still a long way off,*” Jesus said – “*while he was still a long way off,*” his father saw him shuffling down the road. Meaning that his father had been looking for him, waiting for him, desperately anxious that his son should come home to him – going out to that road every morning, noon, and night just to see if just maybe today his son might be returning. While that boy was still a long way off, on this day his father at last saw him coming home. But his father didn’t just see him, his father started running, running towards him. In that culture, fathers don’t ever run – it is beneath their dignity. Children run, servants run, mothers run – but never do fathers run. But his father gathers up his robes in his hands and runs toward his prodigal son as fast as sandals will let him.

And when he reaches his son – what does he do? The son doesn’t even have time to get a word of apology out of his mouth before his father has wrapped him up in his arms, crying tears of joy and shouting to all, “*Rejoice with me – for my son who was lost, is found; my son who was dead, is alive.*” Not a word about what the son had done to him. Not even the very first word of blame, recrimination, condemnation. Just a joyous heart, not a condemning heart. And the son’s own heart in that moment is overcome by his father’s love for him. His condemning heart is healed

by his father's love for him. And he is now, at last, truly home – truly where he was always meant to be. And that, says Jesus – that is what God is like towards us. Towards us. *“By this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our heart before him; for whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything.”*

He knows everything about us, and He loves us anyway – profoundly, deeply loves us. He knows all the reasons, valid or not, for why our own hearts condemn us – and yet He refuses to condemn us, only to embrace us. Greater than our own hearts, His heart invites us in, welcomes us home, fills us with grace and mercy and peace, promises us that we will now dwell with Him, live all our days – even counting into eternity – in the arms of His unconditional love for us. And that, brothers and sisters in Christ, is what we call the Good News. That, brothers and sisters in Christ, is the heart of the Gospel. That when our hearts condemn us, God is greater than our hearts.

¹ Quoted in M. Craig Barnes, “Called to Forgive,” sermon found on-line at [Called to Forgive - National Presbyterian Church](#)

² This cartoon was originally published on January 31, 1993.

³ Richard Foster, “Living Confidently in God,” sermon found on-line at www.30goodminutes.org/csec/sermon/foster_4315.htm. The idea of the “who, where, what” of our self-condemnation is drawn from this sermon. Unfortunately, this link is no longer active.

⁴ Lewis B. Smedes, *Shame and Grace* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), pp. 3-4.

⁵ Luke 8:43-48.

⁶ Luke 15:11-24.