

Keeping ourselves from Idols as we grow in the certainty of knowing Christ Jesus our Lord

1 John 5:16-21

Sermon 6/6 in a Series on 1 John

As we come to the end of our study of 1 John the Apostle ends his letter with a statement of the threefold Christian certainty:

- 1: Christians are set free of the power of sin;
2. Christians are on the side of God against the world;
3. Christians are conscious that they have entered into that reality which is God:

It is because of this threefold certainty that John closes the letter with a final warning. “Little children, keep yourselves from idols.” Do not go off to something else, something that is so uncertain. Do not give your attention, your interest, your time, or your energy, and your money to that which is other than Jesus Christ. Within the culture John was writing to the pantheon of Greek and Roman gods and goddesses was alive and well, just as it is today.

Rather than giving their supreme allegiance to Jesus Christ many gave their lives to gods like Narcissus. He is the god who fell in love with himself. Is this not perhaps the supreme god of humankind, the worship of self, the worship of the human the exaltation of human? We have the worship of Bacchus, the god of pleasure, the god of wine, women and song. There is the worship of Venus, the goddess of love and sexual pleasure; Apollo, the god of physical beauty; and Minerva, the goddess of science. Rather than giving ourselves to these idols we are to give ourselves to Jesus Christ and the threefold certainty we know because we know him.

What is most striking about the close of First John is the threefold occurrence of the phrase “we know” in verses 18, 19, and 20. There is a quiet ring of assurance about it; especially when you discover that the apostle uses a word in the original Greek which refers not to knowledge gained by experience, but to an inward learning process. It is the hidden wisdom from God which is not available to the world in general but which is imparted to those who are taught by the Spirit of God.

Let's take some time now to look at these three certainties more closely:

1: Christians are set free of the power of sin: “We know that those who are born of God do not sin, but the One who was born of God protects them, and the evil one does not touch them.” Christians have the certainty of righteousness. St. John is saying that if you are a Christian, you will come to a place where you cannot continue in sin. He is not talking about sinlessness. What he means is, “We know that any one born of God cannot continue on in sin.” He simply cannot. That means that if there is a Christian profession there must be an accompanying change in the life. There is a basic change in the attitude toward wrongdoing. If that change is not there, then the person is only deceiving himself, herself and others about being a Christian. That is what John is declaring. There may be occasional failure in practice, as there is in each of our lives from time to time, but there cannot be a continual, habitual practicing of sin. There must be a deep desire within to be changed which keeps this individual always pushing out against the inhibiting forces and habits of sin. This desire is the proof of the new birth.

The reason a Christian cannot go on living in sin, doing what he or she knows to be wrong, is because “the One who was born of God protects them” The Lord Jesus Christ dwells in the life of the believer and it is because of this that they cannot go on in sin. When we are true Christians the love Christ has an unbreakable hold on our lives. We may struggle, we may temporarily fall, we may resist the changes that the Spirit of God is attempting to make, but we cannot continually do so. The One who is dwelling in us will bring us into circumstances and pressures that will make us realize what we are doing, and the mess we are making, and make us hunger to go on and be free.

The result is, as John says, the evil one can never repossess us or as John says “and the evil one does not touch them.” The evil one, of course, is the devil. John says that the stronger One has now come and the bonds of the strong man have been broken and he can never repossess the Christian. That is an encouraging word. The enemy can frighten us, as he often does. He can harass us, he can threaten us, he can make us believe that we are in his power and that we have to do certain things that are wrong. He can create desires and passions within us that are so strong that we think we must yield to them. But that is a lie, because he is a liar. We do not have to yield to them. He can lure us, he can deceive us, he can even temporarily derail us, and make us fall, but the great declaration of this Scripture is, the devil can never make you sin.

It is in light of this verse that we are able to understand what John has just finished saying in verses 16-17 “If you see your brother or sister committing what is not a mortal sin, you will ask, and God will give life to such a one—to those whose sin is not mortal. There is sin that is mortal; I do not say that you should pray about that. 17 All wrongdoing is sin, but there is sin that is not mortal.”

John wants us to understand that when we are aware of an area of sin in our lives we can have a brother or sister pray with us and for us. And God will give life to such a one. In other words God will give us the power to overcome that sin. When John refers to mortal sin in these verses he is describing someone who is living in a state of perpetual sin and has no desire to change. In such a person our prayers will have little or no effect because they are not open to admitting their sin and have no desire to overcome it with the help of Jesus Christ. But when we know what we are doing is wrong and when we ask for the prayers of others we can grow in the certainty of knowing that Christ sets us free from the power of sin.

2. Christians are on the side of God against the world: We know that we are God’s children, and that the whole world lies under the power of the evil one. There is the certainty of relationship that any Christian can declare. “We know,” John says, “that we are of God;” For the Christian a fundamental separation has occurred between us and the world system to which we once belonged; that we now are “of God,” we are walking in his direction, we are going on with him. The world, on the other hand, “lies in the power of the evil one.” The whole world is going a different direction.

You can see how this touches at every point our relation to the busy, complex world in which we live. We live in this world. We were born in it, we grew up in it. But for those who are Christians, we no longer can be like it. A fundamental separation has occurred. We are no longer in the same relationship. We now see that the world lies in the power of the evil one.

It is because of verses like this one and what we have studied in verse 18 that the news of what happened in the Diocese of New Westminster last week is so troubling. As you perhaps heard Bishop Ingham, the Anglican Bishop in Vancouver, authorized the blessing of same sex unions and the first such ceremony was conducted in a church within the diocese on Thursday. But such an action runs counter to this certainty we are considering now. The world is so supportive of homosexual unions, telling us that they are equally acceptable to heterosexual relationships. But the Bible says they are

not. And for the church to bless such unions is to blur the lines between belonging to God and belonging to the world. We need to acknowledge in light of John's teaching that to be a practising homosexual, with no desire to change, and a practising Christian is a contradiction in terms. If we take John's teaching seriously we have to say that to go on living an active homosexual lifestyle is in John's language a mortal sin. John has made it clear that those who belong to Christ Jesus do not go on living in a state of active sin. We compromise John's message here if we accept as normal what the Bible says is a sinful form of sexual expression and lifestyle contrary to God's will for us. We allow the world, which is under the control of the evil one, shape our theology rather than God's revealed word when we bless that which the church should not bless.

Let's move on to the third certainty we have as Christians:

3. Christians are conscious that they have entered into that reality which is God:

“And we know 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, in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life.” Notice how many times the word, true occurs in this verse: “to know him who is true; and we are in him who is true... He is the true God and eternal life.” Here is reality. Here is the great rock upon which everything rests. Our faith does not rest upon human guesses; not on clever ideas, or on untested theories. It rests solidly upon the great events of God's actions in history. It rests on facts.

There is an historical process here. “The Son of God came,” John says in chapter one, we saw him, we felt him, we lived with him. We can testify in every possible way that the Son of God came in time. Further, the practical result of that is, he gave us a new understanding. We began to see life as it really is. He stripped it of its veils, took away its illusions, dispelled the mists and vagueness which cause people to grope through life like blind men and women. He clarified life, he gave us an understanding, he told us what was true. The glorious privilege that follows is, “we are in him who is true.” We not only know him, we live in him. We are part of his life. We share his thinking, we have the mind of Christ.

As we:

- 1: grow in sharing in Jesus' thinking we will
- 2: more fully know what it means to be set free from the power of sin and

3: know we are children of God.

Of these 3 things John says we can be certain.

The question is are you certain of these things?

Thanks be to God for a faith that is full of such grace and truth.

Amen.