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Eternal Life

1 John 5:18–21

As we have talked about, 1 John is not written as a straight, linear argument that builds one topic upon another, always moving forward and progressing through the material. The Apostle Paul writes that way, but not John. Instead, John writes this letter in a spiral, addressing God’s righteousness, our sin, our salvation, our love for one another, and then finally starting back again at the beginning. These four topics all spill into one another, so that John goes back and forth, developing and applying, reminding and clarifying, always moving closer to the center of his message.

Over the course of chapter 5, John’s spiral is quickly tightening. As he arrives at the core of his purpose for writing this letter, the tone of his writing intensifies. John has written about faith, God’s testimony, the life that is in the Son of God, our confidence before God, and prayer. But now, as we come to the end of 1 John, the apostle leaves us with three “we have come to know” statements and one command at the climax of his message.

PROTECTION FROM THE EVIL ONE

In 1 John 5:18, the apostle writes the first of these statements:

We have come to know that everyone who has been

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born of God does not practice sin, but *he* who was born of God protects [lit. “keeps”] him, and the evil *one* does not touch him.

Just as he did in 1 John 3:4–10, John here explains that being born of God is incompatible with continuing, ongoing sin. And, just as in 1 John 3:4–10, John is not saying that “real” Christians are somehow sinless. John knows full well that all believers sin, and he made this abundantly clear in the opening of this letter when he wrote that anyone who claims to be without sin is a liar (1 John 1:6, 8, 10). Additionally, recall that John revealed only a few verses earlier in 1 John 5:13 his purpose for writing this letter: so that we may know that we have eternal life.

So, when John writes that “everyone who has been born of God does not practice sin,” he is not casting doubt on the genuineness of our salvation. Instead, he has two senses of meaning in mind: (1) a description of the new nature of those born of God; and (2) an exhortation to continue to put the remaining sin in our lives to death by the grace of Christ.

First, John genuinely wants to convey that we have been radically transformed by being born of God so that we cannot sin any longer without remorse. When we become the children of God, we slowly begin to lose our appetite for the sin we once enjoyed—and even when we do give into temptation, we do not gain the satisfaction from sin that we once did. Instead, God’s Spirit convicts us of our sin and leads us to repent (turn) from what we have done back to God, seeking forgiveness through the gospel. It isn’t that sin is impossible but rather that ongoing sin is unsustainable in the life of someone who has been born of God.

Second, John writes this statement to urge us to abandon whatever sin still remains in our lives. Although this isn’t phrased as a command, we need to read this as John’s gentle but firm nudge toward holy living. It is as though John is saying, “If we have come to know that everyone who has been born of God does not keep on sinning, then shouldn’t you

put to death whatever sin still entangles you?”

We are not alone, however, in waging war against the lingering sin in our lives. On the contrary, John is explicit that we have supernatural help, for “he who was born of God protects” us. This is a play on words, moving from describing “everyone who has been born of God” (i.e., all believers) to then singling out the one person who could be described as “he who was born of God”—that is, the only begotten Son of God, Jesus.

Jesus is our Great Protector not only against sin but even against the evil one himself. No matter what temptation the Great Tempter throws at us—despair, lust, envy, greed, pride, hatred, and so on—John tells us that Satan cannot “touch” (which we might translate as “fasten to, take hold of, cling to”) us because of the perfect protection of the Son of God.¹ When Jesus died on the cross, he purchased not only our forgiveness from sin but also the grace that enables us to live holy lives. When we are armed with this grace, Satan is simply not in an evenly matched fight. It is not as though God passively watches us from heaven, curious to see how well we end up doing. The whole story of the gospel is that God actively came down from heaven to come to our rescue!

So, as you struggle against your sin, remember that God himself has sworn an unbreakable oath to assist you—the Father issued the promise, the Son sealed the promise in his own blood, and the Spirit confirms the promise by his anointing on your life. He who was born of God protects you, even at the cost of his own life. And if God himself is for you, then the evil one has no power to touch you.

THE WHOLE WORLD LIES IN THE EVIL ONE

In the second “we have come to know” statement with which he closes his first letter, John writes:

We have come to know that we are of God, and the whole world lies in the evil one. (1 John 5:19)

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Here, John writes that we who look to Jesus Christ for salvation may have absolute confidence in our origin, which is that we are of God (*ek tou theou*), a shortened form of saying that we have been born of God (*ho gegennemenos ek tou theou*, as in 1 John 5:18). And if we know that we have been born of God, we may be confident that God has indeed given us eternal life. In other words, if we are confident about our new birth, we may be confident as we go to our death.

But just as glorious as the gospel of Jesus Christ is for the believer, the curse of the evil one is equally terrifying for the unbeliever. John writes literally that “the whole world lies in the evil one,” but the ESV translators added “in the power of” to make more sense of the phrase. John’s image portrays the world as entirely powerless under the dominion of the evil one.

Perhaps most tragically, the world thinks that they are the ones who are really living. They do anything and everything they please, and they imagine that in chasing after every opportunity available to them, they have life. But it is in doing those very things that they actually enslave themselves more and more to Satan.

There are only two kingdoms in this world: the kingdom of the evil one and the kingdom of our God and of his Christ. Every human being is a subject of one of these kingdoms, without exception. The kingdom of the evil one is death and slavery; the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ is life and freedom.

But John Stott draws our attention to an important point concerning John’s describing the lost as the “whole world”: “We need to remember, however, that although the whole world lies in the power of the evil one, it is for the sins of the whole world (the only other occurrence of the expression in the Epistle) that Jesus Christ is the propitiation (ii. 2).”² The gospel holds out hope to the lost—even to those whom we might consider the most lost in their subjection to the kingdom of the evil one. The gospel gives this command:

believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved from the dominion of darkness, being transferred into the kingdom of God’s beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

JESUS IS THE TRUE GOD AND ETERNAL LIFE

The third “we have come to know” statement as John closes his first letter is one of the most precious verses to me in the entire Bible:

But we have come to know that the Son of God came and he has given to us understanding so that we may know the True One, and we are in the True One, in his Son Jesus Christ. This one is true God and eternal life. (1 John 5:20)

Once again, John loads his deceptively simple sentences with massive theological freight. Here, John is highlighting three facets of Jesus’ glory: first, the objective and subjective knowledge that Jesus has given to us; second, the personal knowledge of God the Father that Jesus has invited us into; and third, the direct experience of God that we have in Jesus.

OBJECTIVE AND SUBJECTIVE KNOWLEDGE OF JESUS

First, John emphasizes both the objective and the subjective knowledge of Jesus, the Son of God. Objectively, Jesus the Son of God “has come.” Though he is the Word who was in the beginning with God and who was himself God, he humbly took on the nature of humanity also, being born to a virgin in Bethlehem. This God–man lived a perfect life and then gave up his life on a Roman cross at the demand of his fellow Jewish people. On the third day, he rose again from the dead.

This actually happened in real history. It is not merely something I feel or wish. Jesus was born, Jesus died, and Jesus rose again. We can build our faith with confidence upon the solid foundation of these historical facts.

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There is, however, another critical component to the objective knowledge that we have of Jesus. Even more than relating the merely human history of Jesus, the Scriptures also testify that God was at work doing something cosmically significant in and through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus: “in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself” (2 Corinthians 5:19). Part of our objective knowledge about Jesus revolves around what God reveals to us in the Bible by pulling back the curtain and letting us peek into the throne room of heaven to hear God’s own eternal decrees.

Look at it another way: on the surface, it isn’t terribly interesting to learn that the Romans executed Jesus on the cross. To put the crucifixion of Jesus into perspective, consider that the Roman general Crassus once crucified six thousand people at the same time after he defeated them in battle.³ From a purely human perspective, Jesus’ death was not unique at all, but from God’s perspective, Jesus’ death is the power of God unto salvation. None of those six thousand people (nor anyone else, for that matter) died as a substitutionary sacrifice for the human race. The objective facts about Jesus are historical, but they are also supernatural.

After John emphasizes the objective aspects of Christ’s ministry, he also reminds us that God has made known to us the extraordinary things he accomplished through Jesus. Subjectively, Jesus has “given us understanding.” Not only have we been made aware of the story of Jesus, but also Jesus has opened our eyes to see, our ears to hear, our hearts to believe, and our minds to understand the significance of the story. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is more than an impersonal history lesson to us, but by the Holy Spirit, God has made this gospel to be our only hope in this life and the next.

It is critical that the message of Jesus the Son of God should be both objective fact and subjective experience. Otherwise, the gospel simply is not good news. If the

gospel is not objectively true—so that the Son of God did not become human for us and for our salvation as the Scriptures say he did—then all the emotional satisfaction in the world wouldn't make a difference. As Paul writes to the Corinthians, “If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied” (1 Corinthians 15:19). But by the same token, if this message had never reached our ears or never penetrated our hearts, then the message would never become good news for us. John never wants us to forget the lavish grace God has demonstrated toward us in the way he subjectively opened our eyes to the objective goodness of the gospel.

PERSONAL KNOWLEDGE OF GOD THROUGH JESUS

Second, the purpose of both Jesus' coming and his giving us understanding is “so that we may know the True One.” Just as we saw in the first verses of 1 John, truth is a person. John's goal is that we may know the True One.

To know the True One in this way would mean far more than simply being aware of him. For example, I am aware that George Washington was the first president of the United States and I am aware of a few details surrounding his life, but we never had a conversation together and he never even knew my name. John means something far more than mere awareness when he talks about the way we know God.

The knowledge John is talking about is intimate, even beyond the intimacy I share with my closest friends or even my wife, since God knows me in a way that no other human possibly could. God created me, so he understands the depths of my deepest doubts, joys, fears, loves, pains, and satisfactions, even before I am aware of them myself.

But this knowledge runs in two directions. Not only does God know us, but God has also allowed us to know him. Paul writes about the mystery of our knowledge of God in 1 Corinthians 2. He explains:

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⁹But, as it is written,
“What no eye has seen, nor ear heard,
nor the heart of man imagined,
what God has prepared for those who love him”—

¹⁰these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. ¹¹For who knows a person’s thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. ¹²Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. (1 Corinthians 2:9–12)

The Spirit of God searches the depths of God, and God has given us of his Spirit so that we might understand the things freely given us by God—that is, so that we could know God the Father intimately by the Spirit, through Christ.

Jesus came so that we may enjoy an intimate, personal knowledge of the True One, God the Father. This knowledge of God the Father is personal and relational, and the joy of this kind of knowing God is eternal life itself (see John 17:3). The Son of God came and gave us understanding so that we may know the True One.

DIRECT EXPERIENCE OF GOD IN JESUS

Third, John writes that our experience of God runs far deeper than knowledge, even deeper than the kind of intimate, relational knowledge we just discussed. More than knowledge, John now explains that, in Jesus, we have a direct experience of God: “we are in the True One, in his Son Jesus Christ. This one is true God and eternal life.”

The stunning thing about this statement is that John speaks of Jesus not as our way of coming to the Father but as the “True One.” The “in” statements seem to point to the same person: “in the True One” refers to “in his Son Jesus Christ.”

Therefore, when John writes the climax of the entire book, “This one is true God and eternal life,” he is still referring to Jesus the Son, who is himself true God and eternal life. The word translated “he” has the sense of “this one,” which would refer to the previous phrase: “and we are in the True One, in his Son Jesus Christ.”

Jesus is true God and eternal life.

R. C. H. Lenski describes the glorious way John slowly reveals more, bit by bit, before this stunning declaration that Jesus is himself true God and eternal life:

So John has hitherto called Jesus “the Son of God” and “his (the Father’s, God’s) Son,” and now, here at the end and the climax, John duplicates and calls also Jesus Christ the real God’s Son because he is the real God’s only begotten Son (4:9), yea, “the real God.” As the Father is the real (genuine) God, so his Son is the real (genuine) God, and this Son places us in fellowship with the Father. Need we add the words that Jesus himself spoke in John 10:30; 12:45; 14:9?⁴

Because Jesus is himself true God and eternal life, all the riches of the triune God are ours if we are in Christ—the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit, the pleasures of fellowship with the Father, and the glorious eternal life of the Son of God.

This is the unspeakably magnificent gospel of Jesus Christ, God’s Son, who is himself true God and eternal life. Our only fitting response to this revelation is to worship Jesus with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength.

LITTLE CHILDREN, KEEP YOURSELVES FROM IDOLS

The last verse of John’s letter has puzzled commentators for centuries:

Little children, keep yourselves from idols. (1 John 5:21)

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John has not mentioned the word *idol* once throughout his entire letter, so why would he end so abruptly with this command? Let's look a little closer at the topic of idolatry.

Certainly, John does not address formal idolatry up to this point. John nowhere discusses the making of idols nor sacrificing to them nor eating the meat sacrificed to them nor the cultic prostitution that was so prevalent in idol worship nor even the human sacrifice that many false gods supposedly demanded. These issues are confronted elsewhere in the Bible, but not here.

On another level, however, we might say that John has written about nothing other than idolatry if we define idolatry as anything that distracts us from worshiping Jesus Christ, who is the true God and Eternal Life himself. Whenever we entertain false ideas about the true God or offer false obedience to God's commandments, then we are guilty of the sin of idolatry. And if John is looking at idolatry as this kind of general idea that encompasses all kinds of things that would distract us from Christ, then this is the perfect place for John to end his letter. This verse is the definitive, all-inclusive word of application after a long sermon, bringing everything into real-life perspective.

So, let's begin to apply John's application to our own lives. Which things are distracting us from Christ? Sometimes we pursue specific sins God has forbidden in his law, whether to lie or to steal or to covet or to commit adultery. When we pursue these sins, we actually begin to worship them in some sense by seeking our ultimate joy and satisfaction in them, rather than in Jesus. That's idolatry in a nutshell.

But we can also commit idolatry with legitimate relationships and activities in our lives, such as in our jobs, spouses, children, friends, or hobbies. These things become idols when they consume our lives to an unhealthy degree. Whenever you elevate even good things to a place beyond the one God has intended them to occupy in your life, those good things become the idols you worship.

Regardless of your specific idolatry, it is incredibly important

that we don't isolate this single verse as John's description of how we defeat sin in our lives. John is pleading with us to avoid sin, but he isn't suggesting that the way to conquer idolatry is just to try really, really hard to "keep yourselves from idols." Yes, those are the words John uses, but this verse isn't all he has said. All the rest of 1 John concerns itself with the glory of Christ in his gospel; only in this one last verse does John tell us to keep ourselves from idols.

The way to conquer sin is to take into account everything else John has written up to this point by seeking to love Christ more than your idols. When sinful temptations arise in our hearts, we must preach to ourselves that the genuine longing of our hearts is to have Christ, not the temptation. When legitimate relationships and activities seek to crowd out Christ, we must preach to ourselves that we will lose whatever we put above Christ; only when we seek the kingdom of God first does God add to us all these other things. The gospel is always the best weapon when we fight against temptation.

And so, little children, keep yourselves from idols.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. How have you experienced unsustainable sin in your life? That is, where have you seen God's grace keeping you from pursuing sin as completely or as fully as you might have done before you came to know Jesus?
2. Which do you tend to value more: the objective knowledge of Jesus (historical facts and supernatural significance) or your subjective experience of Jesus (the work of the Holy Spirit in making the gospel real to you)? Why do you think that is? Why is the other kind of knowledge of Jesus so important, and what would it look like to balance out the two in your mind?
3. What idols do you have in your life? What illegitimate things are you pursuing? What legitimate things have become so important that they are distracting you from Jesus himself?
4. What would be the first three things that would change in your life if you genuinely loved Jesus more than anyone or anything else?

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in 4:3: “every spirit that does not confess *the* Jesus having come in the flesh is not from God” to differentiate the having-come-in-flesh Jesus from the various false versions of Jesus promoted by the prophets of the spirit of error.

3. C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 39.
4. Colin Kruse, *The Letters of John*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 163.

CHAPTER 9: FAITH (1 JOHN 5:1–12)

1. Stott, *Epistles of John*, 172.
2. John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1961), 103.
3. Burdick, *Letters of John*, 372.

CHAPTER 10: PRAYER (1 JOHN 5:13–17)

1. Stott, *Epistles of John*, 185.
2. Jeremiah 7:16–18, 11:14, 14:11; see also Kruse, *Letters of John*, 193.
3. Lenski, *Interpretation of the Epistles*, 534–35, emphasis added.

CHAPTER 11: ETERNAL LIFE (1 JOHN 5:18–21)

1. Burdick, *Letters of John*, 393.
2. Stott, *Epistles of John*, 194.
3. Appian, *The Civil Wars*, book 1, §120.
4. Lenski, *Interpretation of the Epistles*, 544–45.

CHAPTER 12: THE CASE STUDY OF THE ELECT LADY (2 JOHN)

1. The only other New Testament letter that does not