



This morning we come to the final passage in our study of 1 John, and I think you'll agree the way John ends this first letter is quite intriguing. In fact, I want to start today with the very last thing John says. Look at 5:21, "*Dear children, keep yourselves from idols.*" That verse has perplexed Bible scholars for centuries. If you look at how other New Testament letters end, you'll see what I mean. Most of them end with some kind of blessing or prayer, amounting to something like a final encouragement for those reading the letter. John ends this letter not with a blessing or a prayer, but with a warning, "Dear children, keep yourselves from idols."

It's also perplexing because nowhere in this letter has John mentioned idols. It's not there. It's not in his other two letters either or in his Gospel. Why here? Why now? Why all of a sudden at the end does he just close this letter with such a warning against idolatry?

If we read this in the Old Testament it would make perfect sense. You don't have to go far in reading the Old Testament to see what a big deal idolatry was. God gave his people the Ten Commandments. The first two dealt with the issue of idolatry. Get this: While Moses was on Mt. Sinai getting those commandments, the people of Israel were down making an idol that looked like a cow. Moses came down the mountain with the two stone tablets, and Aaron had the audacity to tell him, "Golly, I threw this stuff in the fire and look what came out." It wasn't just them; it was Solomon and a long line of Kings. You read the Old Testament and this warning makes sense.

But not here, not in 1 John. So what do we do with this? The more I've thought about it, the more it makes sense. I've come to think in this one verse John summarizes his entire letter. We know the people he was writing to were under attack. They'd been preyed upon by false teachers called the Gnostics. These people claimed a superior knowledge of God; they denied Jesus was the Son of God who came in the flesh and died for our sins, and they left the church and took many with them. Many of you are committed to a small group of believers you meet with regularly. Imagine if one day half the group left because they claimed you weren't spiritual; trusting Jesus wasn't enough. In essence, these Gnostics said salvation didn't come through faith in Jesus but through knowledge. Their idol was knowledge. So when John says, "*Dear children, keep yourselves from idols,*" he's thinking of that. He's warning them from replacing their faith in

Jesus with faith in knowledge. It might seem strange someone would do that, but we do it all the time. It doesn't have to be knowledge; it can be anything.

No one has written more insightfully about modern day idolatry than Tim Keller. In his book, *Counterfeit Gods* he says an idol is "anything more important to you than God, anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God, anything you seek to give you what only God can give. A counterfeit god is anything so central and essential to your life that, should you lose it, your life would feel hardly worth living." We tend to think idols are bad things, but that's rarely the case. The better something is, the more likely we think it can satisfy our deepest needs. Anything can be an idol, especially the very best things. These aren't idols made of wood and stone; they're idols of the heart.

Keller says we can identify our idols by asking ourselves three questions: First, what do we love? Whatever we daydream about, whatever we enjoy imagining, whatever captures our affections and provides us with a sense of significance and worth can be an idol. Second, what do we trust? Whatever we look to give us a sense of security, control and confidence can be an idol. Often the thing we fear losing the most can be an idol. Finally, what do we obey? God should be our only Lord and Master, but whatever we love and trust we also serve. Whatever controls us is our master. The person who seeks power is controlled by power. The person who seeks acceptance is controlled by the people he wants to please. We don't control ourselves. We're controlled by the lord of our lives. The Gnostics were enamored with and controlled by knowledge. You might be dealing with something else.

You can even make Christmas an idol. We all know Christmas is supposed to be about the birth of Christ, but how often do we look to Christmas to provide a sense of joy and peace and family togetherness? We carry so many expectations into this season. We'll do almost anything to see them realized. We'll go into debt. We'll travel great distances. We'll cram way too much into our schedule.

So when John says, "*Dear Children, keep yourselves from idols,*" this makes perfect sense, not only in the context of John's letter but also in our own lives. And John wants to give his readers some tools to deal with that. In essence, he tells them their knowledge is better than the Gnostics. He wants them to know that they know the one true God because he's made himself known to us in Christ.

## We Know We Have Eternal Life

If you look at the eight verses that proceed this warning, you'll find several things we know that far surpass anything our idols can offer. Look at verse 13.

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

The first thing we know is we have eternal life. John even says this is why he's written them this letter—he wants them know if they believe in (trust) the name of the Son of God they have this. To believe in his name is the same thing as believing in his person.

Eternal life. What else could possibly offer us eternal life? That's not just talking about the duration of life, but also the quality of life. Eternal life isn't just everlasting life, it's sharing in the very life of God. This past week my 89-year-old dad has been told he only has days, maybe weeks, to live. As you can imagine, it's been an emotional time for my family. I've been wondering, how do I say goodbye to my dad? How do I do this well? One of the things I keep on coming back to is this: I'm so glad my dad knows Jesus. I'm so glad he came to faith 20 years ago. His life has been so different ever since. But the greatest thing is, when I say goodbye, it's just goodbye for now, because I'm going to see him again.

What idol can give you that? What idol can give you the sure and certain hope that you'll live not just forever, but forever with God in a place where there's no more crying or pain or death?

## We Know He Answers Our Prayers

The second thing we know is he hears and answers our prayers. Look at verses 14–15.

**This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him.**

That word “confidence” means boldness. Earlier in this letter John said we could have confidence in the future day of judgment, but here he talks about a confidence or boldness we have right now in prayer. We can come into his presence and bring our requests at any time. When we do that, he says we know not only does he hear us but he gives us whatever we ask.

But this isn't just a blanket promise. There's an important qualification. He says, *“...if we ask anything according to his will.”* Prayer isn't a convenient device for getting what we want out of God, but it's a way of bending our will to his. So in prayer we seek God's will, embrace it and align ourselves with it. Every true prayer is a variation on the theme, “Your will be done.” Jesus taught us to say this in what we call the Lord's Prayer, “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” He also lived this out in

the garden of Gethsemane. He was completely honest with God about what he wanted (“Take this cup from me”) but he also bowed his will to his Father's (“not my will but yours be done”).

This, by the way, is what it means when we say at the end of our prayers, “In Jesus' name, Amen.” So often we say that without understanding what it means. Part of what it means is we make our requests not based on our own merit but on the merit of Jesus and his work on the cross. But it also means our prayers should reflect his values and purposes. Our prayers should be governed by his kingdom agenda. For that to happen our minds and hearts must be shaped by Scripture. Sometimes we just need to stop and ask, what does God really want in this situation?

The great thing about this is, he knows what's best for us, and he wants that for us, and when we pray according to that, “we know that we have what we asked from him.” We already have it even though we might not see the results right away. It's like you go out and buy a Christmas gift for one of your kids because you know what they want. But you go to them anyway and ask them, What do you want for Christmas? They tell you and it's exactly what you already bought for them. That's no surprise to you; you knew what they wanted and you were happy to get it for them. In a sense, their request has been granted and they have it, but they just can't enjoy it until Christmas. This is our confidence in prayer; this is what we know! What idol can do that? What idol has the power and the love to grant your requests?

Now John goes on and he applies what he's said about prayer to a specific situation. He moves from talking about prayer in general to intercessory prayer; prayer for others. This was a question they were dealing with because there were people who'd left the church and were now denying Christ. There were also people who were still in the church but struggling in their walk. About praying for them, John says:

**If you see any brother or sister commit a sin that does not lead to death, you should pray and God will give them life. I refer to those whose sin does not lead to death. There is a sin that leads to death. I am not saying that you should pray about that. All wrongdoing is sin, and there is sin that does not lead to death (verses 16–17).**

These two verses are an illustration of a request that's in the will of God in contrast with one that isn't. He starts with the positive. What do you do when you see a brother or sister in Christ commit a sin? You pray for him. He doesn't tell us what to pray for, but it seems you'd pray for that person to have an attitude of confession and repentance. That's in the will of God. Remember, we saw in 1:9, *“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”* When we pray for them in that way, it says God will answer our prayer and give them life. We've already learned as believers we have this life in us, but I believe this is saying that through

confession they'll will continue to have that life. So this is what you do for a fellow believer who falls into sin: you pray for them.

But notice there's a qualification and this is the negative example. John says this only applies to the one who commits "a sin that does not lead to death." There is sin that does lead to death and he's not saying to pray about that. He doesn't come right out and say **not** to pray about it, he doesn't forbid it, but he doesn't advise it either. It would seem that the "sin which leads to death" is the kind to which God has determined upon a certain response and no prayer is going to change his mind, so it's not in God's will to pray about that.

The big question here is, what's the sin that leads to death? And what kind of death is he talking about? Physical death or spiritual death? Is he talking about believers or unbelievers? There are several explanations for what this means. One view regards it as some specific sin which is so terrible as to be unforgivable, such as suicide, murder, or adultery. This view created the Catholic distinction between mortal and venial sins. A second view relates this to what Jesus said about blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. A third view says this is talking about the physical death of a believer. There are examples in the Bible of believers who died as a result of blatant sin, like Ananias and Sapphira.

A better approach is to understand this in the context of what was going on in 1 John. Sin that lead to death is the sin of the people who'd left John's churches and rejected the truth of the gospel that Jesus was the Son of God who died on the cross to pay for our sins. These aren't people who were once saved but now have lost their salvation. He doesn't call them a brother or sister in Christ. They might have made a profession of faith but they never entered into new birth in Christ. And so after being a part of the fellowship of believers and hearing the gospel and seeing God at work they hardened their heart and turned away from it. I think these are the same kinds of people the writer of Hebrews was talking about when he describes those "*...who have once been enlightened and have tasted of the heavenly gift and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance...*" (Hebrews 6:4-6). Now we should be careful about making this judgment on someone too rashly. God's mercies are great.

But that's not the focus here. The focus is on the opportunity and the responsibility we have to pray for our brothers and sisters in Christ. Throughout this book John has talked about the great commandment to love our brothers and sisters in Christ. Well, this is one of the ways you love them. You pray for them when they fall into sin. You pray they'd recognize their sin and seek forgiveness and turn from it. God will answer that prayer! It reminds me of what Jesus said to Simon Peter. Before his arrest,

Jesus told Peter he'd soon deny him three times. Here's what he said to him, "*Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift all of you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers*" (Luke 22:31-32). You see, this is what Jesus did for Peter, and this is what we know he can do for others through our prayers.

## **We Know We're of the True God and are Kept Safe from the Evil One**

The third thing we know is found in verses 18–20.

**We know that anyone born of God does not continue to sin; the One who was born of God keeps them safe, and the evil one cannot harm them. We know that we are children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one. We know also that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true. And we are in him who is true by being in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life.**

Notice how John says three times, "We know..." He says several things we know, but I want to treat these together as one. In essence he says we know we belong to the true God and are kept safe from the evil one. Pay particular attention to what he says in verse 18. "*The One who was born of God (Jesus) keeps them (anyone born of God) safe, and the evil one (the devil) cannot harm them.*" One of the things we often look to our idols for is a sense of security. We all long to feel secure. We know there are so many things in this world that threaten us; so many things that can trip us up. John mentions how the whole world is under the control of the evil one. Well, we live in that world. We live in a world that lies to us all the time about what's true and important. You see it everywhere. When you're watching a commercial on TV, just stop for a minute and analyze what it's really communicating. Look at the billboards along 101, what are they really saying? And behind all of this there's a malevolent power called Satan, who makes it all look very attractive.

Then we have to deal with our own flesh, our own propensity towards selfishness. Sometimes we just feel like we're fighting a losing battle. Sometimes we want to just give up. But John says, you belong to the true God and he's given you understanding to know and believe in his Son and because of that the evil one can't harm you. Sure, you may fall into sin occasionally, but you won't continue in sin because Jesus will keep you safe. Do you believe that? Do you believe he'll keep you safe from the evil one? Charles Spurgeon used to say he was so secure in his salvation that he could grab onto a corn stalk and swing out over the fires of hell, look straight into the devil's face and sing, "Blessed Assurance, Jesus is mine!" That's security!

The cure for idolatry is to know what we know. Remember that old TV show, *Leave it to Beaver*? Beaver was this classic kid who'd come out with some great one-liners. One of my favorites was when he'd be trying to convince someone of something and they would question him and he'd say, "Sure I'm sure." In many ways that's what John wants for us in this letter. He wants us to be sure we're sure. He wants us to be sure about the fact that through faith in Jesus we have eternal life. He wants us to be sure we have confident access into his presence and he'll answer our prayers. He wants us to be sure that as children of God we know him who is true and he'll keep us safe from the evil one until the very end.

Tim Keller says the cure for idolatry isn't to remove the idols from our lives, but rather it is to replace them. Replace those things that you love and trust and obey, replace the idols of your heart with the God who alone gives eternal life, who alone will answer your prayers, and who alone keeps you safe from the evil one. Look again at the last line of verse 20, "***And we are in him who is true by being in His Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life.***" Don't just remove your idols, replace your idols with him—Jesus Christ—the true God and eternal life.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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