

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, March 01, 2026
The Second Sunday In Lent

Solemn Evensong
4:00 pm

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A Sermon by
The Rev. Dr. Luigi Gioia
on
1 John 3:19-24
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“Living with myself”

Part of our 2026 Lenten Sermon Series on The Five Habits of Christian Life.

How can you live with yourself!

We’ve all heard this sentence in films or maybe in real life. Sometimes the people who should find this –‘living with themselves’– excruciating because of the immense public harm they have done to others seem completely immune to shame and remorse. Scripture would say that they have “hardened their heart”, desensitised themselves against inner reproach. They might be pure narcissists, or just cynical characters who believe that in life you cannot afford being sentimental. Often they succeed in life, their wealth and power enable them to avoid accountability – and this makes them even less liable to ever question their own behavior.

The prosperity of the wicked is often lamented in the Psalms: it looks as if trying to be good makes us weak, that justice is an illusion, and we are tempted to give over to resignation. Or we look for a silver lining and find consolation in the thought that we at least are not as wicked as they are. We at least can sleep at night because of our good conscience. We at least have not killed anyone, have not destroyed anyone’s life.

It might be worth though turning this same question towards ourselves – not in reproach, but out of genuine curiosity: *How do I live with myself?* Sure, I have not killed anyone, but can I say that I have never hurt anyone? Never been unfair, judgmental, unforgiving, selfish? I know that I have – just as I know how good I can be at avoiding taking responsibility: “It was not that bad”, “These things happen”, “Who does not ever make any mistake”, “It was not my fault” – and the like.

Or I can go the opposite direction and feel crushed by guilt. However much I try to find justifications for what I did wrong I cannot forgive myself, I keep thinking about it, feel terrible, unworthy, miserable. I might forget for a while about it, but sooner or later the thought, memory, guilt takes over again. I might even indulge in this guilt as a form of self-punishment – which, we must admit, does not sound very healthy.

To assuage these feelings, we might decide to talk to a close friend in the hope she or he will not judge us, or, if it gets too bad, try therapy. Somehow these are secular forms of ‘confession’: they might not erase

the harm we have done but give us a way to live with it, at least partially, through acknowledging our wrongdoings and maybe change for the better.

The bottom line is that having to deal with the thought of our wrongdoings on our own is hard. Left to ourselves we seem incapable to avoid the pitfalls of denial, self-justification, or self-pity (and sometimes self-punishment). Somehow, we are not equipped to achieve the only thing that would bring us durable and genuine peace, that is *resolution* or, as theological language sometimes puts it, *atonement*.

This is what John acknowledges in his first letter: there is no easy way to deal with a reproachful heart, a heart that "condemns us" (3:19), as he puts it.

John's acknowledgement though is meant to pave the way to a discovery: if we learn to listen in the right way, we find that in our very heart there is not only reproach but also a voice capable of reassuring us:

Thus we shall "reassure our heart before God: whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything." (3:19)

This other voice tells us that "God knows everything", especially what is in our heart, much better and more deeply than we can. Left to myself I can't avoid denial, self-justification, self-pity, or self-punishment. The kind ear of a friend or the help of a therapist can give me some more clarity about my real motives and inner short-comings, but nobody, not even myself, will ever know everything about myself. Saint Augustine, this expert investigator of the heart, had to acknowledge that "We are a mystery to ourselves". We are not a mystery to God though. When John declares that he is "greater than our heart" he means that God loves us more than we will ever be able to (truly) love ourselves.

Think it this way: when I feel unwell, I take some over the counter remedy and maybe some rest, based on what I can only guess about the nature and cause of my illness. It is my body yes, but I do not know everything about it. If the illness persists, I must go to a doctor because only she knows my body better than I do, and has more chances to find the right way of curing me.

The same applies to the heart. God is the healer who knows our heart better than ourselves, and can give us the only remedy that brings real healing: his unconditional forgiveness. He can and wants to forgive us completely not because he has any illusion about us – on the contrary: none of my deeper motives and desires are hidden from him. God does not need to justify me or deny the wrong I have done. And because he knows everything he can forgive everything, remove once and for all the burden of my guilt, change my heart.

This is how I think about confession. Not as the kind ear of a friend, nor as therapy, but as the only truly persuasive assurance that I am forgiven and that I can forgive myself – truly persuasive because immune to all the half-truths I entertain about myself and yet still guaranteeing that I am loved unconditionally.

Many Christian denominations maintain that this assurance can be gained by our confession directly to God – and they are not wrong. God forgives us the moment we turn to him. The risk though is that we think we are making our confession to God, while still talking to ourselves, and to our idea of God – and chances are that our idea of God might not be much bigger than our heart, and the assurance of forgiveness half-convincing, just as all our other strategies of self-justification.

The priest is not a therapist. He does not give us human solutions, but God's 'ab-solution'. He assures us that the wrong we have done ceases to be ours alone to carry. Our wrongdoings and their consequences

become God's deal: God is greater than us not only at forgiving but also at healing, at repairing, at atoning, at changing evil into an even greater good. Ab-solution opens the way to resolution by changing our heart and opening for us new ways of restoring justice.

Learning how to deal with our reproaching and mysterious heart is the work of a lifetime. Confession helps – and so does another habit Christian wisdom has honed over the centuries, what we call 'spiritual direction' or, better, 'spiritual counselling'. Just like confession, spiritual counselling is not therapy, although it does have something in common with the kind ear of a friend. The spiritual counsellor offers listening without judgement. She or he does not have the solution to whatever pain, sorrow, difficulty or question I bring to her. She simply is someone who, to use Paul's sentence has experienced God's comfort and forgiveness in her life and thus has become able "to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which herself is comforted by God" (2 Cor 1:4).

How do I live with myself?

The Christian answer is that I can't, or better, that I don't have to. From the beginning God declared that it is not good that I should be alone and makes a helper suitable for me (cf. Gen 2:18). This is true for every aspect of our lives, but especially for what the bible calls the 'heart' – the place in us that can only be open from the inside, and where God himself comes only if we invite him in.

How do I live with myself?

Just by letting God's forgiveness, light, healing, and reassurance in:

Thus we shall "reassure our heart before God: whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything." (3:19)
