

1 John 3:20

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

For if our heart condemn us, God is greater than our heart, and knoweth all things.

Analysis

For if our heart condemn us, God is greater than our heart, and knoweth all things. John addresses believers whose hearts (conscience) condemn them despite evidence of genuine love. "If our heart condemn us" (ean kataginōskē hēmōn hē kardia)—when our conscience accuses and condemns us. This is a reality for sensitive Christians who keenly feel their remaining sin and imperfect love. Introspection can produce crushing self-condemnation.

"God is greater than our heart" (hoti meizōn estin ho theos tēs kardias hēmōn)—God surpasses our conscience in both severity and mercy. He sees more clearly than we do. If we're genuinely His children who love the brethren (even imperfectly), He knows this. Our subjective feelings of condemnation don't determine our objective standing before Him. He judges rightly, not based on fluctuating feelings but on truth.

"And knoweth all things" (kai ginōskei panta)—God's omniscience is here a comfort, not a terror. He knows all our sins (which should humble us) but also knows whether we truly love Him and His children (which should encourage us). He knows the genuineness of our faith even when our hearts doubt. This provides assurance even when conscience condemns—if we truly love the brethren in deed and truth, God knows this, and His knowledge matters more than our self-condemnation. However, this also warns against false assurance—if we don't love, God knows that too.

Historical Context

First-century Judaism had extensive teaching about conscience, good and evil impulses (yetzer hatov and yetzer hara), and examination of one's spiritual state. Sensitive Jews struggled with whether they truly pleased God despite their best efforts to keep Torah. Similarly, early Christians faced doubts about their salvation, especially when aware of continuing sin.

John's pastoral wisdom addresses both scrupulous consciences (offering assurance when genuine love exists) and seared consciences (warning that God knows when love is absent). Later Protestant theology would develop extensive teaching on the condemning and comforting functions of conscience, but always subordinate to God's revealed truth in Scripture. Our feelings must be evaluated by objective truth—God's word and the evidence of spiritual fruit.

Related Passages

1 John 4:8 — God is love

1 Corinthians 13:4 — Characteristics of love

Study Questions

1. When your heart condemns you, how can you find comfort in the fact that God is greater than your heart and knows all things?
2. How do you distinguish between appropriate conviction of sin and excessive, unbiblical self-condemnation?
3. What does God know about your love for fellow believers that your condemning heart might be overlooking?

Interlinear Text

ὅτι	έὰν	καταγινώσκῃ	ἡμῶν	ἢ	καρδίας	ὅτι	μείζων	
For	if	condemn us	our	G3588	heart	For	greater	
G3754	G1437	G2607	G2257		G2588	G3754	G3187	
ἐστὶν	ό	Θεὸς	τῆς	καρδίας	ἡμῶν	καὶ	γινώσκει	πάντα
is	G3588	God	G3588	heart	our	and	knoweth	all things
G2076		G2316		G2588	G2257	G2532	G1097	G3956

Additional Cross-References

Jeremiah 17:10 (Parallel theme): I the LORD search the heart, I try the reins, even to give every man according to his ways, and according to the fruit of his doings.

Hebrews 4:13 (Parallel theme): Neither is there any creature that is not manifest in his sight: but all things are naked and opened unto the eyes of him with whom we have to do.

1 Corinthians 4:4 (Parallel theme): For I know nothing by myself; yet am I not hereby justified: but he that judgeth me is the Lord.

1 John 4:4 (References God): Ye are of God, little children, and have overcome them: because greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world.

Jeremiah 23:24 (Parallel theme): Can any hide himself in secret places that I shall not see him? saith the LORD. Do not I fill heaven and earth? saith the LORD.

Job 33:12 (References God): Behold, in this thou art not just: I will answer thee, that God is greater than man.

Job 27:6 (Parallel theme): My righteousness I hold fast, and will not let it go: my heart shall not reproach me so long as I live.

John 21:17 (Parallel theme): He saith unto him the third time, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me? Peter was grieved because he said unto him the third time, Lovest thou me? And he said unto him, Lord, thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I love thee. Jesus saith unto him, Feed my sheep.

