

# (1 John #20) Hearts at Rest in His Presence

by J. Glyn Owen

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*The sermon explores the importance of a properly functioning conscience and the role of the Holy Spirit in conviction, emphasizing the need to distinguish between God's voice and Satan's voice in times of false accusation.*

**Duration:** 39:56

**Topics:** "Rest"

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## Description

In this sermon, John emphasizes the importance of turning away from the fallible testimony of our subjective conscience and focusing on the objective testimony of our behavior. He encourages listeners to examine the realities of their situation and look at the objectives of what God has done in their lives. John warns against believing every spirit, as there are evil spirits and Satan himself who can manipulate our consciences. He urges believers to assess their love for God's people as a sign of abiding in the truth. The sermon concludes with a prayer for guidance and realignment of our consciences through the power of God's Word and Spirit.

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## Transcript

Simply want to refer to that today. Let's look at it because I want you to see the way we're ultimately going. Verse twenty-two, or should we start with twenty-one? Beloved, if our heart condemn us not, that is, if we have real Christian assurance, then have we confidence toward God.

And whatsoever we ask, we receive of him, because we keep his commandments, and we do those things that are pleasing in his sight. Now that's a remarkable vista of Christian experience. John doesn't qualify it.

Whatsoever we ask of him, we receive of him. This is the confidence, he says, that we may have of God when our hearts no longer condemn us. But this morning we've got to stay with this first basic truth that is woven into this, into the pattern, into the texture of this passage.

I suppose we could speak of it as the cure of a heart or of a conscience that is falsely condemned. By this we shall know, says John, that we are of the truth, and reassure our hearts before him, whenever our hearts condemn us. For God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.

Do we know anything this morning of the condemning heart? Or, perhaps we should put it in slightly different language, of the condemning conscience. You will find that the translations vary here. Some use

the word heart, referring to the whole, inner, self, the soul.

Other people refer to the conscience. Well, now it comes very much to the same thing. I wonder whether some of us have come to church this morning, and deep down in our souls we are under a cloud.

Everything seems to rise within us to condemn us. Particularly so if we have been courageous enough to look into the face of these tests that John has been applying to Christian people, or to professing Christian people. I wonder whether some of us have emerged from this exercise proud, harassed, worried, challenged, so that if the truth were known, these words of Scripture put us very much in the blue.

We are clouded, clouded over by clouds of doubt and unbelief, and possibly of fear. We have no confidence whatsoever that we are the children of God. And certainly we are not able to move into the arena of Christian intercession spoken of in the later part of this passage.

Now, this is our theme this morning. And I have to take a little longer with this than I would normally do. And I do so because I know that there is need to do so.

Now, let's start like this. Let's acknowledge the fact there are times when our hearts, when our conscience is condemned, discomfiting and disconcerting, though it may sometimes be. The existence of a conscience as such is one of the most precious gifts of God to any man, any woman that wants to please Him.

Oh, it can hurt. Oh my, it can stab us at the most awkward moments when we would like to be at peace and in full control of ourselves. And we certainly don't want to blush, and we don't want to show that we're agitated.

But you know that this thing, this moral monitor within can stab us and make us uncomfortable and ill at ease at the most awkward times. But let us nevertheless acknowledge the fact that if in a world of sin and temptation and satanic power we want to live a life that is pleasing to God, this is one of His most precious gifts of all. One of them.

A conscience that is properly functioning can be a great guide to us. You remember how Paul, in the book of the Acts, insists that this is one of his main goals in life. He says, I always try to keep my conscience clear, to cultivate a conscience void of offense, a conscience that functions properly, so that I may rightly react to the will of God and may know His voice, may not be pummeled by alien forces or alien spirits, but I may nevertheless be sensitive to the voice of God and know when He is angry with me, when He is displeased with me.

Now, of course, the conscience needs to be trained. A conscience, in the first place, needs to be purged. We need a conscience that is purged from sin.

But we need a conscience also that is renewed by the Spirit. And we need a conscience, above all, that is in line with the will and the word of God. A conscience that is synchronized to God's standard rather than man's standard.

Now, you know, as far as the time on the clock is concerned, in certain places just now it's three o'clock in the afternoon. In other places it's nine o'clock in the morning. Do you know there are consciences like that? They vary.

If we brought up a moral issue in this congregation this morning, it could well be that some would say, now that's absolutely taboo, it's altogether wrong. And others might say, I hope not, but others might say, well, there's nothing whatsoever that's wrong with that. You see, it's like a watch, it's like a clock being out of alignment.

It's not in touch with an objective standard of truth that says yes or no, black or white. Now, this doesn't please everybody. This is the doctrine of the word of God.

Our consciences, like our watches and our clocks, our consciences need to be set according to the objective standard of the word of God. And this is something that needs to be done not only once in a while, but regularly. This is the value of reading the word of God in the quietness of our bedroom or whatever we have, and letting the word of God set the standard and the tone of our lives.

Now, that's necessary. Can I ask you this morning, my friend, do you know the cleansing of the blood of Jesus Christ, taking the sin away from your soul, purging you, forgiving you? Do you know the quickening of the spirit of God, giving you new life, even in your conscience? And then this. Is it something that you practice daily to align your conscience to the truth of the word? If not, your conscience may lead you astray.

It can let you down. And you can be doing things which are completely wrong in the sight of God, whilst at the same time saying in your own soul, I see nothing wrong in it. And that's because this moral monitor, this inbuilt spiritual radar system, it's not rightly geared, it's not rightly set, it's not rightly tuned.

Now, assuming that our consciences are rightly tuned, and they're condemning us, and we feel uncomfortable, now there's only one line to take. It's this way. John has been talking about it earlier on in his epistle.

First of all, we must bring the whole thing out into the light of God. Walk in the light. Don't try to hide the sin that God has not forgiven.

Don't try to bury it and forget about it. My good Christian friend, never do that. If you can forget sin that God has not forgiven, you are your own worst enemy.

And on the day of judgment, that sin that you've forgotten may rise from the dead and face you. Don't try to forget sins that you've not acknowledged before God and been forgiven for. Rather, bring them out into the open.

Make confession of them. And then, when you've made confession of them, do what John says. Believe the promises of the gospel.

If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us. Mark that word. Not just to forgive us, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

There is a cathartic process which goes on in the soul that only God can perform, purging the inner man, so that we are clean in spirit, in mind, in imagination, in conscience. Now then, if our consciences are rightly functioning this morning, and they're telling us that something is wrong, that's the way to go. But that's not my main theme.

I'm thinking this morning, and I believe John is here in this context, that's why I'm coming to it. I'm thinking particularly of some whose consciences may be accusing them falsely. You see, important as the conscience is, it is not infallible.

Your conscience may fail to tell you that something is wrong when it is. But you know, this to me is one of the most challenging things, is to discover sometimes people who are bludgeoned by their consciences in a way that they ought not. In other words, their consciences so accuse them and so harass them, that they think that everything's wrong, nothing's right.

And they've got to become slaves of negatives. And their life is a sheer negation. They're afraid to do this, they're afraid to do that.

And it's all because there's something that's gone wrong in the realm of the conscience. I'm deliberately trying not to be technical in language about this, but to speak the language of the man of the street. Now why should this be? How does our consciences get into this condition? The heart, as John speaks of it in our translation, or the conscience? How does this happen? You know, sometimes our consciences take advantage of us when we are physically unwell.

Have you noticed that? For the conscience to function properly, as I understand it, it needs also two witnesses alongside of it. The witness of the mind, understanding the truth of God and his standard, and the witness of the memory, to remember whether I have done this or whether I did say that. And the conscience is meant to function as one of a trinity, over against the understanding of God's truth on the one hand and the realities of one's life situation on the other.

Now, when you're very tired, or when you're sick and you're under the weather, you see, one of the tragedies is this. You can be accused of things and you're not quite sure really whether you did it or whether you didn't, whether you said it or whether you did not say it. And there are times when, in sickness and in a condition of tiredness, when men and women can be flayed by their consciences in a way that it is desperate to behold.

Now again, you can have the same kind of thing in the period of mental strain. This mental strain may have emerged when you've been sitting examinations, or when you've got a difficult job every day, or indeed in one of many circumstances. We don't need to go into the details, but the thing is, you're not on top form and you're not able to think clearly, and you're not able to remember properly, and therefore the conscience may take advantage over you.

Now, if you ally a time of mental strain with physical exhaustion, then the conscience can become tyrannical. You think of a man like Elijah. Think of a man like Elijah.

Now, if ever there was a man, I like that word, if ever there was a real man, it was Elijah. Elijah was a man of a man. I won't add.

A real man. Masculine. A man in charge of himself and his passions.

James says he was a man subject to like passions as we are. But what did he do? He prayed. Now, that's a man subject to like passions as we are, but he prayed and the heavens shut up.

And he prayed again and the heavens opened. That's a man using a confidence that God sometimes puts within the reach of men. A man exercising a ministry for God.

But now, listen to this man. He won't believe it. He's been on Mount Carmel.

He's been challenging the hosts of Baal. Single-handed. Thousands of priests of Baal have been on the other side, and here has been dear old Elijah, this one man standing alone.

And he's challenged them in various ways. I don't need to go into detail. Now, that's over, and he won the victory.

He wasn't beaten. He had the victory. And his calling and his ministry were vindicated.

Just a little later, I want you to come and listen to this dear old man, panting almost breathless. Oh, please, God, take me away. I want to die.

You can hardly believe it. Now, what's happened? Well, you see, it's a combination of forces. There is nervous tension and there is physical weakness.

He didn't really mean that, but he was oppressed by his conscience. He didn't really mean that. You remember what God gave him.

The treatment was primarily a good night's sleep, or a couple of nights' sleep, and a meal, supernaturally ordered and cooked. That's what God gave him. He needs food and he needs sleep.

My dear men and women, you and I cannot be spiritually on top if we don't look after our bodies and matters of sleep and things of this order. Did not the same thing happen with John the Baptist, but I don't need to go into that this morning. He had doubts about the very person of the Lord Jesus that he had introduced as the sin-bearing Lamb and the Spirit-baptizing Lord.

He had doubts. He was in prison, you see. He too had gone through a time of tension and physical turmoil, and then something, this heart of his, this inner voice within him was accusing, and he wasn't sure where he was.

And everything was blurred now. One other thing I want to mention, and that is this. It's something natural.

Some people have a melancholic spirit. Now, if you don't know anything about this, well, thank God. But you know that there are people who on a morning like this are naturally depressed.

And they need our prayers, and they need our sympathy, and they need our thought. It is something that is more or less inbuilt. It can be overcome.

But here it is. They wake up on a lovely morning like this, and if they take time to remember the goodness of the Lord, the Lord may have done great things for them even yesterday or last week, but somehow the sun doesn't shine through today. Now, if their consciences take advantage of that, as the conscience very often does, they can be living in a constant state of terror.

And the conscience is not to be trusted in circumstances like this. But most important of all, and this factor may be related to one or all of the factors to which I have already mentioned, most important of all, there is the influence of Satan upon the conscience, as indeed upon every other aspect of life. There is nothing which the devil so delights in as giving us a morbid conscience.

And that is because, of course, we have not learnt seriously to discern between the voice of God convicting us and the voice of Satan accusing us. Now, I have not gone off my subject, because, you see, John is going to talk about this, or rather he is writing about it. You know, in the last verse of this chapter, he says this, these are the last words of the chapter, Hereby we know that he abideth in us by the spirit that he has given to us.

Then he starts the next chapter in this way, Now, beloved, he says, Believe not every spirit. If there was only one spirit abroad in the world, life would be so easy and uncomplicated. But there are other spirits, there are evil spirits, and there is the archenemy of our souls, there is Satan himself.

In the book of the Revelation, John speaks of him as the accuser of the brethren. Now, what happens when Satan molests our consciences and plays ducks and drakes with us? Well, I'll tell you one thing that happens is this. No amount of confession of sin will get you anywhere.

This is one of the major differences between the accusations of Satan and the convictions of the Holy Spirit. When the Holy Spirit is convicting you of sin, oh, he may hurt even as much as Satan hurts. But the goal is different.

The Holy Spirit convicts you in order for you to do something. Bring your sin out into the light. Confess it to God.

Come to the fount where sin is washed away. Be cleansed, be purified and renewed. That's the purpose of the Spirit.

It's always to bring you to the feet of Jesus. It's always to bring you back into Christian fellowship. It's always to teach you to rise above your circumstances and start life anew.

But when Satan molests, the goal is quite different. You can confess your sin, but you get nowhere. No peace.

You can come to the cross of Christ and you can say, Lord, please forgive me my sins. And you can repeat it a thousand times over and you get no peace. You see, he's played ducks and drakes with your conscience.

And you're not sensitive to the realities of the spiritual life. But Satan nags and nags and torments and torments. And though you do everything that the Bible asks a sinner to do, and though you do it twice, three times over, you get no peace.

Now that's Satan. That's satanic. And the Bible tells us how to approach Satan.

When the Spirit convicts you of sin, you act in a certain way. Confess, repent, turn to the Lord Jesus for cleansing and for pardon and renewal. Right.

But when Satan molests you, there are certain other things that we must do. We must stand up and make war with him by the blood of the Lamb and the word of our testimony. We must come back to the word and be guided aright and know what's what.

Now, this is why it's so important to go back then to the language of the Gospels and the language of John chapter 10. This is why it's so important to know the voice of the Good Shepherd and to be able to distinguish between the voice of the Good Shepherd and the enemy of the flock. Jesus said, my sheep

hear my voice.

And then he goes forward to speak about himself in the third person. He calls his own sheep by name and he leads them out. And then he says later on, they know his voice.

If we are sheep of the Good Shepherd, we ought to become so familiar with his voice that we know. Yes, it's our Lord that's speaking. We must learn to distinguish between the voice of God and the voice of Satan.

If God by his Spirit is convincing us of sin, one way to act. If it is satanic, an entirely different way. Now, there are means, and it is with this that I must draw to a close, but there are means, as John tells us, of reassuring the hearts of God's people even when they have been falsely bludgeoned by a ravenous conscience.

Now, that's what this passage that we have this morning is all about. Let me read it again. By this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our hearts.

You got it? And reassure our consciences before him whenever our hearts condemn us. Isn't it wonderful that God wants us to be assured? Now, I'd like to face you with this blessed truth this morning, Christian. If you're downcast, if you're doubtful, if you're fearful, God has ordained this Sunday morning right here in Knox because he wants you to be reassured.

The conscience can be reassured. How? Now, just notice these very briefly. We may know, says John, that we are of the truth.

We may know that we are of the truth. That sounds terribly arrogant to the modern mind because nobody's really right, only the doubter. The only person who's really right in the world of today is the person who doubts.

He has license to express his doubts and to propagate his doubts. And, well, but you say that you know anything, and especially that you know ultimate truth and are assured of the things of God, and you're classified an oddity. Says John, look, it is possible for us Christian people, the children of God, now he's talking about Christians, it is possible for us, he says, to know that we are of the truth.

John designates the believers as being variously related to the truth. He says, for example, in chapter 2 and verse 21, that believers know the truth. There is no such thing as a Christian who doesn't know the truth of the gospel, of God's revelation.

Listen to his words. I write to you, he says, not because you do not know the truth, but because you know it, the Christian knows the truth. Not only that, the believer is a doer of the truth.

You have it right here in chapter 1 and verse 6. If we say that we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and we do not the truth. Now that's an idiomatic form, we don't do the truth. The truth has to be done, and a true believer is a doer of truth.

He puts it into practice. But the believer also is indwelt by truth. John says so.

If we say we have no sin, he says, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. And the implication is this, that a true Christian is a man in whom the word of God dwells. The seed of the word is in his soul.

But over and above that, says John, a Christian man is of the truth, out of the truth. He is a product of the truth. I don't think there was an age in the Christian church and in the Christian history, the history of the Christian church, when this needed to be stressed more than today.

Vital Christian experience is something that the truth produces, not an atmosphere that men are responsible for. Not something that we do, not the psychological ethos or atmosphere of a given service, but something that the truth produces. It is so easy to work up psychological experiences.

It is so easy to arouse the emotions and send people on their way, believing they've got this or they've got that, and it turns out to be nothing but a bubble. What John is saying is this, Christian experience, properly so called, is born out of the truth. It's the product of the word of God.

The devil doesn't like the word of God. Do anything but proclaim and expound the word of God, he doesn't mind. Because, you see, the word produces real truth, real experience in the soul.

Now, this word, as it produces an experience of grace and of the knowledge of God, it takes us out of darkness into light, out of the kingdom of Satan into the kingdom of God. Of his own will, says James, begat he us by the word of truth. That's the Christian.

Now, says John, it is possible for us to know that we are out of the truth, so that when our consciences act in the way we've been describing and get all out of hand with us and keep us morose and sad and melancholic, there's something here that invites us. There is something that we're told what we are to do. How does the truth itself vindicate the experience it has produced? Well, this is John's answer.

By this. By this. What's that? Well, here it is, the beginning of verse 19.

By this we shall know that we are of the truth. By this. What's this? Here John is referring back to what is in the preceding verse and what we were considering last Lord's Day morning.

Can I put it to you in this way? John is preaching the same sermon twice over, because it's so important. No, he doesn't repeat every detail, but these two little words, by this, points us back. And he says, get back to what I told you just a few minutes ago.

By this you may know that you're of the truth. Well, what's this? Well, John bids us turn away from the fallible testimony of our subjective conscience or heart to the objective testimony of our behavior. And that, particularly, in one respect.

He is, in fact, repeating the message which says this. By this we know that we've passed out of death unto life because we love the brethren. Now, he's really saying this.

He's saying that you may know that you're of the truth whatever your conscience tells you because you have come to a place where you really love the people of God. Love them generally as the people of God. Love them specifically when you know an individual in need.

And so love him that, at expense to yourself, you do something to help him just because he's a brother or a sister in Christ. But that's what he's saying. And by this you may know that you're of the truth.

Your conscience may bludgeon you and you may not know where to bury your head, says John. By this. By this.

Now, I guess that this is something that takes us a little bit by storm. I know it does. How is it that John can put so much emphasis upon the love of the brethren, the love of fellow Christians? Our love for Christian men and women who are redeemed by the same Lord.

How can he put such emphasis upon that? I will hurry past a number of things in order to say this as we close. Fundamentally, the answer is this. Because in loving the people of the Lord, we love the Lord of the people.

When we say or when we sing in our hymns so much that is ostensibly directed towards our Lord, you know that when we sing the right words or say the right words, our hearts can be far, far open. And we can take the words of great hymn writers and of scriptures and we can put them upon our lips and we can mouth them. And you know, don't we know? Don't we all agree? All this can be a matter of from the mouth outwards.

Now, says John, there is a way which is absolute proof before him that you are of the truth, and here it is, that you love the brethren. Why? Because in loving the brethren you love the Lord Jesus. Now, let me prove this in one way.

There are other ways, but let me prove it in one way. When the judge will one day say to some of you, Come ye, blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from before the foundations of the world. I was hungry and you gave me food.

I was thirsty and you gave me drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was naked and you clothed me.

I was sick and you visited me. I was in prison and you came to me. Some of you, perhaps myself, will say to him, Lord, visited you? Clothed you? I didn't live in your day.

I must think two thousand years afterwards something's gone wrong somewhere. I never did anything to you. I never was with you in the flesh.

I never touched you, never handled you, never heard your voice. It was the testimony of the apostles that I believed. You know what he's going to say, and he's put it on record beforehand.

Some will hear this. Truly I say to you, As you did it to the least of these my brethren, you did it to me. You have it again in the conversion of Saul of Tarsus.

Do you remember Saul? Do you remember the voice? Saul, Saul, I persecutest thou thee. Me? Who are you? Paul is not persecuting anyone in disguise. In fact, we have no reason to believe that Paul had said a bad word to Jesus face to face.

How had Paul persecuted the voice from the heavens, who turned out to be none other than Jesus the Lord, risen and ascended? Ah, it's the same answer. In persecuting the church, the bride, the body, he was persecuting the head. Now, that's the truth that we have here.

Love of the brethren means this. It's love for the body of which he is the head. It's love for the corpus of which he is the indwelling spirit.

And this is why the Bible puts such prize upon this and such emphasis upon it. You cannot separate the church from the head, from the Lord. You cannot separate the people of God from the God of the people.

And this is why it's so absolutely important. If we are not one with the people of God, my friends, we may not be one with God. And the whole reasoning of John, as I understand it, is put topsy-turvy if we don't see this clearly.

By this, says John, your conscience may worry you and harass you. You're not sure whether you're keeping the moral test. Are you obedient enough to be a Christian? You're not sure whether you're keeping any of the other tests, the social test even of love.

Well, says John, look back. Do you love the people generally? Yes, yes. But now, do you know of believers in real difficulties? How do you react? Do you react like Cain or do you react like Christ? Are you Cain-like or Christ-like? Christ delivered himself up for us.

So ought we to lay down our lives for the brethren. And if the need does not arise for that, then, says John, if we have this world's goods, sufficient and more than needful, and we see a brother in need, and we shut up our bowels of compassion and we get away from him, now to show that we've seen it, John says, that's enough. Something wrong.

But if we act positively, by this, by this we may know. I must close then. And I speak to any harassed brother or sister in Christ yet this morning.

Apply this test. If it's a dark, morose morning today, if the sky is very threatening even when the sun is shining, and Satan has so molested your conscience, you rarely ever get comfort and food from the Bible or inspiration from the fellowship of believers. Have a look at the realities of the situation.

Look at the objectives. What has God done in your life? Do you love his people? If so, be assured, and be assured in order to perform a ministry that will be as edifying to yourself as it will be glorifying to him. Oh, may his word help us in these tumultuous days.

A challenge to all the Lord's people. Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we have need of guidance and direction from thy word.

And as we bow before thee today, we ask that the power and the authority of this apostolic word and the significance and application of it may come through to us so that we may not be unnecessarily tormented by a conscience that is not functioning properly. Rather, purge our consciences and help us by thy word and spirit to realign them that we may walk in the center of the King's highway, know the divine approval upon our various activities or non-activities. We ask it in Jesus' name.

Amen.

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