

December 6, 2015 by Steve Brandon



Taking Inventory

1 John 3:19-24

1. Look at Your Heart (verses 19-21).
2. Look at Your Prayers (verse 22).
3. Look at Your Life (verses 23-24).

Every so often many businesses conduct an inventory. They count what they have on their shelves. They do this because these companies need to know what on their shelves. They need to know what they can sell. They need to know what they can ship out. They need to be sure that they have all of their parts onsite so that they can manufacture their goods. They need to know that they have enough supplies on hand to service their customers.

The reason why they do inventories is because it's important that what they think is on their shelves is actually on their shelves. If the database tells them that they have 3 items on the shelf, when, in actuality, they ran out of supplies a month ago, it's going to be hard for the business. Delivery deadlines will be missed. Promises won't be kept. Customers will be lost.

Now, there are many different ways to do an inventory. Some businesses will shut down their entire operation to figure out what's in their warehouse. Other businesses will conduct their inventory over a long weekend, where many of the staff put in some extra overtime. Other businesses will inventory a very small portion of their warehouse every day. Some will conduct their inventories every three months to six months. Others will conduct their inventories on an annual basis.

Others won't do any inventory at all. Instead, they rely solely upon their computer software to keep their inventory, checking only occasionally to see if the data in the computer matches what is on their shelves. And they will address the inventory differences only when they notice a discrepancy.

Now, when it comes to our spiritual condition, it is good for us to take an inventory. It is good to step back and simply see where we are in our walk with God. It may just be that what is on your shelves isn't what you think is on your shelves. It may just be that when you think is true about yourself really isn't true, once you begin to examine yourself.

My message this morning is entitled, "Taking Inventory." That is, "taking inventory" of your life. Turn to 1 John, chapter 3. We will look this morning at verses 19-24. These verses are practically right in the middle of the book. It's a good point in the book of 1 John to stop, to shut down everything, and to take inventory of our lives.

1 John 3:19-24

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. Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God; and whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him. And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. Whoever keeps his commandments abides in God, and God in him. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit whom he has given us.

Verse 19 sets up the passage quite well.

1 John 3:19

By this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our heart before him;

This is the inventory that I want for you all to take this morning: "Are you of the truth? Or not?"

For a business, it is very helpful to know what is on your shelves. When a customer calls, you want to know whether or not you can fulfill their request. You lose business when you tell your customer that you can deliver, only to find that your shelves are empty. Your inventory wasn't kept up to date.

Likewise, when it comes to your spiritual condition, it is good for you to know what is on your shelf. The last thing in the world that you want is to think that you are of the truth when the judgment comes, and you find out that you are not of the truth. That is the most devastating thing that could ever happen to you. It's one thing to lose a customer. It's another thing to lose your soul.

And this is exactly what will happen to people on the judgment day. Jesus said, ...

Matthew 7:21-23

"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'

They had failed to take inventory of their soul. And books like 1 John help to prevent a tragedy like this from happening to you. Passages like our text today especially help to prevent this as well. This is my hope.

When a business takes inventory and discovers that they lack a certain part that they need, they can take steps to get the part on their shelves. Likewise, when you take a spiritual inventory of your life, you can clearly see if you are lacking in some area and take steps to resolve those issues. When Paul wrote to those in Corinth, he wrote, ...

2 Corinthians 13:5

Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you? --unless indeed you fail to meet the test!

This is what our text is calling us to do this morning -- to test ourselves to see if we are in the faith. Or, to use the metaphor that I have chosen to use in my message this morning -- to take inventory of your life.

The aim of our text is that our hearts would be convinced that we are of the truth. Isn't this what verse 19 says?

1 John 3:19

By this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our heart before him;

John wants for your heart to be fully assured that you are of the truth; that indeed you are saved; that indeed you know Christ; that indeed you have eternal life. This is fully in line with the purpose of 1 John.

1 John 5:13

I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life.

So, today we are "taking inventory." We will be asking, "Are you of the truth?" Here's my first point, ...

1. Look at Your Heart (verses 19-21).

Verse 20, ...

1 John 3:20

for whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything.

Last week I mentioned how this is the most difficult verse in 1 John to interpret. Because, the interpretation can go one of two ways. Either it brings a message of condemnation. Or, it brings a message of comfort. In the first case, the verse reads like this, ...

1 John 3:20 [brackets mine]

for whenever our heart condemns us, [the condemnation can be sure, because] God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything. [He knows more than we do. If we, with our limited knowledge of our heart, feel condemnation. Then surely, God knows even more of our sin and will surely condemn us].

This is a possible interpretation. In fact, many pastors and teachers of previous generations held to this position (men like John Calvin and Charles Simeon and D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones). There's good reason for this interpretation. I believe that verse 21 is especially strong. It can be taken as a contrast, ...

Verse 20 says, "If our heart condemns us, ..." And verse 21 says, "Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, ..." Further, verse 21 says, "Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God." Verse 20 says, "If our heart condemns us, ... [we don't have confidence before God] ... because God is greater than our heart and he knows everything. ... [Our condemnation is sure]. This is the first view. The view is that verse 20 is a message of condemnation.

The second view is that verse 20 is a message of comfort. In this case, verse 20 reads like this, ...

1 John 3:20 [brackets mine]

for whenever our heart condemns us [when we don't love like we should (i.e. verse 18) (and we know it), you can be comforted to know that] God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything. [He knows your struggles. He knows your desire to live rightly. He can bring you assurance through your doubts].

This, too, is a possible interpretation. Many hold to this position as well. I believe that this is the majority position of this generation. You can see it in the Bible translations. In fact, this is how the NIV translates this verse, ...

1 John 3:19 (NIV)

This is how we know that we belong to the truth and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence:

This is how the Amplified Bible translates this verse, ...

1 John 3:19-20 (Amplified)

By this we will know [without any doubt] that we are of the truth, and will assure our heart and quiet our conscience before Him whenever our heart convicts us [in guilt]; for God is greater than our heart and He knows all things [nothing is hidden from Him because we are in His hands].

And I believe that this interpretation holds to the entire aim of the book. The aim of 1 John is to give you comfort and assurance that, indeed, you are a believer, "that you have eternal life" (1 John 5:13). In fact, this is what verse 19 is getting at, ...

1 John 3:19

By this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our heart before him;

In other words, we should really know, in the depths of our heart, that we have eternal life. And John is pressing his readers -- he is pressing us -- to be sure that we know that we are of the truth. This is John's burden throughout this entire letter.

1 John 3:1-2

See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. ... Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.

1 John 4:4

Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.

And I believe that the burden is no less right here in our text this morning. John wants for us to have assurance in our hearts, that we are indeed children of God. This is what verse 19 says, ...

1 John 3:19

By this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our heart before him;

And one of the greatest blessings in this life is a heart that is sure before God. That knows him. That loves him. That experiences the forgiveness that he gives in the gospel. That does not condemn. Look at verse 21, ...

1 John 3:21

Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God;

The life that lives in confidence before God is a happy, well-contented life. "The wicked flee when no one pursues, but the righteous are bold as a lion" (Proverbs 28:1). Those who have sin to hide, will live in paranoia. But, those who are right with the Lord will live with little fear.

Have you ever considered life in the forest? How does a deer live? Perpetual danger is all around. They must be always looking around, skittish, ready to flee at a moment's notice. But, how does a lion live? He's the king of the forest! He sleeps in his lair in perfect peace. He walks through the forest with not a care in the world.

How do you live? Are you a deer, scared that you might be discovered? Or, are you a lion who boldly lives with no fear? Much of it has to do with your heart. And so, as you take inventory of your soul this morning, are you of the truth? I ask you to Look at Your Heart (verses 19-21).

Now, this is a difficult counsel. Because, as Jeremiah 17:9 says, ...

Jeremiah 17:9

The heart is deceitful above all things,
and desperately sick;
who can understand it?

And so, as you look at your heart, know that you will have a tendency to justify yourself. You will have a tendency to think yourself better than you are. And so, we need the Lord's help in these things. Jeremiah 17:10 says, "I the Lord search the heart and test the mind," so let's spend

a few moments seeking the Lord's help in these matters. And so, I ask you to bow your heads and deal with the Lord for a few moments.

Ask him to show you your heart. Pray the prayer of David in Psalm 139:23-24, "Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!"

Do you have a heart that desires God? Do you want his ways? Do you really believe that Jesus is the Christ? Have you seen the work of God in you?

Let's move on. As you take inventory of your life this morning, asking "Are you of the truth?" Not only should you Look at Your Heart (verses 19-21). Secondly, you should also ...

2. Look at Your Prayers (verse 22).

Look at verse 22.

1 John 3:22
and whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him.

Now, this verse really flows from verse 21, ...

1 John 3:21-22
Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God; and whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him.

The idea is this: when our heart doesn't condemn us, we have a confidence before God (verse 21). We are not fearful of him. Rather we come to him as one of his children. And so, we know that as we pray, the Lord hears us and he answers our prayers with good things. And so, answered prayer becomes a way to know that we are one of his children. Because, as we abide in Christ (2:28), we have confidence before God (2:28) because we know that we are children of God (3:1, 2) and we know that he has our best in mind.

That's why Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, ...

Matthew 7:7-11
"Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

And so, we can come to God as his children, seeking help from him. And he will answer our prayers.

That's why I'm asking you to take inventory of your life by Look[ing] at Your Prayers (verse 22). Are they being answered? Because, answered prayer is a sign of our confidence before God. And our confidence before God is a sign that our heart is right before him.

The idea here is that if our heart is not right; if we aren't believing in Christ; if we aren't loving our brother (3:17-18); if we are living in sin, then God won't hear our prayers. And unanswered prayer may well be a sign that all is not well with your soul. Unanswered prayer may be a sign that your stock shelves are empty. "If one turns away his ear from hearing the law, even his prayer is an abomination" (Proverbs 28:9).

In other words, if someone isn't paying attention to the law and is not heeding it's counsel, then what right do they have in praying to the Lord!

On the other side, Proverbs 15:8 says that "the prayer of the upright is acceptable to him." And this is where we are in our text in 1 John this morning. If you are walking in an upright way; if you are obeying his commands; if you are loving your brother, then you can expect to see answered prayer in your life.

Isn't this what we see in verse 22?

1 John 3:22
and whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him.

When you obey God and when you are pleasing God, then you can expect to see answers to prayer in your life. And so, the big question comes: Are you seeing prayer answered in your life? Or, how about this, if I would ask you to turn to your neighbor and tell them of prayers being answered in your life, could you tell them of specific prayers being answered?

Now, a little caveat. This doesn't mean that God will give us everything that we pray for, as if he is some sort of genie, obligated to answer our three wishes. Over in chapter 5 and verses 14 and 15, we read this, ...

1 John 5:14-15
And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. And if we

know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him.

And the key words here are "according to his will." And what John said about prayer in chapter 5 is certainly what he means about prayer in chapter 3. This open-ended statement about answered prayer has some constraints. Praying for God to send someone to you give you a new car, just might not be in his will.

In fact, truth be known, there might be many things that we pray for that aren't in his will. We pray for healing. We pray for relief. We pray that God would remove us from our troubles. But, it might just be that some of our troubles are indeed the will of God. And to prayers for relief from them will not be answered. Because God has a greater plan.

Do you remember Paul's prayer in 2 Corinthians 12? He was experiencing something he called "a thorn in his flesh" (2 Corinthians 7). We don't know exactly what this was. It may have been a person. It may have been an illness. It may have been some other sort of difficulty. In many ways, it's good that we don't know exactly what it was, so that Paul's experience can be applied equally as well to the various sorts of troubles that all of us face. Paul wrote, "Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me" (2 Corinthians 12:8). And three times time, the Lord refused to answer his prayer.

Can you picture it? Paul is praying, ...

God, I have this thorn in my flesh. It hurts. It hinders me. I could be doing so many other things in ministry if this was removed. I could travel. I could speak without opposition. Please, Lord, could you please remove it?

And God said, "No." And so, Paul prays again, ...

Lord, please. This is a very difficult trial in my life. It's causing me an immense amount of pain. It's distracting my mind. I'm limited in my abilities because of it. I so want it to be removed. Lord, please remove it from me!

And God said, "No." And so, Paul prays again, ...

Oh, Lord, this thorn is killing me. It's a burden that is too difficult for me to bear. I'm not sure how much longer I can make it. I just want it to go away. Can you please help me? Can you please remove it?

And God says, "No." But, God said more than that. Paul writes, ...

2 Corinthians 12:9
But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

In other words, God had a plan for Paul's life. And it was a plan that brought hardship into his life so that he would not trust in his own power, but instead he would trust in the power of God! And when Paul came to understand this, he said, ...

2 Corinthians 12:9-10
... Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

God used the thorn in Paul's flesh to humble him and to keep him dependent upon the Lord (2 Corinthians 12:7). And many times, we simply don't know God's plan. It doesn't mean that we should stop praying. But, it means that we should be praying "according to his will." And as we do, we should be experiencing answers to prayer.

Now, the answer for us may be "No." And we need to be ready for that. Even Jesus himself experienced unanswered prayer. In the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus was in great anguish of heart. So much so that he was sweating drops of blood (Luke 22:44). And he prayed, "Father, if you are willing, removed this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done" (Luke 22:42).

And of course, the cup was not removed from Jesus. He bore the wrath of God on the cross for our sins.

And so, I come back to this question. If I would ask you to turn to your neighbor and tell them of prayers being answered in your life, could you tell them of specific prayers being answered? And it may be that God has answered your prayers with a "No."

I can think of the prayers that I have prayed that have gone unanswered. I pray often for unbelievers to come to faith in Christ. Yet, sadly, few come to faith. I pray often for God to bring more people to this church. Yet, sadly, we remain a small congregation. I pray often for God to stir the passion of my heart in greater ways to serve him. Yet, sadly, I too often experience coldness of my own heart.

Yet, I do see answers to my prayer in my life. God's faithfulness shows every Sunday morning, as I struggle to prepare each week and I ask, "What will I say?" It's a hard task to open God's word each week to you with something meaningful to say. And I pray desperately that God would give me his grace. God is faithful to give me the words I need to say every Sunday.

God's faithfulness shows in the lives of our children. Hardly a day passes when Yvonne and I don't pray together for the lives of each of our children. And God is faithfully working in their lives.

The existence of this church is an answer to prayer. Many of you come on Sunday mornings and think that Rock Valley Bible Church has simply always existed. That everyone has always been here. But, I remember when Rock Valley Bible Church was only a prayer. There weren't any people. We didn't even have a name for this church. We simply had God. And he has answered our prayers.

So take a few moments to think on how God has answered your prayers. And if you can't answer this question. That's OK. But let it be a rebuke to you. Perhaps you need to think more deeply about the results of your prayers. Perhaps your inventory shelves are empty.

Let's finish quickly with my last point this morning. Are you of the truth? Look at Your Heart (verses 19-21). Look at Your Prayers (verse 22). Finally, ...

3. Look at Your Life (verses 23-24).

1 John 3:23-24

And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. Whoever keeps his commandments abides in God, and God in him. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit whom he has given us.

This is everything that we have been looking at since late August. We have had a steady dose of (1) obedience and (2) love. Obedience to God. Love toward one another. Yet, there is something new here, and it's surprising. This is the first time that John has mentioned anything about believing. He says, ...

1 John 3:23

And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ ...

This is quite shocking! Isn't it? Because, this is where life with God begins! It begins with faith. It begins when you see your sin before God and realize that you need a Savior. And Jesus is that Savior. He will save you from your sins, not by the things that you do. But through your faith. And when you confess your sins, according to chapter 1 and verse 9, "he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

Though "belief" isn't mentioned until now, certainly John has referred to the idea. Confessing our sins to God expresses belief in Jesus that he will forgive us (1:9). We also see the concept in 2:22-23, where John speaks about those who "deny" Jesus. Denial is the opposite of faith, which accepts him (and believes in him).

Chapter 2 speaks of knowing him, "And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments. Whoever says "I know him" but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him" (1 John 2:2-4). It speaks of abiding in him, "Let what you heard from the beginning abide in you. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, then you too will abide in the Son and in the Father.

... And now, little children, abide in him, so that when he appears we may have confidence and not shrink from him in shame at his coming" (1 John 2:24, 28).

And so, though the word, "belief" isn't used until now, the concept has been there. But, it hasn't really been emphasized. But later it will be, ...

1 John 5:1

Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God. ...

1 John 5:5

Who is it that overcomes the world except the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?

And it's emphasis is right here in our text this morning, in verse 23. And so, I ask you, Do you believe? Do you realize that God has commanded you to believe?

1 John 3:23

And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ ...

And if you don't believe in Jesus, then you have not yet even begun to obey him. But, when you believe, you will have love for the brothers.

1 John 5:1

Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the Father loves whoever has been born of him.

We must believe.

And when we believe, we love. "But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth" (1 John 3:17-18). And we obey. "And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure. Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness" (1 John 3:3-4).

Are you in the truth? Look at Your Heart. Look at Your Prayers. Look at Your Life. Take inventory of your life, and you will see if you are really in the truth.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on December 6, 2015 by Steve Brandon.

For more information see www.rvbc.cc.

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