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1 John 5:13-21

Thirteenth Message

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WALKING IN CONFIDENCE

SERIES: LIVING CONFIDENTLY IN THE LIGHT

As we come to the end of our study in 1 John I am reminded of a scene in C. S. Lewis' book, *Prince Caspian*, the second in his "Chronicles of Narnia" books. Lucy finally sees the lion, Aslan, again. Aslan, who symbolizes Christ, greets Lucy with these warm words,

"Welcome, child."

"Aslan," said Lucy, "you're bigger."

"That is because you are older, little one," answered he.

"Not because you are?"

"I am not. But every year you grow, you will find me bigger."

It is my prayer that as we conclude our studies in this epistle your view of God has become larger, that you are sensing to a greater degree the assurance of his love and the power of his strength in your daily life.

Unfortunately that isn't always true in all of Christendom. As I read these words I am also reminded of a leading evangelical voice today whose words are sadly true:

We do not have a strong church today nor do we have many strong Christians. We can trace the cause to an acute lack of sound spiritual knowledge. Why is the church weak? Why are individual Christians? It's because they have allowed their minds to become conformed to the "spirit of this age," with its mechanistic, godless thinking. They have forgotten what God is like and what He promises to do for those who trust Him.

Ask an average Christian to talk about God. After getting past the expected answers you will find that his god is a little god of vacillating sentiments. He is a God who would like to save the world but who cannot. He would like to restrain evil, but somehow he finds it beyond his power. So he has withdrawn into semi-retirement, being willing to give good advice in a grandfatherly sort of way, but for the most part he has left his children to fend for themselves in a dangerous environment.

Such a god is not the God of the Bible...the God of the Bible is not weak; He is strong. He is all-mighty. Nothing happens without his permission or apart from His purposes—even evil. Nothing disturbs or puzzles Him. His purposes are always accomplished. Therefore those who know Him rightly act with boldness, assured that God is with them to accomplish His own desirable purposes in their lives.

It is that kind of confidence that we have seen throughout these five chapters in 1 John, and it is this note of positive assurance that rings throughout these last verses. The phrase, "we know," is repeated again and again—six times to be exact. In verse 13 we find not only the purpose of this letter but the climactic assertion to which all of the preceding chapters have been moving: "These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, in order that you may know that you have eternal life."

"These things" refers to the whole letter, not just the preceding verses. In his gospel, John tells us his purpose was "that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you

may have life in His name." Now he has written "in order that you may know you have eternal life." It is the joy of assurance.

It is because eternal life is knowing God that we can have this absolute assurance.

Eternal life is a personal, experiential knowledge of God, leading to a lifetime of fellowship with him. It cannot be counterfeited. It cannot be found anywhere else apart from the person of Jesus Christ.

John Stott summarizes the purpose of both John's gospel and epistle in four stages: "that his readers may hear, and hearing may believe, and believing may live, and living may know. Hearing, believing, living, knowing."

The assurance of eternal life is not presumption. Presumptuousness is doubting God's word, not in trusting it. John concludes his letter summarizing what we do know.

Having stated his grand purpose of our assurance, the apostle concludes his letter sharing four certainties, four God-given affirmations which can count on. They summarize the truths that we have learned throughout the book.

We find the first assurance set out in verses 14-17 of the final chapter.

I. We Have a New Assurance in Prayer

And this is the confidence which we have before Him, that, if we ask anything according to his will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests which we have asked from Him. If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death, he shall ask and God will for him give life to those who commit sin not leading to death. There is a sin leading to death; I do not say that he should make request for this. All unrighteousness is sin, and there is a sin not leading to death. (1 John 5:14-17 NASB)

The first characteristic of our knowing God, that relationship which is eternal life, is confidence in our approach to the Father. This will naturally be expressed in prayer, where the believer's prayer is marked by this boldness or freedom of speech. Our conversation with God is to be uninhibited, open, relaxed, and yet tempered with reverence and submission. Our prayer will reflect the fact that we are children of a loving heavenly Father, not a cold, distant being.

The writer to the Hebrews expresses this same thought in chapter 4 when he says: "for we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Heb 4:15-16).

John has already taught us in chapter 3 that we can pray confidently because God in his sovereignty knows us and forgives us.

But there is a limitation to our prayers in verse 14: They are to be “according to His will.” With that condition, we may ask anything. The only reluctance or unwillingness in God is the reluctance to give a dearly loved child something that he in his wisdom knows would not be in the child’s best interest.

Prayer is not an attempt to get God to see things our way and to get from him what we think we need or want. Prayer is submitting our will to his. As Henri Nouwen expressed it:

Prayer is a radical conversion of all our mental processes because in prayer we move away from ourselves, our worries, preoccupation, and self-gratification—and direct all that we recognize as ours to God in the simple trust that through His love all will be made new.

Prayer is for us! It is the means God uses to develop Christ’s Lordship in our lives. That is why it so important for us to pray. The less we pray the more self-willed we become. The essence of assured prayer is the model of the Lord Jesus, “Not my will but thine be done.” One man has paraphrased that part of the Lord’s prayer in this way, “Your will be done in me, your bit of earth, as it is in Christ, who is my heaven!”

That ought to be a great motivation for us to find out God’s will, to build on the commands and promises in his word in our prayers; to talk over every situation with him, and submit all of our thinking, planning, and decision making to him.

A further confidence is given in verse 15, in that we know with God, to hear is to answer. That is the implication of the present tense, “we have the requests which we asked.” There is no period of delay with God. Though from our perspective the answer may not be seen for some time, our requests are granted at once, says John.

There is an excellent illustration of this in the book of Daniel. At the beginning of chapter 10, Daniel receives a revelation from God concerning a great war. Daniel then begins a period of fasting and mourning to give himself to prayer. Three weeks later, an angel appears to him in a vision and says, “Do not be afraid, Daniel. Since the first day you set your mind to gain understanding and to humble yourself before your God, your words were heard, and I have come in response to them. But the prince of the Persian kingdom [Satan] resisted me twenty-one days” (Dan 10:12-13).

The answer to Daniel’s prayer was immediate, but the experience of it was not. The reason given was the cosmic spiritual warfare that was being waged, in which Daniel was involved through his praying. When we take up the weapon of prayer we are engaging in a battle, as the apostle Paul declares, “not with flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Eph 6:12). That is one reason why prayer may appear to be delayed. But is also a great encouragement to continue to pray, knowing that our prayers can play a part in the spiritual battle. Because there is an invisible battle taking place we are encouraged to pray for one another, especially when we see our brother or sister in spiritual need, which is the exhortation in verses 16-17.

Now we must address these verses, which have been debated throughout the centuries, and which are without doubt the most difficult verses to interpret in this book. There are several issues that are related, but the central one is what John means by “a sin that does not lead to death,” and “a sin that leads to death.” In the former case, Christians are urged to pray for a brother whom they see sinning; in the latter, they are not. What is the distinction between the two?

We do not have time to debate the merits of various interpretations this morning, but I will cover in brief form how various people have interpreted these verses. One view is to see this as some specific sin which is so terrible that it is unforgivable. This is the interpretation from which the Roman Catholic Church derives its two categories of sin: venial sins (which are can be pardoned), and mortal sins (sins that lead to death). There is no warrant in this text or in any other to support such an interpretation.

Others have identified this with the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit, linking this with the words of Jesus when he warned that such blasphemy can never be forgiven (Matt 12:31-32). Who knows how many sensitive Christians have suffered deeply, imagining that some sin of theirs is the unforgivable sin? Let me say if that is your concern this morning, the very fact that you feel dread is a sure indication that you are not guilty of this sin.

Others have suggested that the only way that sin could lead to death is by its consequences in a literal, physical sense. Scripture does teach that sin at times can lead to death. This was true of Ananias and Sapphira, in Acts 5. If that is true, then John is discouraging prayer because it would mean praying for the dead. While this is possible, the context tells us that the contrast is with “spiritual life,” so that spiritual, rather than physical, death is the most natural reading of the text.

Although these suggestion have some biblical warrant, are they what John is concerned about? If his major emphasis in this letter is that only those who believe that Jesus is the Son of God have eternal life, then the sin that leads to death, the sin that excludes us from the life of God, must be the denial of that truth. That sin leads to death because it rejects the only means by which sin can be forgiven: the atoning death of the incarnate Son of God. As one scholar puts it, “It is not that this sin is unpardonable, but that it remains unpardoned.”

Another commentator writes:

It is possible to close the heart against the influences of God’s Spirit so obstinately and persistently that repentance becomes a moral impossibility. Just as the body may starve itself to such an extent as to make digestion, or even reception of food, impossible; so the soul may go on refusing offers of grace until the very power to receive grace perishes.

But let us not allow this difficult exception blind us to John’s exhortation. There is nothing here about a Christian believer committing the sin that leads to death; only an admission that such a sin exists. The exhortation is that when we see a brother or sister becoming enmeshed in some sin, it is our privilege and responsibility to pray with confidence that he or she will be given life, i.e. be restored to that full fellowship with God and the body which sin spoils. James reminds us to confess our sins to one another and pray for one another “that you may be healed.” Perhaps the most important stimulus to bring a straying brother and sister to repentance is our prayers.

So we have a new assurance in prayer.

Secondly, says John (verse 18),

II. We Have a New Attitude Toward Sin

We know that no one who is born of God sins; but He who was born of God keeps him and the evil one does not touch him. (5:18)

Christians do not continue in a lifestyle of sin. We have traveled over this ground already. It should be foundational truth. It is a statement that is true of every believer, everyone “who has been born of God.” We know better by now than to think that this verse teaches that Christians cannot sin, and that if we do we haven’t been born of God.

As we have already seen, the verb “to sin” is in the present tense: “no one continues to sin.” In fact, John began his letter by reminding us that if we say we have not sinned, we make God a liar. There is no special level of spirituality or holiness that is available to a special few. John is speaking about a lifestyle. No Christian continues to sin as he did before he came to Christ. The reason is that “the one who was born of God keeps him safe.”

It is Christ himself who keeps God’s children safe so that Satan cannot touch them. That word “touch” is a weak translation. It means “to fasten oneself,” and as such, to harm someone. He may—and will—attack God’s children, but he cannot gain a foothold; he cannot succeed in getting them back into his grip. Jesus himself guaranteed this as he promised his disciples: “I give [my sheep] eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father’s hand. I and the Father are one” (John 10:28-30).

Let this truth encourage us this morning. As we struggle against sin in our lives we can do so with confidence rather than despair. Our Protector is stronger than our enemy, more alert and more concerned than we can ever be. “Greater is He that is in you than he that is in the world.”

We have a new attitude toward sin.

Thirdly, John reminds us (verse 19),

III. We Have a New Relationship to the World

We know that we are of God, and the whole world lies in the power of the evil one. (5:19)

Here is a third great truth that Christians know and affirm: We know that we belong to God and not to this world. We know this is true by the evidence of change in our lives. We have been born from above. We no longer have a resistant will, but rather desire to obey God. We love one another.

It is an issue of Lordship. The world “lies in the power of the evil one.” It is dominated by the devil who fiercely controls it and organizes its activities to express his own hatred toward God and his children. You only need read today’s newspaper to know that is true. Take your pick of continents: Look at Asia, Africa, Europe, Australia. And yet, by contrast, God controls his children with his light and his love.

But along with that we need to remember that Scripture teaches that the devil is a created being, subject to God’s authority. He is not allowed to act apart from God’s permission. His ultimate doom is assured. And so the freedom that the devil offers apart from God is an illusion. It is slavery.

All of our compulsive behavior, whether it is alcohol, drugs, pornography, immorality or gambling, are merely attempts to escape from this world and find some sense of personal satisfaction.

But apart from God that raging thirst will never be satisfied. It is like drinking salt water: The more you drink the more you want; the more you want the less you are satisfied. That is the devil’s plan.

And what is true on an individual level is also true on an international level, whether militarily or politically. The tyranny of sin is selfishness. Thoughtful and concerned people articulate the problems but the world does not have the power to solve them. The world lies in the grip of the evil one. We know that this is so and we know why.

Because this is true it is essential that we as the church not try to preserve our distinctives in a sealed environment, detached from the world and its problems. We need to remember that our Lord commissioned us to go into the world, not to withdraw from it. We are to be in the world, though we are not of it. Our attitude is not one of indifference or separation, but of involvement and compassion, as we model our Savior before a dying world. We are to be salt and light.

One man has written,

I simply argue that the cross be raised again
at the center of the marketplace
as well as on the steeple of the church,

I am recovering the claim that
Jesus was not crucified in a cathedral
between two candles:

But on a cross between two thieves
on a town garbage heap;

At a crossroad of politics so cosmopolitan
that they had to write his title
in Hebrew and Latin and Greek...

And at the kind of place where cynics talk smut,
and thieves curse and soldiers gamble.

Because that is where He died,
and that is what he died about.

And that is where Christ’s men ought to be,
and that is what church people ought to be about.

In the words of Jude, “Keep yourselves in God’s love as you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you to eternal life. Be merciful to those who doubt; snatch others from the fire and save them” (Jude 21-23).

And finally, says the apostle (verses 20-21),

IV. We Have a New Understanding of God

And we know that the Son of God has come, and has given us understanding, in order that we might know Him who is true, and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life. Little children, guard yourselves from idols. (5:20-21)

This last conviction is the foundation of the three preceding it. “We know that the Son of God has come...in order that we might know Him...and we are in Him.”

Our faith is grounded in what God has done in history, in Christ. We know that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh (4:2), and that he came by “water and blood” (5:6). His coming “has given us understanding,” i.e. the power or capacity of knowing, of seeing. John says, “We saw him, we felt him, we lived with him. We can testify that he has given us understanding. We began to see life as it really is.

He stripped it of its illusions.” He has enabled us to know him who is true, or better, “real.” He is the ultimate reality.

Not only do we know him, but we are “in Him.” Unlike the world, which is under the control of the evil one, we are in God, sharing his very life. We are in God as he is in us. In Christ we are as close as we possibly could be. God shares with us his own indestructible life, the life of the age to come.

What tremendous privileges! This is the fellowship with the Father and the Son that John introduced us to earlier as the essence of eternal life. We have come full circle. How tremendous are these great, unshakable, foundational truths on which our faith rests! They have been shared with the explicit purpose that we might know that these things are objectively true and real in our own life. We do know that these things are true and nothing need shake that assurance. For at its heart lies the unmovable truth that, by God’s grace, we know him and are in him.

No wonder John closes with the admonition, “Little children, guard yourselves from idols.” Here is our responsibility. An idol is anything that occupies the place due to God. It is an imitation or substitute, not reality. It may be made of wood, or stone, or metal, it may be carved and shaped by a craftsman, but it is unlikely that John was thinking of such objects. His concern was with the false ideas and heretical concepts about God to which the church was being subjected.

That warning is just as appropriate today. Our twentieth century idols are no less crude than those of the first century. Though the names have been changed, the idols are exactly the same.

There is the worship of Narcissus, the god who fell in love with himself. That may be the supreme god our age. We think we are so clever we can do anything. Even in evangelical circles we find many who think they know God so well that they can predict his responses and even condition them. Consequently, what they end up worshipping is not the true God but an idol of their own making, a thinly veiled excuse for worshipping themselves.

We have the worship of Bacchus, the god of pleasure. Every week in my office I do battle with those who tell me that God wants them to be happy and fulfilled. They can’t be happy with their present circumstances, they tell me.

We have the worship of Venus, the goddess of love; of Apollo, the god of physical beauty; of Minerva, the goddess of science. They are all here.

“Little children, guard yourself from idols.” Do not give your attention, time or energy to anything that squeezes God out of that central position in your life. Anything that does so must be ruthlessly destroyed. Any notion of God which contradicts his perfect revelation in Jesus Christ must be rejected.

I want to close this morning with one of my favorite stories out of the book, *The Velveteen Rabbit*. The main character is a shiny new stuffed rabbit who is in the process of becoming real. He wants to be more than just a toy sitting on a shelf. As he struggles with his initial feelings of uneasiness he meets an old, worn-out stuffed horse. In a way, the horse reminds me of the apostle John. John is a wise, loving man who understands what it means to be real and he shares with all of us young rabbits who long to live significant lives what it means to be real.

The Skin Horse had lived longer in the nursery than any of the others. He was so old that his brown coat was bald in patches and showed the seams underneath, and most of the hairs in his tail had been pulled out to string bead necklaces. He was wise, for he had seen a long succession of mechanical toys arrive to boast and swagger, and by-and-by break their mainsprings and pass away, and he knew that they were only toys, and would never turn into anything else. For nursery magic is very strange and wonderful, and only those playthings that are old and wise and experienced like the Skin Horse understand all about it.

“What is REAL?” asked the Rabbit one day, when they were lying side by side near the nursery fender, before Nana came to tidy the room. “Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?”

“Real isn’t how you are made,” said the Skin Horse. “It’s a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real.”

“Does it hurt?” asked the Rabbit.

“Sometimes,” said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. “When you are Real you don’t mind being hurt.”

“Does it happen all at once?” said the Skin Horse. “You become. It takes a long time. That’s why it doesn’t often happen to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don’t matter at all, because once you are Real you can’t be ugly, except to people who don’t understand.”

“Little Children, guard yourselves from idols!”

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