

THE BOOK OF 1 JOHN

Lesson Eight

The True Faith Confirmed and Affirmed

“Who is he that overcomes the world, but he that believes that Jesus is the Son of God? This is he that came by water and blood, even Jesus Christ; not by water only, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit that bears witness, because the Spirit is truth. For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one. And there are three that bear witness in earth, the Spirit, and the water, and the blood: and these three agree in one. If we receive the witness of men, the witness of God is greater: for this is the witness of God which he hath testified of his Son. He that believes on the Son of God has the witness in himself: he that believes not God has made him a liar; because he believes not the record that God gave of his Son. And this is the record, that God has given to us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He that has the Son has life; and he that has not the Son of God has not life. These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God; that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you may believe on the name of the Son of God. And this is the confidence that we have in him, that, if we ask any thing according to his will, he hears us: And if we know that he hear us, whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we desired of him. If any man see his brother sin a sin which is not unto death, he shall ask, and he shall give him life for them that sin not unto death. There is a sin unto death: I do not say that he shall pray for it. All unrighteousness is sin: and there is a sin not unto death. We know that whosoever is born of God sins not; but he that is begotten of God keeps himself, and that wicked one touches him not. And we know that we are of God, and the whole world lies in wickedness. And we know that the Son of God is come, and has given us an understanding, that we may know him that is true, and we are in him that is true, even in his Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God, and eternal life. Little children, keep yourselves from idols. Amen.” 1 John 5:5-21

The Three Confirming Witnesses - v. 5-12

John begins this section by asking a question. Who can overcome the world? He answers it in saying “Only the person who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.” To this another question naturally arises: How does a person come to faith in Jesus as the Son of God? John answers the question by showing that faith is dependent upon having been exposed to the right kind of evidence confirmed by valid testimony or witnesses.

In verses 6-9 he lists three witnesses that God has given to men to support their faith or trust. Then in verses 10-12 John describes the two different types of responses to the testimonies about Christ.

The whole section focuses on Jesus Christ and the mission for which He came into the world. It begins with the somewhat obscure statement that Jesus Christ came by water and by blood. Divorced from its historical setting, this statement is confusing to the modern reader. Some have taught that these two terms refer to the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's supper. Others believe it is a reference to the water and blood that flowed from Christ's body when the Roman soldier pierced His side in His death on the cross (John 19:34). But neither of these views explain the meaning of **"not by water only"**. Someone has taught that Jesus Christ came by water only.

Most Bible teachers understand the water to refer to the baptism of Jesus, and the blood to His death on the cross. This fits well into the controversy John was experiencing with the pre-Gnostic teachers. They taught that the heavenly spirit being of Christ descended upon Jesus and began His earthly mission at the point of His baptism, but withdrew His presence from Him just prior to His death on the cross. So that it was only the earthly human Jesus who died, and not the heavenly Christ. Over against this heresy, John emphasized that it was Jesus Christ, not simply a human Jesus, who experienced both baptism and crucifixion. John understood the baptism of Jesus in a different way from that of his opponents. They thought of the baptism as the point in time when Jesus received the heavenly Christ; but John believed that Jesus was already the Christ when He experienced His baptism, and remained the Christ who died on the cross. It was the person of the Son of God who came into the world. He did so in the womb of the virgin. It was the Son who came into this world to seek and save those who were lost. It was the Son who shed His blood on the cross to redeem lost sinners. Apart from Christ's true humanity, suffering, and dying there could be no propitiation for our sins. In the early church water and blood became key words to convey the true understanding of the Incarnation.

John goes on to introduce a third witness, namely the Holy Spirit. It was at His baptism the Spirit came upon Him in the form of a dove, and it was this witness that convinced John the Baptist that Jesus was the Son of God. In John 1:32-34 we read, **"And John bare record, saying, I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it abode upon him. And I knew him not: but he that sent me to baptize with water, the same said unto me, 'Upon whom you shall see the Spirit descending, and remaining on him, the same is he who baptizes with the Holy Ghost.' And I saw, and bare record that this is the Son of God."** The Spirit also had inspired the Old Testament Scriptures that spoke of the coming of Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God.

The fact that there are three witnesses is the main point of the statement, and all three are in agreement concerning the person of Jesus Christ, and the mission for which He came into the world.

While the theme of the section is Jesus Christ, the key word is “witness.” It is sometimes translated in our *Authorized Version* as “record” or “testimony” and “testified.” All told, John uses it nine times in verses 6-12. It comes from the strict setting found in a courtroom of law. In a court trial, a certain man is called a witness. The witness gives his testimony. He swears to tell the truth. The evidence that is compiled is based upon the trustworthiness of the witnesses. If all the witnesses agree, it is easy for the faith or verdict of the jury to be established.

The Mosaic law required that judgment should be founded upon solid, valid evidence. In criminal cases, testimonies were admissible as evidence upon the basis of two or three witnesses whose testimonies had been heard and confirmed as true. (Deuteronomy 17:6; 19:15). False witnesses were severely punished (Deuteronomy 19:16). In the New Testament this was the pattern for church discipline (Matthew 18:16; I Timothy 5:19; II Corinthians 13:1).

If the system of human witnesses is worthy of respect by men, then how much more should God’s collection of witnesses be respected. Through the voice of the Old Testament prophets and the New Testament apostles, God has given us a trustworthy record of the truth concerning the person and mission of His Son Jesus Christ. The Christian faith does not require a blind leap into the dark – it is confirmed by many **“infallible proofs.”** (Acts 1:3).

The response to the evidence found in the record that God has given confines a hearer to reach one of two verdicts: either it is truth to be believed or it is a lie that is to be rejected. Based on the Biblical record, the claims that Jesus made for Himself require one to believe He was either a liar, a lunatic or the Lord God. The verdict one makes reveals his standing before God. If he believes the witness, or testimony of God, he is given an internal witness that confirms that he has heard the truth and now is in possession of the truth. In contrast the person who rejects the testimony of God makes God out to be a liar. This insult upon God’s character continues as long as the person remains in unbelief. One cannot profess to believe in God and at the same time reject God’s testimony to His own Son. If Jesus is not God’s own Son in the flesh, then God is no longer the truth. He is a liar. He who has the Son, has life, and he who does not have the Son does not have life. Unbelief is willful rejection of the evidence that God has testified unto.

Christian Certainties Affirmed - vs. 13-21

In verse 13, John begins the conclusion of his epistle. His purpose was to help believers who were being confronted with opposing views of what comprised true Christianity. He wanted to enable them to know with confidence that they had followed the truth. In the remaining verses he uses the word “know” seven times. The Greek word for “know” was used for knowledge characterized by certainty. The false teachers prided themselves to be in possession of the true and advanced knowledge. John says no, we know some things about God for which we are certain. He then lists five Christian certainties. In doing so, he gives a summary of what he has taught.

(1) Assurance of Eternal Life - v. 13

“These things I have written unto you who believe on the name of the Son of God; that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you may believe on the name of the Son of God.”

John sums up his letter by saying that the things that he has written should help to give assurance to believers that they possess eternal life. Those who had left the teachings of the apostles had shaken the faith of the remaining faithful. But by their remaining true to the fundamentals of the faith, their salvation was sure. The fundamental tests were: correct doctrine (a correct view of Christ), correct love (self giving for the brethren), and a correct obedience (doing what God says is right). A clear understanding of the Gospel record gives a legitimate ground for Christian assurance or certainty. Believing, loving, and obeying are the evidences of eternal life.

(2) Answered Prayer - vs. 14-17

“And this is the confidence that we have in him, that, if we ask any thing according to his will, he hears us: And if we know that he hear us, whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we desired of him. If any man see his brother sin a sin which is not unto death, he shall ask, and he shall give him life for them that sin not unto death. There is a sin unto death: I do not say that he shall pray for it. All unrighteousness is sin: and there is a sin not unto death.”

Answered prayer is the second Christian certainty. To pray means to ask. The word confidence meant to speak openly or freely. It was used to describe the free citizens in Athens who were permitted to speak their minds boldly before the assembly or the city council. Slaves were not given this right. Christians have a right to speak freely toward God, that is, face-to-face. In Hebrews 4:16 we are told, **“Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.”** The word, “boldly” is “confidence.” The words, “he hears us” means to “hear with favor,” not merely to “listen to.” The believer can be certain that God hears any request with a favorable attitude, as long as it is in accord with His will. This passage provides a key to answered prayer. One such condition was given in 3:22 where “living in God’s will” was prescribed. Here it is “praying in God’s will.” Even Jesus submitted His will to the will of His Father. As He faced the cross, He prayed, **“let his cup pass from me, nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt.”** (Matthew 26:39).

Prayer must not be viewed not as our attempt to get God to see things from our point of view but as our attempt to see things from God’s point of view. It is not getting our will done in heaven, but it is getting God’s will done here on earth. George Mueller, who fed thousands of orphans with food provided in answer to prayer, said “Prayer is not overcoming God’s reluctance. It is laying hold of God’s willingness.” David said, **“Delight thyself also in the Lord: and he shall give thee the desires of thine heart”** (Psalm 37:4).

In verses 16 and 17, John turns from the assurance in prayer to the ministry of prayer. He shows how prayer in accordance with God’s will results in God answering our petitions. In contrast there are some things for which we are not to pray or intercede. John’s statement in verse 16 has led to much debate over its meaning among Bible students. The subject is sin among the brethren. He says there is a sin for which prayer is efficacious, and there is a sin unto death for which prayer shall not prevail.

Three major questions arise which affect one’s interpretation. First, who is the “brother?” Second, what kind of “death” is spoken of, physical or spiritual? Third, what is the identifiable “sin”? Before we deal with these questions, we first must address the sin which is forgivable. In the passage, John mentions it three times and the unforgivable sin but once. Thus, it is John’s primary focus.

The term “brother” refers to a person who has identified himself with the visible community of faith, namely believers. It does not include those who are pagans and have never professed faith in Christ. The sin not unto death is a sin that other Christians can see and identify. It is a repeated sin as seen in the present tense of the verb. John has consistently declared that a genuine Christian cannot continue in a pattern of sin. God will not allow it to keep on. Thus a person can pray for a sinning brother, and God will answer such a prayer by using corrective means to restore the sinning brother. Paul described a case involving a sinning brother in Galatians

6:1, where we read, **“Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, you who are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering yourself, lest you also be tempted.”**

John’s statement somewhat parallels the situation found in James 5:14-20. James describes a believer who is sick, and God has chastened him because of his persistent sin. The man understands his case and sends for the elders who come and pray for him. They pray the prayer of faith and his sins are forgiven, and his health is restored. The prayer of faith in James is the same as the prayer in the will of God in I John 5:14, 15.

This helps to answer the question as why the sinning brother should need intercession by others. Why can he not pray for himself and make his own confession? The answer is that his sin is of a visible public nature which has affected the community life of the church. As the church prays in the will of God, and confession is made on the brother’s part, then fellowship life within the church community can be restored. So the **“sin not unto death”** is any sin which can be forgiven which leads to the restoration of church fellowship.

Next, we must consider John’s meaning of the word, “death”. Is he referring to physical or spiritual death? In addition to using it three times in verse 16, he uses the word twice in 3:14. There we read, **“We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love his brother, abides in death.”** Anyone who does not love the brethren remains in death. John is not thinking of physical death, but is referring to spiritual death. Throughout the letter John is contrasting the true believers from the false ones. He contrasts spiritual death with spiritual life. There is nothing in the historical context of John’s letter that would indicate that he is speaking of the physical death of a believer. Thus the interpretation that the sin unto death is the physical death of a believer at the chastening of God is to be rejected.

This leaves us now with the task of identifying the sin unto death and who commits it. In his commentary, William Barclay notes that the Greek expression “sin unto death” means “the sin which is going towards death, the sin whose end is death, the sin that, if continued in, must finish in death.” (Barclay, *The Letters of John and Jude*, p. 142).

So the sin is of a spiritual nature and is fatal to the soul’s eternal well-being. The identity of the sin can best occur by identifying who commits or has committed it. In the context of the epistle it would be those antichrists or false prophets who have left the apostolic fellowship. From the opening verses to the closing verse where John says, **“Keep yourselves from idols,”** he never leaves his purpose; namely to expose the false Christian from the true. It is those who have separated themselves from the church, and who are now trying to deceive the church that can be visibly identified as false brethren. Their sin consists of the refusal to confess the doctrinal truth concerning Jesus Christ; the refusal to love the community of apostolic brethren; and the

refusal to obey the moral commands of God. Their sin and their separation marked them out as apostates for all to see. They do not share the common fellowship with the Father and the Son that brings believers together in a common bond. They lack the signs of the new birth. They are clearly unbelievers.

As the confession of Christ with the mouth and belief in the heart leads to salvation unto life, so the denial of Christ with the mouth and unbelief in the heart is the sin that leads to death. It is committed by those who may yet confess to being Christians but are reprobate concerning the faith. The Greek scholars Marvin Vincent, Kenneth Wuest, A. T. Robinson, and Henry Alford, among others all reach the same conclusion.

By their denial of Christ and His redemptive work, these false prophets have placed themselves beyond the scope of Christ's redemption and intercession. In John 17:9, Jesus Said, ***"I pray for them: I pray not for the world, but for them who you have given me, for they are thine."*** Jesus also said in Matthew 7:6, ***"Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn again and rend you."*** One cannot pray for God's blessings to be upon those who harden their attitudes toward the true Christ and His gospel. To do so is to pray out of the will of God. In II John verses 10 and 11, John goes so far as to forbid financial support and God's blessings to such false teachers. In doing so the Christian community would only promote further heresy. ***"If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither bid him God speed: For he that bids him God speed is partaker of his evil deeds."***

(3) Assurance of Victory Over Sin and Satan - v. 18

"We know that whosoever is born of God sins not; but he that is begotten of God keeps himself, and that wicked one touches him not."

In verse 18, John affirms a third Christian certainty flowing out of his letter. It is the certainty of victory over sin and Satan. Except for a minor variation in wording, the first part of the sentence is virtually identical to that of 3:9. We have seen that John does not teach sinless perfection. But he does affirm that all those who are regenerated by the Spirit of God cannot continue to practice sin. This is true of all Christians, not just some. This establishes the doctrine of the preservation and perseverance of the saints, and refutes the teaching that a regenerate child of God can fall away from a state of eternal life and be lost.

The question is how does a believer keep from practicing sin and succumbing to Satan's power? Our Authorized Version translates from a set of Greek manuscripts in this manner. **"He that is begotten of God** (the believer) **keeps himself, and the wicked one touches him not."** Read in this manner, it establishes human responsibility and the duty to persevere. But it should not cause a believer to trust in his own will power.

Meanwhile, a number of modern translations are based on an equal number of Greek manuscripts that provide this translation, **"He who was begotten of God** (Christ) **keeps him** (the believer), **and the wicked one does not touch him** (the believer)." This would teach the preservation of the saints by God's power. Peter's experience with Satan would help us to understand this truth. In Luke 22:31, 32 we read, **"And the Lord said, Simon, Simon, behold, Satan has desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat: But I have prayed for you, that your faith fail not: and when you are converted, strengthen your brethren."** Christ will keep all of those whom the Father has given Him and will not lose one. (John 17:12).

(4) True Christians Belong to God - v. 19

"We know that we are of God, and the whole world lies in wickedness."

John's fourth affirmation of what we know as Christians is that mankind is divided into two camps: those who belong to God and those who belong to the evil one.

Those who have been born again and those who have not. There is no middle ground. To be born of God is to be safe from the power of the wicked one. Not to be born of God is to be wholly under the power of the wicked one. Regardless of any doubts that the false prophets may have caused, John and his readers can be assured they belong to the Father.

The Greek word, *"lieth"* or *"lies"* carries the idea of passivity. Those who are under the control of the Satanic world system, do not even struggle against or try to be loosed from its power. They are in love with themselves and what they can obtain to make themselves look better than others. The Christian life of faith, love, and obedience is viewed as a bondage.

(5) Salvation Comes Through the Knowledge of God's Son Jesus Christ, Who is the True God - v. 20

"And we know that the Son of God is come, and hath given us an understanding, that we may know him that is true, and we are in him that is true, even in his Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God, and eternal life."

The fifth thing that a Christian knows for certain is that salvation from sin comes only through the knowledge of God's Son, Jesus Christ, who is the true God. If mankind is divided into two camps, how is it possible for a person to come out of one and pass into another? How can one leave the kingdom of Satan and enter into the kingdom of God's dear Son? John gives the answer. Jesus Christ, God's Son has come into the world of mankind and has given us understanding or knowledge to be able to understand the One who is the true God. This knowledge comes through a revelation, but a revelation grounded in history.

While the Gnostics claimed that salvation came through knowledge imparted through revelations from the Revealer, it differed from John's position. Throughout the epistle, John has insisted on the real incarnation of the Son of God, while the Gnostics would only allow that the Son of God seemed to be united with Jesus. John has insisted on the death of Jesus Christ to make an atonement to save us from our sin. The Gnostics insisted their special knowledge was necessary to save a person from their ignorance. They believed that salvation was just the correcting of man's ignorance, and not a deliverance from sin. Which way is the true way of salvation? Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life; no man comes unto the Father, but by me." (John 14:6).

The Son not only became a man, He revealed the truth, and He gives understanding or knowledge, namely the capacity to receive spiritual truth. This occurs in the new birth that opens the spiritual eyes of the sinner to see and enter the kingdom of truth. In contrast to the Gnostics' false views of God, Jesus is the true God, and in Him is life eternal. Jesus prayed for those whom the Father had given Him to save in this manner. ***"And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent."***

A Closing Exhortation - v. 21

"Little children, keep yourselves from idols. Amen"

John closes his epistle by speaking the truth in love. He shows his attachment to his readers by again calling them his little children. He then exhorts them to "keep themselves from idols." An idol is a false image of God formed in the imagination of the human mind. The idols in verse 21 are not physical images but false concepts of God. They stand in contrast to ***"the true God"*** of verse 20. The idols John had in mind are the false doctrines of Cerinthus and the other pre-Gnostic teachers. John closes his epistle while still in pursuit of the truth. The enemy is false teaching, inspired by the evil one. May the truth of God prevail today against error as we confess the correct doctrine of Christ, show a correct love for the apostolic brethren, and live a correct life of obedience to God's commands. ***"Buy the truth and sell it not!"*** (Proverbs 23:23). Beware of false views of God.