

1 John 3:16-24 N.T. 226 (NRSV)

¹⁶We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. ¹⁷How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?

¹⁸Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. ¹⁹And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him ²⁰whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. ²¹Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; ²²and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him.

²³And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. ²⁴All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us.

1 John 3:16-24 N.T. Page 226
“Confidence Without Conning”

Opening Prayer: Please bow with me in prayer. Almighty God, we humbly enter your presence today seeking food for our souls. Fill us up, Lord. Feed us till we want no more and make us whole. In Christ’s Name we pray, **Amen.**

Introduction: Does anyone recognize the character in this picture? (Wait for an answer.) Yes, that’s Paul Newman playing “**Fast Eddie**” in the 1986 movie “*The Color of Money*.” Now, does anyone remember why people called “Fast Eddie” “Fast?” (Wait for an answer.) Because he was a pool hustler. In fact, “*The Color of Money*” was the sequel to a 1961 movie called “*The Hustler*” starring a much younger Paul Newman. **Fast Eddie** was a master at tricking people into thinking he wasn’t very good, and then once he’d set his trap, he’d pounce and run the table and take those gullible fools’ money. Of course, once people caught on that Eddie was a pool hustler, he’d have to move on to the next town to look for some new marks, or maybe I should say suckers. Eventually Eddie had to run out towns so in the “*Color of Money*” we see Fast Eddie passing on the tricks of the trade to Vincent, a member of the next generation, played by Tom Cruise.

We have a lot of names for characters like Fast Eddie and Vincent. We call them hustlers, shysters, swindlers, and even flim flam men. But for me the name that’s most telling is to call them “**con artist.**” A con artist is a person who’s skilled at instilling a false sense of confidence in others, and then turning that false confidence to their advantage for their own personal gain. That’s why we say con artist play “**confidence games.**” **People are conned** into having confidence.

No one likes being conned. That’s why we also have a set of adjectives to describe con artist. We call them slick, slimy, sleazy, seedy, low-life scum. **Yes, we truly despise** people who take advantage of other people.

PAUSE

Move I.

Our gut tells us it's not right to con others. Instinctively we know that it's not right to prey on and manipulate other people. We hate the deceit and trickery of the con man's game. We think it's downright disgusting for someone to take advantage of weak, gullible, or mentally challenged people. We all believe in trying to get ahead in life, **but not when it's done** at other people's expense. **That's why** we find what the late Bernie Madoff did so despicable. He tricked little old widows and even charities out of their money so he could live in a penthouse and fly around on private jets. We don't need anyone to tell us that what Bernie Madoff did was wrong; we know it instinctively in our guts. **We know that to con** anyone out of anything is wrong.

Your gut sense is that queasy feeling in the pit of your stomach, all the way down into your intestines that you get when you realize that something is wrong, or dangerous, or even evil. **Our Bible lesson today** from 1 John has a verse that **talks about this gut sense** that everyone has. Now, I suspect you could read 1 John 3:16-24 over and over again and you'd never see any reference to this gut sense. That's because it's one of those underlying meanings that has gotten lost in the translation. When John wrote this letter, he wrote using idioms. **An idiom** is any phrase that has a meaning that rests beyond the individual definitions of the words used in the phrase. Let me give you a simple example. **If I were to say** Joe is about to "kick the bucket," does this picture show what I more than likely mean? No, it's doubtful that I literally mean that Joe is about to kick a bucket. What I more than likely mean **is that Joe is about to die**. The phrase "*To kick the bucket*" is an idiom. And in our culture, everyone knows that the phrase "*To kick the bucket*" means, "*To die*." And idiom is a phrase whose meaning rests beyond the individual definitions of the words that make up the phrase.

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Let's look at 1 John 3:17 (NRSV). **“How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?”** When John wrote that verse a little over 1900 years ago, he used a Greek idiom that's literally gotten lost in the translation. The translation accurately says what John meant, but the underlying idiom John used is lost. The translation says, **“and yet refuses to help,”** which is this phrase in the original Greek. (καὶ κλείση τὰ σπλάγχνα αὐτοῦ ἀπ' αὐτοῦ) A literal translation of this Greek phrase is **“but shuts up his bowels from them.”** Now that's an idiom: **“shuts up his bowels.”** In first-century, Greek culture to say *“to shut up your bowels”* didn't literally mean that you were constipated. It was an idiom meaning that you **withheld your compassion, or your pity, or your help** from someone. When you see a brother or sister in need, **your gut instinctively tells you** that you need to help them.

God has instilled such gut sense in each of us. We know in our gut when we should help someone in need. We know in our gut when something is wrong. **We know** in our gut that con artists are low-life scum. We know in our gut that it's wrong to take advantage of other people. **Yes, our gut does unmistakably tell us that it's wrong to con others.**

End I.

Move II.

Yet we all too easily con ourselves. We trick ourselves into believing things that just aren't so. We think our opinions are always correct. We think our actions are always justified. We think we know what's best. We think we can do no wrong, or at least no wrong that would ever be worthy of death. We con ourselves into believing our own B.S. We think we're basically good people and nothing we couldn't possibly ever do could be so bad as to deserve God's wrath. **We know we don't measure up** to the gold standard of perfection, but surely, we're good enough to **pass with a B or at worst a C.**

I've been a pastor for just shy of eighteen years now. That's only about 1/4th of my life. But in that short time, there's one reality that I've witnessed again and again. **Good people are capable of doing bad things.** The line between virtue and sin is all too easily crossed. **A good mother** crosses the line and shakes her baby. **A good husband** crosses the line and cheats on his wife. **A good student** crosses the line and uses crib notes on a test. **A good employee** crosses the line and steals from his employer. But when you first speak to any these people, you usually discover that they've conned themselves into believing that what they've done isn't all that wrong. They believe that their actions are somehow justified. It's not cheating if I'm in a loveless marriage. It's not child abuse if I love my child. It's not stealing if I'm under paid. In your mind, you always justify your own actions. You know other people sin, but you never do. **When that's what** you're thinking, all you're doing is conning yourself.

In the middle of the Old Testament, is a collection of **books filled with** ancient tidbits of wisdom. **These books** of Wisdom include Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs and collectively that make up nearly a fifth of the Old Testament. These tidbits of wisdom within these books have withstood the test of time. They're as true today they were three millennia ago.

I want to draw your attention to one tidbit of wisdom found in the book of Proverbs, a collection of wise saying that are about 3,000 years old. **In Proverbs 14:12 (NRSV)** the ancient sage writes, **“There is a way that seems right to a person, but its end is the way to death.”** When you think your way is right, you’re conning yourself. That way that seems so right to you, is really leading you to your doom. I know you’re trying to be a good person. I know you’re trying to live by the golden rule. I know you’re trying not to lie, cheat, or steal. I know you want to do good, **but the truth is that we all end up crossing** that line and doing bad.

This brings us to a second tidbit of wisdom also found the book of Proverbs. **In Proverbs 3:5-6 (NRSV)** the ancient teacher writes this instruction, **“Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.”** Following on that way that seems so right to you is leading you to your doom but following the path that is right to God leads to a blessed life. Only God’s way leads to life.

Why do we keep pulling the wool over our own eyes? Why do we continually try to justify our own actions? Why do we deceive ourselves? Our gut keeps pointing us in the right direction. **Yet it’s so easy just to keep right on conning ourselves.**

End II.

Move III.

So, let God be your source of confidence. Other people can trick you, and you can even trick yourself, but God will never trick you. With God, instilling confidence is never a game. God means exactly what he says and God does exactly what he promises. God's worthy of your confidence.

Most of you know that words fascinate me. I know it's weird, but I actually like dictionaries. We human beings attach meanings to sounds and then we connect those sounds together **forming words** whose meaning draws upon the meanings of its parts. **Let's take a moment** to look at the word "confidence." The word confidence is a noun formed **by attaching the suffix –ence** to end of the verb confide. **According to the *online Etymology Dictionary*, adding –ence** to a verb forms "**a noun of process or fact.**" You can have confidence in the person to whom you confide; it's a fact. So, the –ence sound on the end of confidence makes it concrete or factual.

Now let's look at the underlying verb root "confide." This is made up of two sounds, "**con**" and "fide." The way I've been **using the sound "con"** thus far in this message today has been to mean a swindler, or shyster. And that is one of the meanings of the sound "con." **But according** to the *online Etymology Dictionary*, the sound "con" has two other meanings as well, **it can mean "a negative,"** like in **the word "contrary,"** or **it can mean** to "to know" like in **the word "conceive."** It's that last meaning that attaches to the sound "con" when it's used in the verb, "confide." **Finally let's look** at the sound "fide." **Again, according** to the *online Etymology Dictionary*, the sound "fide" **means "faith or trust."** This would be like in **the word "fidelity."**

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I hope I haven't completely boarded you, but when we put everything we've just learned together, this is what we get: **con – fide – ence** which means “**to know you can trust as a fact.**” And that's pretty much the definition **we find in an ordinary dictionary.** “Confidence” means **to have faith, trust, and assurance in a person or thing.**

And who can you have confidence in? **Well, certainly not** in the con artist, and if you're honest, **not in yourself** either. **Only God**, and God alone, is worthy of your confidence. **That too** is one of those tidbits of wisdom found in the book of Proverbs. **Proverbs 3:25-26 (NRSV)** says, **Do not be afraid of sudden panic, or of the storm that strikes the wicked, for the LORD will be your confidence and will keep your foot from being caught.**” **When the circumstances of life** have others around you pulling their hair out in a tizzy, **put your confidence in God** and you can rest assured that you'll stay on the path that leads to life. **The world** is full of all kinds of scary uncertainties: **the global pandemic, the jittery economy, and even diametrically opposed ideologies.** **So please, let God be your steadfast source of confidence.**

End III.

Conclusion: We do know it's not right to con others. That's why we despise con artists like Fast Eddie, and Bernie Madoff. We know in our bowels it's wrong. **Yet we all too easily continue to con ourselves.** We trick ourselves into thinking that we can do no wrong. Well, you can con yourself, but you can't con God. God's wrath's still coming. **So, let God be your source of confidence.** Put your whole faith and trust in God, and count on him to lead you on the path that leads to life. Let me read you the last verse of our Bible lesson today again. **This is 1 John 3:24 (NRSV), "All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us."** That's how you can have "*Confidence Without Conning.*"

Closing Prayer: Let's pray. Eternal God, you and you alone are worthy of our honor, and glory, and praise. You are our only true source of confidence both in this life and in the life to come. **Amen!**

10:30: Closing Hymn: "Jesu, Jesu" Red Hymnal No. 432

All Five Verses

Sending Forth: Are the uncertainties of life getting you down? Then let God be your confidence. Go forth confidence that you are a child of God through the saving grace of Christ Jesus our Lord. **Amen!**