

"WHAT CHRISTIANS KNOW"

Throughout our study of this letter, we have seen plenty of evidence that indicates that John was writing in order to address a crisis that had occurred in these churches. Teachers had arisen who were advocating a form of religion that was contrary to the gospel that was being proclaimed by John and the other apostles. John's words in chapter 2 indicate that the group led by these teachers had finally left the church to form their own sect. Nevertheless, the damage had already been done. The teachings of this group had sown seeds of uncertainty among the remaining church members about the nature of genuine Christian belief. These Christians had had their faith shaken. How could they be sure that they were of the truth? And even if they were of the truth, what about those who had listened to the false teachers and followed after them? Was all hope lost for them?

These were the issues that were at stake when John set out to write this letter. He wanted to establish these Christians in the assurance of their salvation. We can see John's emphasis upon the theme of Christian assurance in this closing section by his repeated use of the verb "to know," which occurs seven times in these nine verses. As he concludes this letter, John's closing point is that

*Christians can have assurance in knowing that they really do belong to Christ and that they will be kept from being permanently led astray by falsehood.*

Listen again to the opening verse of our passage. John says, "I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life." There are two inferences that can be drawn from this statement. First of all, it tells us that Christians can have assurance when it comes to our standing with God. We are not doomed to go through life wondering if God really accepts us. We really can know, and know for certain, that we are saved.

At the same time, this verse also tells us that Christians may not always have this certainty about their salvation. John wrote this letter to Christians who lacked assurance. He wrote it so that they might know that they have eternal life. There are a number of things that can cause a Christian to have doubts about his salvation. For the Christians to whom John was writing, it was their run-in with false teaching. For others, it can be a fall into some grievous sin, or the experience of something tragic in their lives, or doubts and questions they may have about the gospel. At such times, the thing to do is not to look inside of ourselves for reassurance, but to direct our eyes to Christ, the founder and

perfecter of our faith, and to trust that he is a sufficient Savior for all who believe in his name.

In verses 14-15, John shows us that Christian assurance results in a confident prayer life. We know that God hears the prayers that his children bring to him. And when the Bible says that God "hears" a person's prayers, it does not simply mean that the sounds of our words have gotten through to God. In that sense, God hears everything. When God is described as "hearing" a person's prayers it means that he grants what that person is asking of him. This is why John uses the present tense in verse 15. He is saying that as soon as we ask God for something, we have what we request. We may not see the answers right away, but God grants them immediately, upon request. Think about that for just a moment. Think about what it means for your prayer life. God grants your requests as soon as you ask them. What an incredible motivation for prayer this should be to us!

Of course, there is one important qualification to this. John is not saying that if I pray for a million dollars I can be certain that I will eventually receive it. He makes this clear by saying that our prayers need to be offered according to God's will. To pray according to God's will means praying in accordance with what the Bible tells us is pleasing to God. There is nothing in the Bible that indicates that

it is God's will for me to receive a million dollars. And for this reason, I should not make such a request of God.

Now it is true that there is much about the will of God that remains hidden to us. But this should not cause us to be hesitant in bringing our requests to the Lord. For example, I do not know if it is God's will for a specific non-Christian I know to become a Christian. I do not know if this person is one of the elect. However, I do know that God wants his gospel to be proclaimed to all people, and I know that he has appointed some people to salvation. The particular non-Christian I want to pray for may or may not be one of the elect. I have no way of knowing. But because it is a possibility, it is entirely appropriate for me to pray for his salvation.

The concept of praying according to God's will helps us to understand the nature of prayer. We tend to think of prayer as a means by which we ask the Lord to give us what we want him to give us. And there is a sense in which this is true. However, when we think about what it means to pray according to God's will, we begin to realize that prayer is more accurately seen as God's appointed means of giving us what he wants to give us. As John Stott puts it: "Prayer is not a convenient device for imposing our will upon God, or bending his will to ours, but the prescribed way of subordinating our will to his." [188] In other

words, prayer is God's appointed way for us to seek his will and to align ourselves with it. For this reason, our prayers always need to be offered with the attitude that Jesus expressed when he added these words to the prayer that he offered in Gethsemane: "not my will, but yours, be done." [Lk. 22:42]

John's teaching on prayer continues into the next paragraph, verses 16-17, where he addresses the subject of praying for our fellow Christians when we see them going astray. These verses present us with an interpretive difficulty: what does John mean when he speaks of "sin that leads to death"? One thing we can be fairly certain about is that this is a reference to spiritual death, not physical death. This makes the best sense when we take into consideration the fact that in this letter John has consistently used the term "life" to describe spiritual and eternal life. Because of this, it stands to reason that the death that John is talking about here is spiritual in nature. Thus, "sin that leads to death" is sin that places a person on an irreversible route to eternal damnation. It is sin from which there is no hope of recovery.

Now before I explain what I think this sin is, I want to pause a moment and ask you to think about what I have just said. The very fact that such sin exists, sin from which a person cannot be delivered, should be very sobering to us. People have a tendency to think lightly of sin. It is easy for a person to think that

he can worry about repenting at some point in the future. We think that this is something over which we have control. But God's Word tells us that this is not the case. The Bible says that there comes a point when it is too late. We may not know when that point is, but God surely knows. Sin is not to be trifled with. It is a deathtrap.

What, then, is this "sin that leads to death"? Well, as you may know, Jesus also spoke of a sin that could not be forgiven. In Matthew 12:31 he said to the Pharisees, "every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven people, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven." According to Jesus, then, there is only one unforgivable sin, the sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Therefore, while John is addressing a different situation than the one that Jesus was dealing with when he spoke these words, the sin that leads to death and the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit are essentially the same thing. It is the sin that is committed when a person persistently rejects or ignores the Spirit's testimony to Christ in the gospel. When this sin is committed by a person who was previously part of the Christian community, it is sometimes referred to as apostasy.

There is a distinction, however, between apostasy and backsliding. And this distinction is at the heart of what John is talking about when he differentiates

between sin that leads to death and sin that does not lead to death. A true apostate is someone who cannot be recovered from his sin. He is the person that the writer of the letter to the Hebrews has in mind when he says that it is impossible for such a person to be restored again to repentance. [see Heb. 6:4] A backslidden Christian, on the other hand, is someone who can be restored, someone who has committed a sin not leading to death. James writes about this when he speaks of a person who wanders from the truth and is brought back by a fellow believer. [see Jas. 5:19-20]

In our passage, John says that we should pray for backsliders, but he will not tell us to pray for apostates. Now, does this mean that John expects us to be able to distinguish between the two? Is he saying that we can know who is merely a backslider and who is an apostate? How are we to understand this? On the one hand, we have to say that we cannot see into people's hearts. We do not have the kind of insight that God has when it comes to a person's spiritual condition. On the other hand, we can see what people do and say. And we can know a great deal about a person by what they exhibit on the outside. There are people who make it clear by their persistent words and actions that they have no interest whatsoever in the gospel. And Jesus said that there comes a point when we need to stop casting the pearl of the gospel before people who are only going to keep

trampling it into the dirt. [see Mt. 7:6] It makes sense, then, there may come a point when it becomes too difficult for us to pray with sincere faith for a person's salvation when they seem to be utterly intractable. This seems to be what John is saying here. When a person gives every indication that he is absolutely determined to keep on rejecting the gospel, John is not willing to command us to pray for that person's salvation.

This is a hard teaching, but it is a bit easier to understand when we keep in mind what John said in the preceding paragraph. Our prayers need to be offered in accordance with God's will. And this means that when we pray for a certain individual's salvation or restoration, we have to be willing to accept the fact that it may not be God's will for that person to be saved. He or she may not be one of the elect. If a straying brother continually rejects all attempts to restore him to the faith, we can certainly keep praying for him for as long as we are able to do so with faith. However, we have to be willing to affirm the righteousness of God's judgment if that person never repents. Our final loyalty must remain with the Lord.

Before we move on to the next part of the passage, I want to remind us of John's main point in verses 16-17. Some of the things that John says here are difficult for us to understand, but one thing is clear: we should be praying for

the erring members of Christ's church. When we see our fellow Christians falling into sin or being led astray or neglecting their duties as believers, we need to be interceding for them. We owe this to them. Listen to Dietrich Bonhoeffer on this - he writes:

“Intercession means no more than to bring our brother into the presence of God, to see him under the Cross of Jesus as a poor human being and sinner in need of grace...[It] is also a daily service we owe to God and our brother.” [*Life Together*, 86-87]

This is not a matter of being judgmental. It is simply a matter of caring for the body of Christ. Our lives are intertwined with those of our fellow believers. Here again is Bonhoeffer: “We *are* members of a body, not only when we choose to be, but in our whole existence. Every member serves the whole body, either to its health or to its destruction.” [89] When a brother or sister in Christ falls, it affects the whole body. This is why it is so important for us to be praying for them.

While John admits that genuine believers do sometimes stray, he also assures us that we are protected from being given over entirely to sin. This is the thrust

of verses 18-19. Repeating what he said back in chapter 3, John reminds us that those who have been born of God do not go on living a life that is characterized by sin. We do "not keep on sinning." To be sure, Christians still commit sin, and we will keep on doing so for as long as we live in this present age, but sin is not our identifying mark. Our lives are characterized by the practice of righteousness, not by the practice of sin

Take note, however, that John does not set this forth as a commandment but as a promise. He tells us that Jesus is the one who protects us from the evil one. The whole world lies in the power of the evil one, but we are kept safe. We belong to the Lord. He will keep us from spiritual harm.

This is very comforting, but it should not cause us to take sin any less seriously. As the Scottish theologian John Duncan once warned, "Don't make faith a cloak for sin. Be sure of coming to Christ: Be sure of abiding in Christ: Be sure of bringing forth fruit to Christ." [Stuart, *Life of John Duncan*, 223-4] Never forget that sin is your mortal enemy. By all means, be confident in God's promise to keep you from the evil one. But never allow your confidence to cause you to be casual towards sin.

The final verse of our passage might seem a bit out of place to you. John writes, "Little children, keep yourselves from idols." Nothing has been said

about idolatry up to this point in the letter, and it is not immediately apparent how this warning fits in with what John has been saying in this passage. But this is resolved when we remember that idolatry is at its root any attempt on our part to put something else in God's place. Anything that is set up as an alternative to the one true God as he has revealed himself in Jesus Christ is an idol. And idolatry is not just a matter of heresy and false religion. As Calvin reminds us, idolatry is simply worshipping "the gifts in place of the Giver himself." [*Institutes*, 4.17.36] Anything can be made into an idol. And for this reason, we always have to be on guard against idolatry.

It is significant that John chose to end this letter about Christian assurance with a note of warning. This tells us that the Bible's teaching on assurance does not encourage us to sit back and relax and coast through the Christian life. On the contrary, we always have to remain vigilant. For as Pastor William Still warns in one of the letters he wrote to his congregation during his fifty years as their pastor, there is the real danger that some who have professed faith in Christ will be found on the day of judgment to have "nothing to show for years of Christian profession but a gradually waning interest in the things of God." [*Letters*, 153] And he goes on to say,

“Think of it again – a decreasing interest, not only in the things of God, but in God Himself as you are carried inexorably on towards the great white throne of his judgment seat. It is a terrible thought, enough to stop you in your tracks, and to cause you to make a complete reappraisal of your life. Whatever the cost in rearrangement, including bravely coming to terms with loved ones, friends, not to say pursuits, pleasures and indulgences, you must turn to the Lord and give yourself afresh to Him.” [*Letters*, 153]

It is a serious thing to exchange the truth of God for man-made idols. Think of all of the things that John has told us that we know as Christians. We know that we have eternal life. We know that God hears and grants our prayers when they are offered in accordance with his will. We know that we have been set free from sin. We know that we are protected from the power of the evil one. We know that we have come to know the one true God. If we know all of these things, “How shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?” [Heb. 2:3]