

EPISTLE OF 1 JOHN
KEEP YOURSELVES FROM IDOLS
1 JOHN 5:18-21

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Introduction

When I was in high school, I was taught by the same geometry teacher who had taught my mother. (Her name was Mrs. Tracy.) She was very much older than dirt and retired after she taught our class. You can come to whatever conclusions you want to about that. Even though it was more about her age, we took pride back in those days of being the class that retired her!

Although I wasn't keen on Mrs. Tracy as a person (because she never smiled and had a sour disposition), I did enjoy studying geometry because I have somewhat of a logical mind to a fault. It fascinated me how you could prove theorems based on certain axioms. If those axioms were true, the rest followed in logical, step-by-step fashion. **You could conclude something with certainty based on the truth of the axioms.**

Throughout this epistle, we have seen how the Apostle John has been dealing with the things that we as Believers can **KNOW for certain.**

He began the letter with the **certainty** of his and the other Apostles firsthand, eyewitness testimony of Jesus Christ (**1:1-4**).

(They were there with Jesus and are in agreement regarding the Person and Work of the Lord Jesus Christ!)

In **2:3**, John wrote, "*And hereby we do **know** that we know him, if we keep his commandments.*

(i.e. The gist of what he had to say in **2:3-5** is that those that are in Him **WANT** to walk in obedience and as we walk in obedience to the Lord's commands, it gives us **certainty** or **assurance** in our hearts that we know Him! The more we walk in obedience to the LORD, the more **assurance** we have that we are in Him!)

In **2:21**, John wrote, I have not written unto you because ye know not the truth, but because ye **know** it, and that no lie is of the truth.

In **2:13 and 2:14**, he wrote to the fathers, because they had **known** Him who has been from the beginning.

In **2:14**, he wrote to the children, because they have **known** the Father.

In (**3:14**), he says that "*We **know** that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren.*"

If you haven't done it, you should read the whole epistle again and highlight or underline that word "**know.**"

As he concludes the letter, John drives home this theme of **knowing!** We saw last week how he summed up his purpose! God wanted these Believers (and us!) to **STAND IN CONFIDENCE!**

GOD WANTS US TO BE CONFIDENT IN OUR SALVATION!

*1 John 5:13 These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God; that ye may **know** that ye have eternal life, and that ye may believe on the name of the Son of God.*

GOD WANTS US TO BE CONFIDENT IN OUR PRAYER LIFE!

1 John 5:15 And if we know that he hear us, whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we desired of him.

Now, in this final section, three times again he uses this word, at the beginning of **verses 18, 19, 20**: "***We know... We know... We know...***" John wants us to be certain about these important truths.

Understand that he is still countering the false teachers and their destructive claims of having secret knowledge.

Verses 18, 19, and 20 are in one sense just a review of what has already been said. We can tend to read these verses and think, "**Got it! Got it! Got it!**" We think that we've passed the course, that we've got the material down just fine.

Then John throws a final curveball right by us and we're caught looking! (**5:21**): "*Little children, keep yourselves from idols. Amen.*"

We think, "*Where in the world did that come from?*" After all, he hasn't been saying anything about idolatry that we've seen, has he?

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I mean he hasn't outright mentioned it in the entire book!
So, at first glance, it may seem out of context to us. But as we begin to think about it, **it actually sums up his entire message!**

Idolatry is making up your own god as a substitute for the one true God, who has revealed Himself in Jesus Christ!

The false teachers were doing just that! They were offering up a false god of their own speculation, rather than the one true God of revelation!

So John's final words are a warning against adopting the errors of man-made religion. **We can sum up his message in 5:18-21:**
Because of what we know about our relationship with God, we must guard ourselves from idols. (i.e. Hold to the truth of Who Jesus is as He revealed Himself to the Apostles and in His Word!)

John says that we know three more things:

I. WE KNOW THAT NO ONE WHO IS BORN OF GOD CONTINUALLY LIVES IN SIN! (5:18)

John explained in *verse 17*, that while all unrighteousness is sin, there is a sin not leading to death.

But John did not want his little children to mistakenly think that it's normal for true children of God to live in sin. So he restates the same point that he made in *3:4-10*! Remember what we saw there—that a **true child of God cannot practice sin or live in sin!**

"Sinneth not" here in *verse 18* is speaking of the fact that a child of God cannot **"continually sin."** We've seen how that John has clearly said that believers do sin (*1:8, 10; 2:1; 5:16*), so what he means here is that **no genuine child of God can live in a state of sin!**

In *3:9*, John based his assertion that those born of God could not sin on the fact that **God's seed abides in them. The new birth provides a new nature from God, which cannot sin.**

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Some contend though that while the new nature cannot sin, because believers also still have the old nature, it is possible for born again people to **live** no differently than unbelievers do. (*i.e. Saving faith does not necessarily result in a righteous life.*)

But that is exactly what the Gnostics in John's day claimed. They drew a distinction between the material body and the spirit. If you confronted them with frequenting prostitutes, they would have claimed, *"That was just my body; my spirit is not tainted by that, it is pure!"* John is saying, *"That is nonsense!"*

In *3:7-8a*, *"Little children, let no man deceive you: he that doeth righteousness is righteous, even as he is righteous. 8 He that committeth sin is of the devil..."*

We can normally tell **by looking at what a person practices** in their life whether they are a child of God or not.

So, both in *chapter 3* and in our text, John is saying that **the new birth has an obvious result, namely, a righteous life.**

While true believers do fall into sin, they cannot live in it indefinitely.

The changed nature results in changed behavior. If a pig falls into a mud hole, he wallows in it and doesn't try to get out, because that is its nature.

But if a sheep falls in a mud hole, it wants to get out, get cleaned up, and avoid that hole in the future, because it has a different nature. So it is with a true child of God!

In *5:18*, John gives as the reason that no one born of God practices sin that *"He that is begotten of God keepeth himself, and that wicked one toucheth him not."* We read that and we think, *"but I thought God is the one who keeps us."* He is!

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1 Peter 1:5 – “Who are kept by the power of God through faith...”

John 10:28-29 28 And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand.

29 My Father, which gave them me, is greater than all; and no man is able to pluck them out of my Father's hand.”

But there is an extent to which we are to keep ourselves:

*1 Thessalonians 5:22 **Abstain** from all appearance of evil.*

*2 Timothy 2:22 **Flee** also youthful lusts: but **follow** righteousness, faith, charity, peace, with them that call on the Lord out of a pure heart.*

*James 1:27 Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and **to keep himself unspotted from the world.***

*Jude 1:21 **Keep yourselves** in the love of God, looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life.*

1 John 3:3; 5:21

But here John seems to be focusing on Christ as the one who keeps us from Satan's clutches:

Jesus was born of God and sinneth not!

Jesus was begotten of God and kept Himself!

So let's look to our Savior, who shares in our humanity and yet who kept Himself from all sin.

Hebrews 2:17 Wherefore in all things it behoved him to be made like unto his brethren, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people.

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Hebrews 4:15 For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin.

When John says “...that wicked one toucheth him not,” he does not mean that we are completely isolated from Satan's assaults.

The enemy can tempt us and sift us like wheat (*Luke 22:31*) with God's permission. **But he cannot lay hold of us to make us captives of sin for the rest of our lives. He can't undo our salvation!**

WE KNOW THAT NO ONE WHO IS BORN OF GOD CONTINUALLY LIVES IN SIN! (5:18)

II. WE KNOW THAT WE ARE OF GOD, IN CONTRAST TO THIS WHOLE WORLD THAT LIES IN WICKEDNESS! (5:19)

Throughout the letter, John has drawn a **sharp line between believers and the world! (3:1, 13; 4:4, 5; 5:4-5)**

After we come to know the LORD, **we are partakers of His Divine nature.** When that became a reality in our lives, **we began to see the world through different eyes than we ever had before!**

**We began to see it through the eyes of our new Heavenly Father!
We began to see it through the eyes of our Lord and Saviour!
We began to see it through the eyes of God's Holy Spirit that now dwells within us!**

It becomes increasingly obvious to us as believers as we grow in the LORD of just how wicked that this whole world system is!

We see here how John describes the whole world as lying in wickedness.

Why do we see so many wicked deeds being done in this world?

Because it lies in wickedness!

Why do we see so much pain, and suffering, anguish, viciousness, and general badness in this world? Because it lies in wickedness!

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All the while this world blames God for the conditions caused by sin!
But sin came by Adam, not by God! And with sin came all the
badness and wickedness that we see around us!

However, the world is blinded to that truth and blinded to the remedy!
*2 Corinthians 4:4 In whom the god of this world hath blinded the
minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of
Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them.*

In contrast to the world, believers are “of God.”

*Colossians 1:13-14 Who hath delivered us from the power of
darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son:
14 In whom we have redemption through his blood, even the
forgiveness of sins:*

*Galatians 1:4 Who gave himself for our sins, that he might deliver us
from this present evil world, according to the will of God and our
Father:*

We now belong to and serve a new Master. He gave us new life, so that
in every sense, we are “of God.” So our lives should be **God-centered**
and **God-focused**. *2 Corinthians 10:5 Casting down imaginations,
and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God,
and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ;*

John says that we know this. But in light of many recent surveys,
which show that there is no discernible difference in morals or values
between those claiming to be born again and the population at large, it
is not out of line to ask, **“Do you know this?”**

Is there a fundamental difference between your priorities and goals and
those of your non-Christian neighbors and family?

Are you living for God and His glory and kingdom, or do you just
attend Church services a little more often than the rest of the
population? **Coming to Church doesn’t make you “of God”!**

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Only a repenting of your sin and trusting on the finished work of Christ
on the cross makes you **“of God.”**

**III. WE KNOW THAT THE SON OF GOD HAS COME AND
GIVEN US UNDERSTANDING TO KNOW THE TRUE GOD!**
(5:20)

The conjunction **“And”** at the beginning of **verse 20** is **contrasting the
blind indifference of the world in verse 19 with the new
understanding of the believer!**

*Ephesians 5:8 For ye were sometimes darkness, but now are ye light
in the Lord: walk as children of light:*

Turn to **Titus 3:3-7**

John and his fellow apostles recognized Jesus as the Son of God,
because He had opened their eyes. This points to the historical
foundation of the Christian faith.

Not only did they know **“that the Son of God is come,”** but also, He
“hath given us an understanding, that we may know Him who is true.”

Without this supernatural gift of understanding, we could not know
God. As Paul wrote in: *1 Corinthians 2:14 But the natural man
receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness
unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually
discerned.*

This divine gift of understanding through God’s Holy Spirit brought us
into a personal relationship with the only true God, so that we came to
know Him!

Here John uses a different word for **“know”**, which means, **“to know
experientially.”** There is a great difference between **knowing about**
someone and actually **knowing** the person himself.

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Through the understanding that Christ gives, we come personally to “*know Him that is true.*” The word “*true*” means “*genuine*” or “*authentic.*” He is “*the real deal*”—**the only genuine God**; all others are fakes or impostors.

Then John adds, “*we are in Him who is true, even in His Son Jesus Christ.*” This refers to the abiding relationship that John has spoken of so often. We dwell in God through Jesus Christ. The close mention of Jesus with God also shows the deity of Christ.

John also adds, “*This is the true God and eternal life.*” That phrase calls to mind Jesus’ words in his prayer to His Heavenly Father in *John 17:3* “*And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent.*”

Eternal life is to know personally the only true God through His Son. If you don’t know Him, you do not have eternal life.

Now let’s deal with that “curveball” in the last verse:

IV. LITTLE CHILDREN, KEEP YOURSELVES FROM IDOLS.
(Vs 21)

At first glance, *verse 21* may seem out of context. But in *verse 20*, John has just mentioned the true God.

This undoubtedly brought to his mind the false god of the heretics. They denied the God of the Bible. They said that “*the Christ*” came upon the man Jesus at His baptism and left just prior to His crucifixion.

But they did not believe that Jesus is eternal God in human flesh. In light of their false god, it is natural for John to warn his little children to guard themselves from idols.

Invariably, **idolaters make up their own gods to suit their desires and preferences. They do not submit to the God Who has revealed Himself in Jesus Christ through the Scriptures.**

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Any Church that is worshiping a “Jesus” of their own imagination and liking, rather than the Jesus revealed in the Bible, is involved in idolatry. In the most basic sense, an idol is anything that takes the rightful place of God in your life. Paul even equated covetousness or greed with idolatry! (See Eph. 5:5; Col. 3:5)

A career, pursuit of money, possessions, excessive devotion to leisure and recreation, or even putting a human relationship ahead of one’s relationship with God, may all become idols!

Putting your intellect above God’s revelation is idolatry! Even choosing worldly activities that rob us of our time while we claim not to have time to spend with God or serve Him, is idolatry.

At the root of all of these is the idol of self. The idolater has not yielded the throne of his life to the true God. Rather, he wants his will and his way, and he tries to use God to get what he wants.

If his god delivers, he sets the god back on the shelf until the next time he needs something and then uses it again. If it doesn’t deliver, he’ll shop around for a better god who gets him what he wants.

But the idolater does not submit to the living and true God. I fear that even many who claim to be born again Christians are only trying to use God to get happiness or peace or a better life. If He brings trials, they look for a new god. That is idolatry!

The word “*keep*” means “*guard*” and implies that we have something valuable that the enemy is trying to steal. *Spurgeon points out that if a man has a box and he’s not sure what’s in it, he won’t be very careful about guarding it. But if he knows that it contains a rare and valuable treasure, he will be diligent to guard it carefully.*

John is saying that if you know the true God and His Son Jesus Christ, you have a treasure. Guard it so that you don’t drift into one of the many forms of idolatry.