

1 JOHN—WEEK 6

THAT WE MAY KNOW



F. Michael Slay
A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Cover Picture is by Jan van Eyck (1390–1441)

On display in Ghent at the St. Bavo Cathedral, it looks like a statue, but it's a painting.

John connects the pieces together in his wrap-up. We know the truth because of the Holy Spirit in us, and thus we know we have eternal life. Our behavior reflects this, as we no longer make a practice of sin.

We are given understanding that we may know Him, which is what it's all about.

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T. M. Moore, Principal
tmmoore@ailbe.org

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1 1 John 5:9–12

If we receive the witness of men, the witness of God is greater; for this is the witness of God which He has testified of His Son. He who believes in the Son of God has the witness in himself; he who does not believe God has made Him a liar, because he has not believed the testimony that God has given of His Son. And this is the testimony: that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life.

This continues the point of the previous passage, which cited the witness of the Spirit and the water and the blood. Those three are *the witness of God*.

John's point is to those who received the witness of men (believers). He's saying that the witness of God is even greater; *for this is the witness of God which He has testified of His Son*. "This" is the Spirit and the water and the blood.

In other words, receiving the witness of men is nice and all that, but recognize how much greater the witness of God is. The believer *has the witness in himself* (the aforementioned Spirit).

This is all to set up how extreme the difference between the believer and the non-believer is. Rejection of the testimony makes God to be a liar.

Then John takes his point about the testimony a step further. The testimony isn't just that Jesus is God's Son; it's *that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son*.

John then drops the hammer with this oft quoted verse: *He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life*.

The Daily Dose of Greek lesson on 1 John 5:12 notes that this would be more literally translated as, "*He who has the Son has this life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have this life.*"

Eternal life.

This starkly divides humanity into two distinct groups: those with (eternal) life and those without it. It's a harsh warning.

Except that 1 John isn't written to warn non-believers; it's written to believers. The stark comparison between believers and non-believers is important, but it's the believers that John wants to be informed about this.

So, this isn't to warn them; it's to encourage them. These were tough times for Christians back then.

They could use some encouragement.

2 1 John 5:13–15 (ESV)

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. And this is the confidence that we have toward 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 that we have asked of him.

The purpose construct in verse 13 is the purpose for the whole letter. That’s clearer if verse 13 is translated as, “*I have written these things,*” instead of, “*I write these things.*”

“*Have written*” is more literal. The verb for write in verse 13 (ἔγραψα egg-rah-psa) is in the aorist tense, not the present. Thus, John is referring to the whole letter when he says the purpose is *that you may know that you have eternal life*.

This is very encouraging, even surprising. John wouldn’t be making this point if it didn’t need to be made. Even in the first century, there were Christians who were unsure of their doctrines.

Life in the 21st century is great in many ways. Food, medicine, sanitation, and information are all much better and more widely available than they were back then.

But the first century Christians had one precious advantage—proximity to the resurrection. It was still possible to talk to (or to get a letter from) someone who was an eyewitness. The resurrection was a fact you could verify personally. It’s nice to have the vast volume of references we have now, but it still doesn’t feel the same.

So, it’s interesting that these folks needed John to prop up their assurance of eternal life. They knew He rose sure enough, but they weren’t sure of the eternal life bit.

It was all just too wonderful to comprehend.

This assurance of eternal life leads in an interesting direction—to confidence in answered prayer. But John’s description of how prayers are answered precludes a “dear Santa Claus” attitude about prayer. John notes that this is *if we ask anything according to his will*. No wish list prayers there.

This matches John’s quote of Jesus in chapter 15, verse 7 of his gospel.

If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. (ESV)

What that passage implies with the words “*If you abide in me, and my words abide in you,*” this passage makes explicit with the words, “*if we ask anything according to his will.*”

If anyone sees his brother sinning a sin which does not lead to death, he will ask, and He will give him life for those who commit sin not leading to death. There is sin leading to death. I do not say that he should pray about that. All unrighteousness is sin, and there is sin not leading to death.

This is one of the most frightening and difficult passages in all of scripture. While it directly speaks of someone who commits *a sin which does not lead to death*, it implies that there is a special kind of sin that does lead *to death*. This sin is so severe that John indicates that there's no point in even praying about it.

And he doesn't tell us what that sin is. Yikes. Here are the clues.

- 1) This sin is an act that someone might see (detect, actually. That could mean hear.)
- 2) It's not worth praying about. That means the sinner is a lost cause.
- 3) All unrighteousness is sin, but this one is different; *there is sin not leading to death*.

This is the oft analyzed topic known as “blasphemy of the Holy Spirit.” The other standard references on this are Jesus's description of it in the synoptic gospels (Matthew 12:24–32, Mark 3:28–30 and Luke 12:10) plus two descriptions in Hebrews.

Now when the Pharisees heard it they said, “This fellow does not cast out demons except by Beelzebub, the ruler of the demons.” But Jesus knew their thoughts, and said to them: ... “Therefore I say to you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven men.” — Matthew 12:24–25a, 31

It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age and who have fallen away, to be brought back to repentance. — Hebrews 6:4–6a

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

There are also some telling cases in scripture: Judas Iscariot and Ananias and Sapphira. Contrast them to simple enemies. We are called to pray for our enemies—even Saul could become Paul the apostle—yet Judas repented to no avail. Ananias and Sapphira weren't even given a chance to repent.

It's the cases that can be redeemed that point to the solution. It matters how informed the sinner is.

Sins committed in ignorance are forgivable.

This should spawn compassion for non-believers. They know not what they do.

We know that everyone who has been born of God does not keep on sinning, but he who was born of God protects him, and the evil one does not touch him.

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

We know that whoever is born of God does not sin; but he who has been born of God keeps himself, and the wicked one does not touch him.

We know that we are of God, and the whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one. (NKJV)

I show both the ESV and the NKJV translations here because of the tough translation issues. In the first part of verse 18, the ESV better conveys the durative present tense sense of the Greek word for *keep on sinning* (ἁμαρτάνει “ha-mar-tahn-ei”). The durative sense comes not only from the verb conjugation but also from the context of 1 John 1:10. We know it can’t say that Christians never sin, only that Christians don’t make a practice of it.

But, for the second part of verse 18, the NKJV rendering is preferred, not because of how a word should be translated but because of a recent development in the archeological consensus on which manuscripts are judged to be more reliable. The manuscripts that have the Greek word for “himself” (ἑαυτόν “heh-auton”) are now preferred.

The point of all this is that we are not under the sway of the evil one because we are born of God and thus keep ourselves from practicing sin.

The enemy can’t touch us.

That’s the good news. The bad news is that *the whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one.*

“World” here means the human race. Rocks and trees, birds and fish are not sinful. We’re up against a formidable foe, and he has a formidable army.

But it’s worse than that. The Greek is much shorter and more direct. First off it literally only says, “The whole world lies in the evil one.” There’s no “sway” or “power.” Those words are a translator’s interpretation of the meaning of “lies in.”

And if that’s not bad enough, the Greek word translated as “lies” (κεῖται “kay-tai”) means “lies” or “reclines.” So, the whole world is just relaxing in the arms of Satan.

Oh, goodie.

5 1 John 5:20–21

And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us an understanding, that we may 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, keep yourselves from idols. Amen.

John’s wrap up is simple and beautiful. Understanding is a priceless gift.

And in a final purpose construction, John tells us that the understanding is for the purpose *that we may know him who is true*.

Note this well. The ultimate goal is knowing Him. Yes, eternal life is part of the package. He *is the true God and eternal life*.

It’s understandable if we think that our own eternal life is the ultimate goal—only a fool would think it unimportant—but the secret of life is actually knowing Him.

Seek knowing Him and you’ll get eternal life in the balance.

John’s last sentence seems to be out of the blue.

Little children, keep yourselves from idols.

The word “idol” appears nowhere else in the entire letter. John hasn’t said anything about idols or idolatry. They haven’t been a topic.

Yet right at the end John blurts out this blunt warning. It’s too brief for him to be making a point; it must be a parting term of endearment—like when I say, “Drive safe,” to the kids when they’re headed out.

That means it’s recognition of an ever-present danger. My advice to drive safe is real, though trite. The advice goes without saying, so saying it is just a salutation.

The takeaway from John’s use of this standard good-bye line is to realize that his readers already had a healthy respect for the danger of idolatry. We don’t have that nowadays. If I said to my kids, “Keep yourselves from idols,” instead of, “Drive safe,” they’d giggle.

We need to be more sensitive to this issue. We’re surrounded by things that John’s readers would be shocked by. Imagine their reaction to a bobble-head doll.

Idolatry is too long a subject for a devotional. It’s not the things that matter; it’s what we do with them.

Do not ignore this subject.

Questions for reflection or discussion

Note: some of these questions may seem to have obvious answers. That's by design. Those answers should be a good springboard for discussion.

1. How can we encourage someone who's struggling with doubt?
2. How can we ask according to His will?
3. Have you ever seen something that might be the unforgiveable sin?
4. Does the world look like it's under the sway of Satan?
5. What in today's society is idolatry?

Items for prayer: