



7. Confident to approach God (1 John 5:13-21)

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.

14 This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. 15 And if we know that he hears us--whatever we ask--we know that we have what we asked of him.

16 If anyone sees his brother commit a sin that does not lead to death, he should pray and God will give him 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 he should pray about that.

17 All wrongdoing is sin, and there is sin that does not lead to death. 18 We know that anyone born of God does not continue to sin; the one who was born of God keeps him safe, and the evil one cannot harm him.

19 We know that we are children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one. 20 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--even in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life. 21 Dear children, keep yourselves from idols.

This is one of those sermons that started off as one thing and has ended as another. This is widely regarded as one of the more ambiguous passages in the NT, but hopefully we will be able to unravel something that will encourage us this evening.

This is a passage that contains encouraging and undeniable truths that we need to understand as the people of God. Unfortunately it has one of those passages of scripture in verses 16 and 17 where the truths of it would have been clear to the original readers but where differences of opinion exist today. We mustn't let this put off what is otherwise a clear passage.

And what is that unquestionable truth? It's the truth given to use in verse 13:

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.

This was written to believers that they may KNOW they have eternal life. It's important for our assurance that we KNOW we have eternal life. I can't stress this more strongly. If you have no assurance of eternal life, you will be dogged throughout the whole of your life with that.

And what is that assurance - that we believe in the name of the Son - it's an expression of His deity. We have already covered this in previous weeks, but there were those who taught that Jesus was just a man and not divine. If that was the case we are still in our sin. But if we believe in a Saviour who has died for our sin, then we also believe in a Father who loves us and has made us His children and as we shall see later, protects us from the evil one so that we know eternally that I am His child - that's assurance!
3:1 How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are

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Lack of assurance usually leads to *legalism*. If God hasn't done everything we need for our salvation, then we need to do something to please Him. And if we don't then we're lost. Because they have no assurance, they try to do things that are listed in the Bible so that they may somehow keep God happy. It's usually characterised by nominal churchgoing - we Go to church to give God his bit.

We are God's people and we are special. Praise Him! Let's be assured we are His. This is an important fact that John underlines later in the chapter, but we must remind ourselves of this fact because it helps us understand verses 14 to 17.

Verses 14 and 15 give us a promise we have heard elsewhere:

14 This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. 15 And if we know that he hears us--whatever we ask--we know that we have what we asked of him.

Isn't that just great. God always hears us when we ask things - because of who we are. We are His people.

It also tells us another key truth in scripture - that reflects what Jesus says in the Gospels - when we ask and God hears we, get what we have asked for. But look at the proviso: *that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us*. Remember that one. So often our prayer is speculative because we don't know what God's will is. But God wants us to know His will and His way. Scripture helps us here, so does His Spirit. So often we don't seek God's will yet God wants us to spend time in His presence because as we do we will discover more of His will for us. Lets pray that we will know what to pray for.

It's time for a George Muller story:

George Muller was a great, confident man of God, who lived and worked in His service. At a time when orphans were poorly treated just about everywhere, he cared for orphans. He took them in, fed them, provided for them, and was directly involved in the conversion to Christ of almost 3,000 orphans. He never asked people for money, but instead prayed for every need. His meticulous records reveal that through answered prayer, he provided schooling for thousands of pupils, distributed 281,196 Bibles, 1,448,662 New Testaments. And this man, who had no resources except prayer, financially supported missionary operations in 26 countries.

God answers prayer when we pray in His will. Scripture is also sometimes very clear on how we should pray and verse 16 gives us such guidance.

16 If anyone sees his brother commit a sin that does not lead to death, he should pray and God will give him 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 he should pray about that.

17 All wrongdoing is sin, and there is sin that does not lead to death. 18 We know that anyone born of God does not continue to sin; the one who was born of God keeps him safe, and the evil one cannot harm him.

This is a difficult passage to understand and there are many interpretations of it - all of which can leave as many questions as they answer. So feel free to disagree on details tonight as you will be in very good company with the good and great of theologians!

What is undeniable is that when we see our brother or sister sin, we should pray for them. In chapter 1 verse 9 we saw the importance of confessing our sins because God

is faithful and just to forgive us our sin and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. Here we pray for our brothers and sisters in Christ that sin.

But how do we explain the idea of sin that results in death? Here follows the best explanation I can think of as I have grappled with the greasy pole of verses 16 and 17.

If anyone sees his brother commit a sin that does not lead to death, he should pray and God will give him life.

This looks almost contradictory. How can God give life to somebody who does not commit a sin that leads to death? The best way that I could put this is that *all wrongdoing is sin, and there is sin that does not lead to death*. For a Christian, our sinning once we have received salvation does not result in spiritual death because we have found salvation in Christ. But that sin affects our relationship with God. Therefore, even though we may have eternal life, that may not be in its fullness right now - remember that eternal life starts when we are saved, not when we are dead. God wants us to know that in its fullness now.

John 10:10 The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

Another way of interpreting this is that in the churches that John was writing to, there was a mix of genuine believers and the false brothers John referred to earlier in the letter. Part of the reason of writing was to identify the difference between the two in the church. The easiest way was in their acceptance or otherwise in the deity of the Son. As I said before, if we accept the deity of the Son then we know that our sins are dealt with eternally. This is what the Advent season is all about - it establishes the deity of the Son.

So therefore the believers were asked to pray for the brothers who sinned that they may receive life and that may mean eternal. But John says don't bother to pray for those that have committed sin that leads to death. There is quite a debate about this sin that leads to death but most commentators go for Jesus' assertion in Matthew 12:

31 And so I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. 32 Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.

The sin which leads to death - spiritual death is blasphemy the Holy Spirit. But what is that? Denying or rejecting that what He reveals and does even though it is clear that what they know or witness is of the Spirit. It reflects well in Hebrews 10

Hebrews 10: 26 If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, 27 but only a fearful expectation of judgement and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God.

This was written to those amongst the Hebrews who heard the Word and got knowledge of the truth - note not who had received the truth - just those to whom the Spirit had revealed the truth and they had ignored and rejected it. John may be aiming at the same thing here. He says *There is a sin that leads to death. I am not saying that he should pray about that*. It's about wilful unbelief - they know the truth but oppose God anyway - the same as denying the Holy Spirit. If people acknowledge what the Spirit says and do not believe then that's the sin that leads to death - eternal death. When we see people wilfully rejecting God even though they know better then John says "don't bother" praying for them. pray for those that have an understanding and need to repent and find life.

There's the two best explanations I've found. Take your pick. The clear message is that we should intercede for those who sin, whether believers or not. Both involve repentance. It's a command about prayer we little practice, but we should. God wants to restore the joy of salvation of Christians that sin and draw into full salvation those that drift around in the church not convinced that they should believe.

The question his readers then may have been asking themselves is: "if there is a sin that leads to death, have I committed it?" It is certainly a question that believers answer today. "Is it possible for a believer to commit this sin and therefore lose their salvation?" "Can satan confuse me and cause me to sin and therefore lose my salvation?" John helpfully gives us the answer

We know that anyone born of God does not continue to sin; the one who was born of God keeps him safe, and the evil one cannot harm him.

It's important. If we are truly born of God, then we don't continue to sin (although John accepts earlier that we will and can find forgiveness) and the evil one can't harm us. This brings us back to verse 13. Because we have faith in Christ, we are the children of God and we can't be snatched from Him by the evil one and by implication, anyone else. This is a long way around of saying that true believers can't commit the sin that leads to death. The passage is written so that we can pray for those that sin so that they will have the joy of salvation. It also gives assurance that believers can't commit the sin that leads to death because we have eternal life and sonship.

This is intended to be for our encouragement. If you are a Christian tonight; if you have accepted Christ as your Saviour then you are a child of God - you are saved eternally - and that is your assurance. That's why verse 13 is written:

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.

We are the people of God. We have listened to His voice, we have trusted Jesus as our Saviour. God has made us His children. That's all you need to know - you have eternal assurance. Look at verse 19

19 We know that we are children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one. 20 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-- even in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life.

Even though we are surrounded by a sea of godlessness we are God's children. We know that we are His - through the Spirit we have that understanding.

That's the message of 1 John when we get to the root of the letter. The Father wants us to understand that we are His children - that we have eternal life. As we come to communion this evening let's remember that because of the broken body and the shed blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, we know Him eternally and satan or anyone else cannot snatch us away. Praise the Lord!

The warning at the end is a simple one

21 Dear children, keep yourselves from idols.

Why this odd end. The reason they never had assurance was that they had allowed their faith to be polluted by worldly and idolatrous belief and mixed it with the gospel to create heresy. We are the children of God - let's keep ourselves from those things that would deflect us from the true faith. As we come to a period of the year when the true

story of Christmas is hidden under a raft of other things that are not of God, let's not allow these things to keep us from the truth.



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