

How Can I Know?, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 7: Confidence Before God

1 John 3:19–24

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Doctrinally, this passage moves to the heart of assurance: how the believer's troubled conscience can find rest before God. John provides for the condemning heart by pointing to a God who is greater than our hearts and knows everything, a God whose verdict outranks our anxious self-accusation. He ties confidence before God to a life that keeps His commands and loves the brethren, and he grounds assurance finally in the gift of the indwelling Holy Spirit. The most doctrinally sensitive material is the role of the Spirit, which must be handled so as to honor His genuine indwelling and witness while guarding against claims of present-day new revelation, continuing apostleship, or miraculous sign gifts. The Spirit assures through His fruit, His help, and His completed, inspired Word.

The pastoral task here is especially tender. Many of the most sincere believers in the room live under relentless self-condemnation, trusting their guilty feelings more than God's promises. The teacher must help them distinguish true conviction, which is specific and leads to confession and relief, from false condemnation, which is vague, God-fleeing, and persistent. The aim is to lift the over-scrupulous believer out of the prosecutor's chair and seat him in the Father's presence as a welcome child, without ever excusing genuine sin.

Beyond the doctrine, aim at formation. The goal is that students leave able to reassure their hearts with truth, to pray with the confidence of welcome children, and to know the convergence of God's promise, a changed life, and the Spirit's witness. The heaviest doctrinal block belongs at Question 9, on the role of the Spirit in assurance. Let that question carry the weight, while the rest of the lesson presses the comfort of a God greater than our hearts into anxious consciences.

Question 1

Student Question:

John says we will "reassure our heart before him" (3:19). What does it mean to reassure or quiet our hearts before God, and why do believers need this so often?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Begin by noticing that John assumes believers' hearts will need reassuring. He does not treat self-condemnation as rare or abnormal; he provides for it. The Christian conscience, awakened to the holiness of God and the reality of sin, will often accuse, and John gives a way to answer that accusation rightly.

Explain what reassuring the heart means. It is not silencing a valid conviction by pretending sin does not matter, nor whipping up positive feelings. It is settling the heart on the truth: that we have come to God through Christ, that His blood cleanses, that we are loved children. The heart is quieted by truth, not by denial.

Connect this to the flow of the passage. John has just spoken of loving 'in deed and in truth' (3:18), and he says it is 'by this' that we reassure our hearts, by the evidence of a life that genuinely, if imperfectly, loves and obeys. The fruit of real faith helps steady a troubled conscience.

For assurance, this is vital. The believer is not meant to live perpetually accused. God has provided both objective grounds (the cross, His promises) and confirming evidence (a changed life) to quiet the heart. Learning to reassure the heart with truth is a central skill of the assured Christian.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The believer's conscience will often accuse, and Scripture provides for it
- Reassuring the heart as settling it on truth, not denying valid conviction
- The evidence of a life loving in deed and truth as a steadying ground (3:18–19)
- God's provision of both objective grounds and confirming evidence for assurance

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean to reassure or quiet the heart before God?
- How is this different from simply ignoring a guilty conscience?
- Why do sincere believers so often need their hearts reassured?

Question 2

Student Question:

How do you typically approach God in prayer, as a welcome child or as an uncertain defendant? Describe what your prayer life reveals about whether your heart is at rest before God or under a cloud of self-condemnation.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question uses prayer as a diagnostic of the heart. How we come to God in prayer reveals what we truly believe about our standing with Him. The accused heart prays timidly, briefly, or not at all; the heart at rest prays freely, as a child to a father.

Help students notice their patterns honestly. Some avoid prayer after sin, feeling unworthy. Some pray only in crisis. Some go through motions while inwardly unsure God is pleased to hear them. These patterns often expose a heart living under condemnation rather than in confidence.

Point to the access the gospel provides. Hebrews invites us to draw near with confidence to the throne of grace (Hebrews 4:16) precisely because of our great High Priest. Our welcome in prayer rests not on our performance that day but on Christ. This frees the believer to come boldly even after failure.

Encourage a change in approach. Invite students to begin coming to God as a welcome child this week, especially in the moments they would normally hide. The aim is to let the truth of our access reshape the very texture of our prayers.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Prayer as a diagnostic of our true sense of standing before God
- The accused heart's timid prayer versus the resting heart's free prayer
- Confident access to God grounded in Christ our High Priest (Hebrews 4:16)
- Coming to God as a welcome child, especially after failure

Discussion Prompts

- Do you come to God in prayer as a welcome child or an uncertain defendant?
- What does your prayer life reveal about your sense of standing with God?
- How would your prayers change if you truly believed you were always welcome?

Question 3

Student Question:

John offers a remarkable comfort: "whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything" (3:20). How is it good news that God knows everything and is greater than our condemning hearts?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This verse is one of the most pastorally precious in the letter, and it deserves careful unfolding. At first the idea that God 'knows everything' might sound frightening to a guilty heart, as though He sees even more to condemn. John means the opposite, and the context makes it clear.

Explain how God's greater knowledge comforts. Our condemning heart often accuses us unfairly, magnifying failures, ignoring grace, forgetting the cross, mistaking feelings for facts. God knows everything our heart knows, and more: He knows our genuine faith, our repentance, the work He Himself is doing in us, and the full provision of Christ's blood. He is a more accurate and more merciful judge than our own anxious hearts.

Show that God being 'greater than our heart' means His verdict outranks ours. When the lesser court of our conscience condemns, the higher court of God, who has accepted us in Christ, has the final word. The believer learns to appeal from his accusing heart to the God who justifies.

Apply this to the over-scrupulous conscience. Many sincere believers trust their feelings of guilt more than God's promises. John reverses this: do not let the verdict of your heart overrule the verdict of God. God is greater, and for the one in Christ, His verdict is acceptance.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's complete knowledge as comfort, not threat, for the one in Christ
- The condemning heart's tendency to accuse unfairly and forget grace
- God as the higher court whose verdict outranks our conscience
- Appealing from the accusing heart to the God who justifies

Discussion Prompts

- Why might 'God knows everything' sound frightening, and how does John mean it as comfort?
- In what ways does your own heart accuse you unfairly?
- What does it mean to appeal from your conscience to the God who is greater?

Question 4

Student Question:

Sometimes a guilty conscience is pointing to real, unaddressed sin, and sometimes it is an unfair accuser to be answered with truth. How can you tell the difference in your own life, and how should you respond to each?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question develops a crucial skill: discerning between true conviction and false condemnation. John's comfort in verse 20 is not meant to silence every guilty feeling, for sometimes the heart accuses because there is genuine, unconfessed sin to address. Wisdom is needed to tell the two apart.

Describe true conviction. It tends to be specific (naming an actual sin), it leads toward God and confession, and it lifts once the sin is confessed and forsaken. This is the Spirit's kind work, and the right response is to confess, repent, and receive cleansing (1:9).

Describe false condemnation. It tends to be vague and global ('I am just bad,' 'God could never be pleased with me'), it drives us away from God rather than toward Him, and it does not lift even after confession. This is the accuser's work or an over-scrupulous conscience, and the right response is to answer it with the truth of the gospel.

Give a practical method. When the heart accuses, ask: is there a specific sin here to confess? If so, confess it and receive cleansing. If the accusation remains vague and relentless after honest confession, recognize it as false condemnation and answer it with God's promises, refusing to let it overrule His verdict.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Discerning true conviction from false condemnation
- True conviction: specific, God-ward, lifting upon confession
- False condemnation: vague, God-fleeing, persistent despite confession
- Responding to each rightly: confession for conviction, truth for condemnation

Discussion Prompts

- How can you tell whether a guilty feeling is true conviction or false condemnation?
- What is the right response to genuine conviction of a specific sin?
- How should you answer a vague, relentless accusation that remains after confession?

Question 5

Student Question:

John connects a clear conscience with bold prayer: "if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God, and whatever we ask we receive from him" (3:21-22). How should we rightly understand this promise about answered prayer?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

John links a heart at rest with confidence in prayer and with receiving what we ask. This must be understood within the whole of Scripture, not as a blank check. John himself qualifies it in the same breath and again in 5:14, 'if we ask anything according to his will.'

Explain the connection John actually draws. The confidence is tied to those who 'keep his commandments and do what pleases him.' A life surrendered to God increasingly wants what God wants, so its prayers increasingly align with His will, and such prayers are answered. This is not a reward for performance but the natural fruit of a heart in tune with God.

Guard against two misreadings. It does not mean God grants every selfish request if we are good enough; that would contradict John's own qualification and Christ's own prayer in Gethsemane. Nor does it mean answered prayer is earned; the confidence flows from relationship, not merit.

Apply it to assurance and prayer life. The believer walking with God can pray with real boldness, confident that the Father hears and will give what is good. A heart freed from condemnation prays expectantly, trusting the Father's wisdom even when His answer differs from the request.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Confidence in prayer tied to a heart at rest before God
- Answered prayer understood within God's will (1 John 5:14)
- Prayers aligning with God's will as the fruit of a surrendered life
- Against treating the promise as a blank check or an earned reward

Discussion Prompts

- How should we understand John's promise that 'whatever we ask we receive'?
- How does a surrendered heart come to pray more in line with God's will?
- How can you pray with boldness while still trusting the Father's wisdom?

Question 6

Student Question:

A condemning heart can quietly poison your boldness, your joy, and your willingness to serve. Where has self-condemnation been holding you back from drawing near to God or stepping out in obedience? What would change if you truly believed you were welcome in His presence?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question traces the practical damage of a condemned heart. Self-condemnation does not stay contained; it leaks into prayer, joy, service, relationships, and risk-taking for God. The believer who feels perpetually disapproved of tends to shrink back from the very life God calls him to.

Help students name the specific cost. Perhaps condemnation has made them avoid leadership, withhold themselves in worship, hesitate to share their faith, or keep God at arm's length. The accusing heart whispers that they are disqualified, and they live smaller than their calling.

Point to the freedom of welcome. When the heart is at rest, the believer serves and risks and prays from security rather than for it. Knowing we are welcome frees us to step out, because our standing does not depend on our performance in the moment.

Encourage a concrete step of faith. Ask students to identify one place where self-condemnation has held them back, and one step they could take this week as a welcome child rather than a cowering defendant. Acting on the truth helps the heart believe it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The wide practical damage of a self-condemning heart
- How condemnation causes believers to shrink from their calling
- Serving and risking from security rather than for it
- Acting on the truth of our welcome as a way the heart learns to rest

Discussion Prompts

- Where has self-condemnation been holding you back from God or from obedience?
- What would change if you truly believed you were welcome in His presence?
- What is one step you could take this week as a welcome child rather than a defendant?

Question 7

Student Question:

John summarizes God's command in two parts: "that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another" (3:23). Why does John bring belief and love together as a single command, and what does this teach about genuine faith?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Notice that John speaks of God's 'commandment' in the singular, then names two things: believing in Jesus and loving one another. For John these are not two separate religions but one integrated life. Genuine faith in Christ and genuine love for the brethren always come together.

Explain why they cannot be separated. To believe in Jesus is to receive His love and submit to His lordship, and the One we believe in commands us to love. A faith that does not produce love is not the faith Jesus commands; a love that is not rooted in faith in Christ loses its source and its shape.

Connect this to the whole letter. John has given tests of genuine faith throughout: right belief about Christ, obedience, and love. Here he gathers them: the believing heart and the loving life are inseparable evidences of the same new birth. This integration guards against both a cold orthodoxy and a rootless sentimentality.

Apply it to assurance. When we find in ourselves both a real trust in Christ and a real love for His people, we are seeing the two halves of God's single command at work, strong evidence that we are genuinely His. Faith and love together steady the heart.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Belief in Christ and love for the brethren as one integrated command
- Genuine faith always producing love; genuine love rooted in faith
- Against both cold orthodoxy and rootless sentimentality
- Faith and love together as evidence of the new birth and ground of assurance

Discussion Prompts

- Why does John bring believing and loving together as a single command?
- How are faith and love inseparable in the genuine Christian life?
- How does seeing both in yourself strengthen your assurance?

Question 8

Student Question:

Confidence before God grows as we actively keep His commands and love His people, not as we passively wait to feel better. What is one specific act of obedience or love God is calling you to that would, in John's words, help your heart no longer condemn you?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question turns assurance from a feeling to be waited for into a life to be lived. John ties the untroubled heart to those who 'keep his commandments and do what pleases him.' Often the path out of self-condemnation runs not through more introspection but through obedience and love.

Help students see that endless self-examination can actually deepen condemnation, while a step of obedient love can quiet the heart. When we love in deed and truth, we have tangible evidence before our own hearts that the life of God is in us (3:18-19).

Caution against works-righteousness. The point is not that we earn God's acceptance by these acts, but that living out our faith produces the fruit that reassures the heart. Assurance is confirmed, not purchased, by obedience and love.

Press for a concrete step. Ask each student to name one act of obedience or love to carry out this week, and to notice how doing it, rather than merely brooding, helps settle the heart. Assurance grows in the doing.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Assurance confirmed through active obedience and love, not passive waiting
- Endless introspection as a deepener of condemnation; obedient love as a quieter of it
- The fruit of a loving life as evidence before our own hearts (3:18-19)
- Obedience confirming, not purchasing, God's acceptance

Discussion Prompts

- What act of obedience or love is God calling you to that would help quiet your heart?
- How can endless self-examination actually deepen self-condemnation?
- Why does living out our faith reassure the heart more than brooding does?

Question 9

Student Question:

John says we know God abides in us "by the Spirit whom he has given us" (3:24). What is the role of the Holy Spirit in the believer's assurance, and how does John's teaching guard against both ignoring the Spirit and claiming new revelations or miraculous signs today?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the doctrinal heart of the lesson and deserves the fullest treatment. John names a further ground of assurance: the Holy Spirit whom God has given to every believer. The indwelling Spirit is part of how we know that God abides in us, a divine gift that accompanies genuine faith.

Establish first when and how the Spirit is given. Scripture ties the gift of the Spirit to the obedient response of faith: 'Repent and be baptized... and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit' (Acts 2:38). Every faithful Christian has received this gift; it is not reserved for a special class of believer. Paul says the Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God (Romans 8:16).

Explain how the Spirit assures without falling into error. The Spirit's witness is not a stream of new private revelations, nor a demand for dramatic signs, nor an inner voice that competes with Scripture. The Spirit assures by producing His fruit in us, by enabling the obedience and love John has described, and by working through the completed, all-sufficient Word He inspired (2 Timothy 3:16–17). When we see His fruit and feel His help in living for God, we are sensing the witness of the Spirit.

Guard both flanks. On one side, some ignore the Spirit altogether, reducing assurance to a dry intellectual deduction; John will not let us forget the living gift of God within us. On the other side, some claim present-day new revelations, continuing apostleship, or miraculous sign gifts as the proof of the Spirit; but the age of those confirming signs accompanied the apostles and the giving of the New Testament, which is now complete and is our authority. The Spirit's ongoing witness is real, but it operates through His indwelling, His fruit, and His inspired Word, not through new revelation.

Bring it home for assurance. The believer rests on a beautiful convergence: the objective promises of God, the evidence of a changed life, and the inner witness of the Spirit who indwells him, all pointing the same direction. The Spirit does not bypass the Word or the changed life; He confirms them from within, helping the believer's heart to know that he truly belongs to God.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The indwelling Holy Spirit as a gift to every faithful Christian and a ground of assurance
- The Spirit received in the obedient response of faith (Acts 2:38; Romans 8:16)
- The Spirit's witness through His fruit, His help in obedience, and His inspired Word, not new private revelation
- Against present-day new revelation, continuing apostleship, or miraculous sign gifts as proof of the Spirit
- The complete New Testament as our authority (2 Timothy 3:16–17)
- The convergence of promise, changed life, and the Spirit's witness in genuine assurance

Discussion Prompts

- How does the indwelling Spirit contribute to the believer's assurance?

- How does the Spirit bear witness without giving new revelations or requiring dramatic signs?
- How do the promise of God, the changed life, and the Spirit's witness work together to assure us?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across this lesson on confidence before God. Name one specific way you sense Jesus forming you through these verses, and the single truth from 1 John 3:19–24 that you most need to carry into the coming week.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone gathers the lesson and turns it toward formation. Aim for an honest, personal response, and give students room to reflect, especially the quietly tormented ones who may rarely speak.

Listen for the over-scrupulous heart. Many sincere believers most need to hear that God is greater than their condemning hearts and that they are welcome in His presence. Help them name the specific accusation they need to answer with truth.

Encourage something concrete: an accusation to answer with God's promise, a step of obedient love to quiet the heart, or a phrase from verse 20 to hold onto when condemnation rises. Confidence grows as truth is practiced.

Point forward. Having learned to quiet the condemning heart, the next lesson turns to discernment, testing the spirits and holding fast the truth about Christ, so that our confidence is anchored in the right Jesus and the right gospel. Reassure the class that the path leads deeper into grounded assurance.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Personal formation as the goal of the study, not merely information
- The over-scrupulous heart's need to hear that God is greater than its condemnation
- Confidence grown through answering accusation with truth and living out love
- A heart at rest as the foundation for the discernment that follows

Discussion Prompts

- What is the one truth from this lesson you most need to carry this week?
- What accusation of your heart do you most need to answer with God's promise?
- Where is Jesus inviting you to come to Him as a welcome child rather than a defendant?