

Am I in This Picture?

Have you ever flipped through an old high school yearbook, remembering the events immortalized in those old photos and wondered, “Am I in this picture?” The scene is familiar. Some of the faces are, perhaps, familiar – but then maybe it’s because some of the kids in the picture look a lot like your grandchildren. But you can’t quite remember if you are in that picture.

I think that is a question we need to ask ourselves when we are reading the New Testament. “Am I in this picture?” Jesus painted marvelous word pictures of the kingdom. “Am I in this picture?” Peter and James and John and Paul painted similar word pictures, but sometimes we have trouble matching up what they describe with what we experience in the modern kingdom. That is the fundamental question I will be repeating as we look into 1 John 3:13 – 24 this afternoon. “Am I in this picture?”

Up to this point in 1 John, as you have been hearing, John has been addressing light and love and fellowship and the Spirit and overcoming and confidence. But, so far, John has not been very specific. Other than in the first three verses of the letter in which John emphasizes that his message is based on the concrete, not the abstract, “What we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we beheld and our hands handled,” John has been generalizing. There are not many examples of what is “walking in the light,” what is “darkness,” what does it mean to “Keep His Word” or to “overcome” or be “anointed”? Even 2:16, “The lust of the eye, and the lust of the flesh, and the boastful pride of life,” leaves a lot of room for excesses of application at both extremes.

Toward the middle of chapter 3, John starts getting a little more specific. He paints pictures. And we need to ask, “Am I in this picture?” How do we know? John repeats that phrase four times in the last half of chapter 3 – We know.

Before John gets to his first, “We know,” in verse 14, he has a concluding statement in verse 13 concerning his illustration in verse 12 about Cain and Abel. It is the transition from his generalizations about the contrast between light and dark, between righteousness and sin, to knowing that we are in the right picture.

“Do not marvel, brethren, if the world hates you.”

Being hated by the world can make you wonder if you are in the right picture.

Of course, there are those who revel in persecution, and thereby justify obnoxious behavior. Our other son-in-law and I (the one I am in business with) were walking across the University of Missouri campus some years ago; we passed a fellow who was, shall we say, preaching to the passersby. He was condemning sin of every sort, focusing particularly on those most common to the university crowd. Quite obviously, a significant percentage of those who heard him hated him. The fellow was part of an organization that does this sort of thing routinely, and they rejoice in being hated. My comment to my son-in-law was, “And this is good news?”

Instead, let’s use John’s illustration, Cain and Abel. Why did Cain kill his brother? John says, “Because his deeds were evil and his brother’s were righteous.” I don’t know about you, but that does not make sense to me. Why would someone do that? As a counter example, in our little town, there is a Christmas give-away for poor people so they can get toys and other “frivolous” gifts for their children at essentially no cost. A local motorcycle club, many of the members of which were well acquainted with the inside of a prison, volunteered to assist in the collection of toys in conjunction with this effort – and were remarkably successful. They wanted to be part of something good. They didn’t hate the church folks for organizing something nice, even though many of the church folks did not particularly want them around. What is John talking about?

I think John has in mind the ideas that Jesus presented in Matthew 5:38 – 48; lines like “Whoever slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also,” “If anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, let him have your coat also,” and such like. And Jesus point? Defuse evil, don’t drive evil into more evil by resisting. Does it work? Sometimes yes, sometimes no. Obviously, with Cain it did not work. But, think of the two thieves who were executed with Jesus. One got it, one didn’t. One

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reviled Jesus for not rescuing all three of them (self-absorbed to the end). The other saw the utter hatred that was directed at goodness and figured it out. Even his request of Jesus was utterly humble. In the same way, the majority of the soldiers mocked, taunted, and abused Jesus. One centurion figured it out and praised God.

“Do not marvel, brethren, if the world hates you.” Am I in this picture? Or, as Peter put it in 1 Peter 2:21, “For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps.” Do we walk as He walked? Am I in this picture?

Unfortunately, many have tried to translate this image into our time and place, but have succeeded only in watering it down, in making it so weak that it has no meaning. I have heard this concept mutated into the “persecution” of a lack of mandatory prayer in public school, or the offensiveness of legalized abortion, or the occasional snide remark by an acquaintance. Folks, these are not hatred. These are minor inconveniences.

Does the world hate me? Am I in this picture?

Until recently, I would have had to answer that I did not know of anyone who hated me in this way. Certainly, there were those who hated me for reasons that had nothing at all to do with Jesus, but none like Cain and Abel. And it was an accident that I now actually know someone who hates me, personally, because of my faith.

About two and a half years ago I was invited by our local graduating high school seniors to be the speaker at their graduation. They had been Brittney’s classmates before she headed for Africa, and at least half of them had spent time around our dining room table doing homework. The kids knew what I would talk about – as did the superintendent. But, the superintendent was a smart man and knew better than to ask. I talked about truth, where it can be found, and how to prove it. As with most graduation speeches, very few people remember anything of what I said. But one fellow was livid, aghast that I would use my position as a former teacher and present scientist to advocate the Bible as the only incontrovertible source of truth. He gave me a good tongue lashing after the ceremony was over, which at least let me know that the PA system was working. But, I didn’t think much more about it beyond that. Some months later I heard from a young man with whom I am studying the Bible that this disgruntled hearer genuinely hates me and is not shy about voicing that hatred to anyone who will listen.

Cool! In this small way, I got into one little corner of the picture. But how can I get into it in a bigger way? How can I walk as He walked (2:6) with the desired result of waking up a few lost people, like that thief or that centurion?

How did Jesus do it? He talked about truth. He talked about what is better. He talked about not settling for the self-justifying benchmarks established by various religious spokesmen. How did Paul frighten a Roman governor? By talking about righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come (Acts 24:25). Of course, Paul raised the ire of a significant number of very religious Jewish people by advocating principles contrary to what they had been taught, but Paul was not hateful in his teaching of those principles. He reasoned with them, the Scriptures say. He was bold, but also kind and gentle. And then there were those occasions when Paul hit people in the pocketbook – the Achilles’ heel of most Americans today – in Philippi and in Ephesus. And this was not that generalized hate that we might infer from militant Islamic cults. They don’t hate you and me individually. They just hate everyone not in their group. John is writing about one-on-one hate, Cain-and-Abel hate.

That same young man who told me about my one beacon of hate gave an answer to a question that fits here. We had been studying through Acts, so I asked him, “What is your impression of the church we have been reading about?” He had a remarkably quick answer, “Black and white, not like the shades of grey we have today.”

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Which picture am I in? Am I a shade of grey? Where's the contrast knob? It is not found in lambasting sin, but in gentleness and kindness, truth and the judgment to come. Certainly, it is a gentleness and kindness that is "out there," that is so starkly contrasting to the world around us that it either blinds them or reveals the truth to them.

But how do I do that? I suppose there are an infinite number of examples depending on the person and the situation. So, let's stick to John's examples in the remainder of chapter 3. We can begin to wonder if we are in the picture at all because we do not experience the kind of hatred that Jesus did. But rather than leaving us dangling in doubt, John reminds us of what we know that can both secure our faith and push us to greater faith.

John's first "WE KNOW" is in verse 14, "We know that we have passed out of death into life because we love the brethren. He who does not love abides in death. Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer; and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him. We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren."

"We know that we have passed out of death into life because we love."

Passed out of death into life – my observation has been that an unsettling number of people in the church have forgotten that transition and its miraculous nature. A good portion of the problem may be found in the fact that our viewpoints have made a radical change, like in 2 Corinthians 5:16, "Therefore, from now on we recognize no man according to the flesh."

And Paul concludes that paragraph with, "We have this ministry of reconciliation" – and we recognize no man according to the flesh. Our viewpoint is one of stark contrast – dead people, love-controlled people.

And where did this love come from? Romans 5:5, "The love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us."

I think we have a tendency to forget that, before we became believers, before we were baptized and became slaves of Christ, before we were given that gift of the Holy Spirit that dwells in us, before that love of God was poured out in our hearts, we didn't have it. The world does not have this kind of self-annihilating love, so they make decisions based on substantially less than we have.

John says, "We know that we have passed from death into life because we love the brethren." John gives his readers a reason to put themselves into the picture by recognizing that love from God in themselves. We would not berate the blind for failing to obey a posted sign. We would not defame the deaf for failing to heed a siren. Neither can we lambaste the lost for failing to love. But observing this lack of love among the lost should remind us that we have passed from death into life.

And John fills in a few details of the picture. "We ought to lay down our lives for the brethren." "Whoever has the world's goods and beholds his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him?" "Let us not love with word or tongue, but in deed and truth." To summarize, love is doing what is best for the other person regardless of its effect on me. Am I in this picture?

James paints some similar pictures of the down side of failing to put to use this great tool called love that only the faithful have. In James 5:6, "You have condemned and put to death the righteous; he does not resist you." I don't think the Jewish Christians of the Dispersion were physically killing each other. Rather, from James' previous paragraph, they were failing to support those who were harvesting in God's field. Or, from James 4:2, "You lust and do not have, so you commit murder." Again, I doubt that the early church needed to start frisking members for deadly weapons as they entered the assembly. No, they were failing to exercise this gift of love and doing the best they could with what comes naturally, and were killing each other's spirits again. So, how do we know if we are using the great gift of love? Am I in this picture?

"Lay down our lives." Obviously, John intends to include physically laying down one's life for the sake of fellow Christians, because his example is Jesus. But I think the picture is bigger than that.

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As Paul notes in Romans 5:7, “For one will hardly die for a righteous man, though perhaps for the good man someone would dare even to die.” Paul acknowledges that, even in the world, dying for another is not unheard of. But, it is rare. Among Christians, it should be the norm.

But in what way? Am I in this picture? How might I die for another? The kingdom has neither physical boundaries nor a traditional military. As Jesus said to Pilate, “If My kingdom were of this world, then my servants would be fighting.” So, how might I lay down my life for the brethren? In this society, I really can’t think of any. We have lots of law enforcement agencies to handle life-threatening crises. But not all the world is this way. Terrorists abound. Kidnapping in the name of religion is routine. We can read about it in the news and wring our hands over the efforts of various governments. Or, we can arm ourselves with the only effective weapon, the Sword of the Spirit, and go and risk our lives for the brethren by taking the gospel to those who would physically kill them.

And, as I have already intimated, I think John’s image is bigger than just physical death. Certainly, Jesus was physically executed. But I submit to you that He laid down His life for us long before that. He laid down His life figuratively in order to set the stage for laying down His life literally. He had no place to lay His head. He was harassed and plotted against. He did not have time for a family. He owned nothing. He never got to take a vacation. Every moment was dedicated to laying down His life that we might live. That’s the picture.

Church people are fond of deliberating over what is appropriate and inappropriate behavior, which is really just an exercise in self-justification. I know a young man who is studying to be a financial planner. He was questioning the appropriateness of this line of work for a Christian, since it is, after all, focused on those with a certain fondness for money. I suggested that he might be able to develop an unusual niche market among wealthy American Christians. He could ask, “Your children all have good jobs and bright financial futures, so they will not need your money. Have you thought about setting up a trust that would perpetually fund missionaries?” Or, “OK, you want to retire comfortably at age 62. Have you considered doing that in the mission field? The cost of living is pretty low.” If we lay down our lives while living, what can be accomplished in the kingdom? Am I in this picture?

“Whoever has the world’s goods.” That describes us. But what defines the line between “closing our hearts” and “financial responsibility”? Here’s a small example from 2 Corinthians 8 and 9. Paul opens chapter 8 by holding up the example of the churches of Macedonia in the matter of giving. One side note, in verse 2, Paul describes their “deep poverty.” These are the same churches that sent money on more than one occasion for Paul’s support when he was working in other cities, including Corinth. So, the churches in poverty were sending funds so Paul could work among the rich – since Corinth was a center of commerce and great wealth. If this pattern holds, we may be seeing African missionaries in America soon.

Nonetheless, Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 9:8 about an oft overlooked promise from God concerning the world’s goods. “And God is able to make all grace abound to you, that always having all sufficiency in everything, you may have an abundance for every good deed.” Or verse 10, “Now He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food, will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness.”

I think it is safe to say that Paul was pleasantly shocked at the liberality of the Macedonian brethren. What would it take to make Paul’s mouth drop open? Paul was a Pharisee. He sought to do everything in the Law. I submit to you that 10% would not have stunned Paul like the Macedonians did. He would have considered 10% normal. So, whatever the Macedonians gave, it had to be significantly greater than a tenth. Quite a number of church leaders today advocate a tithe system – and struggle to achieve it. I submit to you that Paul would not have been impressed at that level. That concept aims way too low. If we aim low, our results will never rise even to mediocrity.

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Here's an illustration to use when you get home. Mainstream churches today contain a disproportionate ratio of middle-class people. Many of them itemize deductions, so they are quite familiar with Schedule A on which one enters one's charitable contributions as a deduction. Did you know that there is a limit to how much you can deduct? Most people don't because they have never come close to it. I know people who routinely exceed that limit, rendering a significant part of their charitable contributions non-deductable.

We have convenient rationalizations for why we did not really close our hearts, or why our brother wasn't really in need. John wrote, "How does the love of God abide in him?"

We tie up our assets, resulting in limited disposable income, and determine that we do not have the ability to help a brother. First, this says our brother is disposable. Second, it denies our ability as those who have faith to move molehills. Third, it denies God's ability to do more than we can ask or think.

The love of God converts all our assets into disposable income, which, as a business owner, is a very scary thought.

I had the opportunity to take our older grandson somewhere in the car some time back. He was perhaps 11 or 12 at the time. I pointed out to him that, being academically talented and hard working, he was never going to want for a job. He would always be a desirable employee because of the kind of person he is. Further, because he had a family, he would always have a fall-back position if things became economically challenging. The economic ways of the world would not be able to overcome him. But that is not true for more than a tiny percentage of people, so he needed to be compassionate with those less talented, or with lesser family situations. They would always have far more difficulties and hardships than he. He understood.

Do we? We have a promise from God that we will have an abundance for every good deed. Of course, having noted God's sense of humor in the Bible, that abundance may come from unpredictable locations. Nonetheless, the economics of this world cannot overpower us. And, as our fall-back position, we have the family of God. Why do we stress out over money? Why do we close our hearts to the brethren? Brethren in need are out there. We tend not to look for them. If you would like to meet one or two, see me later.

With these all-encompassing pictures of laying down our lives for the brethren and sharing the world's goods with the brethren, we can begin to wonder if we are in the picture, or if we are just casual observers and bystanders of the kingdom. I think John knew which way his readers would be headed at this point, so his next "we know" is designed to bring us back to the center of the picture. Even if our hearts condemn us because we are not all that we can be by faith, we can still have confidence.

John writes, "We shall know by this that we are of the truth, and shall assure our heart before Him, in whatever our heart condemns us; for God is greater than our heart, and knows all things. 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 the things that are pleasing in His sight."

Everyone can find an example where he or she falls short of the example of Jesus. Strangely, it has been my experience that those who seem closer to the example find more fault in themselves, and those with only a vague resemblance to Jesus can find little reason to condemn themselves. I think this is an expression of how dead self gets. Those with lots of self have trouble seeing the holes in their self-justification. Those whose selves are thoroughly dead can see the truth more clearly. John writes, "In whatever our heart condemns us; for God is greater than our heart." I may be kicking myself over yet another squandered opportunity for the kingdom, but John's reminder is that this situation should refresh in us the grace of God rather than depress us in our shortcomings. We can remain in Romans 7

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or move on to Chapter 8. We will not gain confidence by the exercise of superior self-control (although self-control is a good thing), but by faith in the grace of God.

In these few verses, John is pulling together the previous examples. How can we overcome those nagging doubts that arise when we see our own failures? Do you see a difference between the love that you have and what passes for love out in the world? Do you see yourself less and less, while focusing on others more and more? Do people marvel at your generosity? Not that God will judge your generosity by worldly standards, but knowing that the world thinks you are outside the box in that regard is a good thing.

Peter wrote in 1 Peter 4:10, “As each one has received a gift, employ it in serving one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.” Several people have written books about how to discover your special gift from God. There are lots of ideas about how to achieve that goal. The fewer verses there are on the subject, the longer the book can be. Most of the approaches I have seen are exercises in self-deception, self-promotion, and self-justification, the operative word in each case being self. Let me tell you what little one can know for sure about that gift from God that we are supposed to exercise.

First, Peter was writing to Christians. Those who received these gifts were Christians, not pagans. Therefore, they received them when they became Christians, or perhaps afterward, since the gifts are God’s to dispense at His good pleasure. Nonetheless, if I could do it before I became a Christian, then it is not my gift. That which I possessed before becoming a Christian has been entrusted to me, and I must be a good steward of all things that pass through my hands on this earth. But, if I had been an accountant before becoming a Christian, becoming church treasurer would not be a matter of exercising a gift, but of being a good steward. If it is a gift from God, then God changed something. This gift is not something that would have happened anyway. By definition, it’s a miracle.

Am I in John’s picture? Can I have confidence before God despite the disparity between Jesus and me? John says, “Have you received anything?” That should give you the necessary confidence to rely on grace and not on my natural ability to do the right thing – because I already trashed that natural ability to do the right thing. Do you take unreasonable risks for the brethren, risks at which any reasonable person would balk? Do you share so much that the IRS is asking for receipts and establishing limits? Can you see in yourself a shift, when faced with opposition or with fuzzy thinking, from anger to compassion? When looking at some possession of yours, have you found yourself asking, “What can I use this for in the kingdom?”

Does it happen all the time? Probably not. But, as Paul wrote in Philippians 3:8 – 14, “More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish in order that I may obtain Christ, and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith, that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained it, or have already become perfect, but I press on in order that I may lay hold of that for which I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on to the goal for the prize of the upward call of Christ Jesus.”

Even when our hearts condemn us, God is greater than our hearts. We have received His promises. We can look back and see miraculous changes in ourselves and be assured that we are in the picture.

We keep His commandments. I’ll save that one for the next section. For now, just note that there are lots of people who stop reading there and start hop-scotching through the Scriptures to show you just what those commandments are. John was not so vague. He spells out the commandments in

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the next verse. Bottom line, we do the things that are pleasing to Him. That thought is similar to Paul's in Colossians 1:10 – 12, "So that you may walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might, for the attaining of all steadfastness and patience; joyously giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light."

Bottom line, we seek to give God a good day. After all the disappointments from Adam's time to our time, we just want to make Him smile. How do we do that? There are several schools of thought. The majority seek the minimum requirements. Although I doubt that their motivation is as sad as attempting to get what they want with a minimum of effort, that's how it comes across. The more important problem is that they are focus on the fences rather than on God.

Imagine the creation as a big field with God in the middle. People are varying distances from God, representing their relationships with God. Somebody decided that there ought to be a fence between those who are among the elect and those who are not. First, they had to figure out where to put the fence. That was no small task, since God makes that choice, and He was not building the fence. Second, they had to decide the nature of the fence. Barbed wire was the obvious choice. So, those inside the fence became the maintainers of the fence, tightening sagging strands, sharpening barbs, occasionally stepping across the fence – just to make sure that it was properly aligned, of course. They never noticed that those outside the fence didn't care if it was there or not. They had plenty of unfettered space, so the fence made no difference. However, it did change the orientation of the church, facing the fence instead of facing God. And, unfortunately, many fence maintainers became tangled in or even injured by the fence.

But what if we ignore the fence and face God? Then, if you drift back, you will back into the fence and jump away from the fence and toward God. So, the fence has some usefulness, if we can just shrink the size of the maintenance budget to a manageable size.

But John's model has no fence. The motivation is to please the One who by grace saved us. There is no need for a fence because, even if built, it would be so far behind us that we couldn't see it. But what if we get off course? What will redirect us? Certainly not a fence that can only limit and injure. Redirection is the job of the brethren who reach back and drag us along. We seek what is best, not what is minimum.

How do we know we are in the picture? When we seek the best – the patently impossible – and dare to do it anyway – just because it will make God smile.

"And this is His commandment, that we believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, just as He commanded us. And the one who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him. And we know by this that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us."

The Law of Moses had the Ten Commandments. Churches today have varying numbers, from a handful to hundreds. John had two: faith and love.

But what is faith? The word is tossed off in a religious discussion as if everyone knew what it is. What is Biblical, saving faith? That is an interesting study in itself, to take all the passages in the New Testament containing faith or believe and sorting them into little piles of index cards, distilling the list of passages to those that offer characteristics of saving faith. I have a list of seven characteristics, but that is my list. You may subdivide the list differently and get a different number. But I think all the characteristics are in my list in one form or another. Briefly, they are

- Acceptance of the resurrection as evidence
- Acceptance of the need for a sacrifice
- Acceptance of the Word of God as true
- A realistic hope of heaven
- Acting on the promises of God

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- Obedience
- Evangelism

If we lack any one of these, we are not in John's picture.

Similarly, we can discover from the Scriptures the nature of this very special love that is poured out within our hearts by the Spirit. My little piles of index cards came up with the origin, qualities, and activities of love, all of which are necessary for the god-given love that we are commanded to exercise.

John writes that we must have faith in the name of, in the authority of, Jesus. We believe and act upon the certain knowledge that Jesus is king and is on His throne and will remain so until this world is no more, at which time He will hand that authority back to the Father.

We must love one another as He commanded us. I am assuming that John is referring to Jesus' little talk with the disciples in the garden in the night in which He was betrayed, specifically John 15:9 – 17. Paul connected love and unity in Colossians 2:2, "that their hearts may be encouraged, having been knit together in love." And in John 13:35, "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." That love which results in unity was to be a proof to the world that Jesus is from God, "I do not ask in behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word; that they may all be one; even as though, Father, art in Me and I in Thee, that they may be in Us; that the world may believe that Thou didst send Me." One of the reasons for this commandment of loving the brethren is as an evidence to the world that this kingdom is truly from the One True and Living God, because no human institution has ever achieved it, nor will it ever be achieved without the love which is poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit.

John concludes this section with one, final "We know." "We know by this that He abides in us, by His Spirit whom He has given us."

Can you see the Spirit? Can you see love? Can you tell the difference between the natural man (the best this world has to offer) and the spiritual man? I used to think not. I suppose that is to be expected; I'm a math and science guy, worse than that, analytical chemistry- addicted to precise measurement. But then, I should be accustomed to indirect measurement. I measure the quantity of an analyte in a solution by how much ultraviolet light of a certain wavelength fails to reach the other side. I determine the structure of a molecule by the flight paths of fragments of a molecule in an RF field after the molecules have been shattered by a beam of electrons. Yet, I have never seen an electron or a molecule or a photon. It's all theory about what is making the detector in the instrument make funny changes.

How do you know if the Spirit abides in you? Because the New Testament says so? That's a start. But, sadly, I know a lot of people who claim to have the Spirit dwelling in them because the Scriptures say that, when you are baptized, you are given the gift of the Spirit – but that's it. They have not made any indirect measurements to confirm this hypothesis. And, from where I sit, my measurements of a lot of people say that there's nobody home.

But should we be able to see, sense, or otherwise perceive the Spirit in ourselves or in others? Look again at what John wrote in that last verse, "We know by this that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us." Granted, John continues in chapter 4 to contrast this Spirit with false prophets, so one could dispense with the last verse of chapter 3 as referring only to the flagrant miraculous powers we read about so often in Acts. (I call them flagrant miracles because to say that miracles have ceased is to say that God no longer answers prayer and that several of His promises are no longer valid. By my observation, God has not been using those flagrant miracles recently, but He still changes the course of human events when we ask, so miracles are still going on all the time.) But is that all John is putting in his picture, flagrant miracles? Or should we be able to perceive in some way whether the Spirit is in me, or in you? Consider again 2 Corinthians 5:16, "Therefore, from now on we recognize no man according to the flesh; even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know Him thus no longer."

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In this letter, John uses the verb, “know,” many times. And surrounding the various usages are various ways to know that you are abiding in Him. But none of those descriptions are very well defined. Any one of them could be, and have been, taken to all sorts of ridiculous extremes. I am reasonably confident that John was not being obtuse or unclear or so general so as to be without substance. So how can we know that God abides in us, that His Spirit dwells in us? I submit to you that it is when we do the impossible. When we can look at ourselves and know absolutely that what I just did was not in my skill set. When we use a skill we had before being dedicated to Christ, we are being good stewards. When we do the impossible, we demonstrate the power of God.

The Spirit that we are given when we are baptized has several functions. Some of the ones that apply here are

- the ability to overcome (Romans 8:11 – 13 and Ephesians 3:16),
- being led, being given hope, and bearing fruit (Galatians 5:5 – 22)
- maturing or perfecting us (Galatians 3:2 – 5)

We are to strive to increase the role of the Spirit in our lives (Ephesians 5:18).

3:14 “We know that we have passed out of death into life because we love the brethren.”

When we use the love that was poured out in our heart by that same Spirit and accomplish that which normal people just cannot do, we know the Spirit dwells in us.

3:16 “We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.” When we take unreasonable risks for the brethren, we know the Spirit is in there somewhere. If we don’t take risks, it is not just because we live in the richest and most secure country in the world. It is because we don’t have the faith to exercise those impossible promises that fly in the face of common sense.

We understand physical and financial risks, and those are in this picture. But here is another that we perhaps don’t exercise as much. When we risk our peace of mind, our peaceful homes, our mental health by investing ourselves in people who have a long, long way to go just to reach the hem of the garment, we are turning loose of the world and letting the Spirit do the overcoming. Open your heart and your home and your peace to the undeserving: wayward children, ne’er-do-well adults, or even legalistic brethren. We need to know what Paul meant when he wrote, “Filling up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions.” If we think of adversity as a bad thing, we will never understand why Jesus came here, never know what our job is, and never let the Spirit do His thing.

When I accomplish that which I absolutely know I cannot do, I have a reason to be confident, even when I fall short and my own conscience condemns me.

Can I see the Spirit in you? I suppose that it is fortunate for us all that I don’t get to make the call as to whether you have that mark of the Spirit by which God knows His own. But there are times when we need to let go of the physically obvious and rely on indirect measurement. Have you ever met someone for the first time and you just knew that, within the next minute or so, you were going to find out that that person is a Christian? Why? Maybe it was because, while listening, they were actually listening and not trying to plan the next move. Have you seen anyone attempt the impossible, come out in a completely different place than they were headed, and it all worked together for good? I heard of a lady on a missions committee say after an interview of a prospective couple, “It’s obvious they are too young and too inexperienced. But if you saw what I saw, we just need to get on board and hang on.” That’s what we should see when we obey those two commandments: faith and love.