

We have seen throughout John’s epistle  
 the interweaving of the doctrinal, the ethical, and the relational –  
 faith, obedience, and love,  
 what you know, what you do, what you love.

In chapters 4 and 5 John has stressed the importance of love –  
 where love “is intertwined  
 with the ethical integrity of keeping God’s commandments  
 and the confessional integrity of a faith that conforms to the truth  
 of Jesus’ coming, his work, and his nature.” (Yarbrough, 296)

Now as John concludes his epistle,  
 he leaves them with some final exhortations.

### 1. Confidence in Prayer (5:13-17)

#### a. We Have Confidence Toward God Because We Have Eternal Life (v13-14)

<sup>13</sup>*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.*

Verse 13 starts by addressing “you who believe in the name of the Son of God” –  
 and he says I write these things to you  
 “that you may know that you have eternal life.”  
 You may be struggling with assurance –  
 you may lack confidence –  
 so I write these things to you (this whole epistle)  
 that you may *know* that you have eternal life.

Because if you believe in the name of the Son of God – you have eternal life.  
 “Whoever has the Son has life.” (v12)

Here at the end of his epistle, John centers on this theme of eternal life.

He spoke of it at the beginning in 1:2 –  
 “we proclaim to you the eternal life which was with the Father  
 and was made manifest to us.”

John’s basic message is that *Jesus*, the Son of God  
*is* eternal life.

In 2:25 he added another point:  
 “this is the promise that he made to us – eternal life.”

So Jesus, the Son of God *is* eternal life,  
 and God has promised *us* eternal life.

In 3:15 John pointed out that “no murderer has eternal life abiding in him” –  
 you cannot have Jesus – you cannot have eternal life –  
 if hatred resides in your heart.

But now in 5:11, 13, and 20

John talks incessantly about eternal life:

“God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son” (v11)

“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.” (v13)

“He [Jesus] is the true God and eternal life.” (v20)

If you have Jesus you have eternal life

because Jesus *is* eternal life –

and so if you believe in him, then you *know* you have eternal life –  
because you have Jesus!

As we have seen throughout John’s epistle,

love and obedience are essential to the Christian life,

but the way that you have Jesus – the way that you have eternal life –  
is not *through* love and obedience,  
but through *faith*.

As soon as you lose sight of that,

you fall prey to a deadly moralism that leads to works-righteousness.

Remember 5:1

“Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God.”

But John goes a step further.

It is not enough for John to say that the one who believes in Jesus  
has been born of God,

John writes so that “you may know that you have eternal life.”

In other words, John says that assurance of grace is not only attainable in theory,  
but that it is attainable *for you*.

“But how do I know?”

*Well, do you believe in Jesus Christ?*

*Yes.*

*Good, then you have been born of God!*

*But what if I apostatize?*

*Well, then, like the apostates in 1 John 2,*

*you will go out from us because you were never part of us!*

*But then how can I have assurance?*

*Because God says that those who believe in Jesus have been born of God.*

*But wouldn’t it be presumptuous of me to assume that?*

*No, because God says it – and it is never presumptuous to believe him!*

As John Stott put it,

“If God’s revealed purpose is not only that we should hear, believe and live,  
but also that we should know, presumptuousness lies in doubting his word,  
not trusting it.” (in Yarbrough, 298)

Verse 14 then begins to work out the implications of this.

*<sup>14</sup>And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us.*

Our confidence toward God is not grounded in ourselves, but in Jesus –  
the eternal life whom God has given us.

**b. Therefore We Have Whatever We Ask of Him (v14-15)**

*<sup>14</sup>And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. <sup>15</sup>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.*

There is a very simple logic in verses 13-15.

If we have Jesus, we have eternal life,  
because the resurrection life of Jesus is in us.  
And therefore, if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us.  
And if the eternal life of Jesus is in us,  
then God will give us what we ask for,  
because he always hears Jesus –  
and therefore always hears us.

Therefore you have confidence before God,  
because he will give you whatever you ask for!

And it is absolutely true that God will give you whatever you ask for.  
Of course, don’t forget the part about asking  
“according to his will.”

If you are asking according to your whims –  
don't expect anything!

Every week we pray “thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

What characterizes your prayers?

Is it a laundry list of things *you* want?

Or is it oriented towards what God wants?

How do you know what God wants?

Read his word!

God has revealed his will clearly in his Word.

And in verse 16, John gives an example:

**c. Therefore God Will Give Life to Those for Whom We Ask (Except for Those Who Have Committed the Sin that Leads to Death) (v16-17)**

<sup>16</sup>*If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death, he shall ask, and God will give him life—to those who commit sins that do not lead to death. There is sin that leads to death; I do not say that one should pray for that.* <sup>17</sup>*All wrongdoing is sin, but there is sin that does not lead to death.*

This is one of the most difficult passages in the whole of scripture – every theological tradition is divided over it.

We need to see 1 John 5 in the light of early Christian penitential practices. As long as you think of this as “what I do in my personal prayer life” then you will remain confused.

But when you see it in light of James 5:16  
“confess your sins to one another and pray for one another,  
that you may be healed,”  
it begins to make sense.

The idea here is that someone has become aware that someone else has sinned. And not just “anyone else” but “his brother” – in other words, someone in close proximity. What should you do when you become aware that your brother has sinned?

Gossip with your friends?

No.

Go and tell the elders?

No.

(Remember what Jesus said –

confront your brother, if he repents, you have won your brother!)

And then pray for him:

*He shall ask, and he will give him life.*

[Please note that the ESV adds the word “God” here –

it is entirely possible that John is saying that the one who prays will give life to his brother through his prayer.

Calvin says “the sense will stay the same, that the prayers of believers will avail even to rescuing a brother from death.” (in Yarbrough, 307)]

So the fundamental point here is that your intercession for one another plays a key role in God’s forgiveness of you.

Now it is true that the medieval penitential system took this too far:

they required contrition (that you be truly sorry for your sin)  
confession (that you tell your sins to a priest, who could absolve you)  
and satisfaction (that you do various things to “pay” for your sin).

Of course, the modern tendency goes too far the other direction –  
requiring only contrition!

As long as you are truly sorry, that’s all that matters.

But if you take that view, then 1 John 5:16 and James 5:16 make no sense.

Both John and James say that we need each other!

(incidentally, Paul’s “ministry of reconciliation”  
and Jesus’ “show your brother” would both concur with this!)

So Jesus, John, James, and Paul *all agree* that there is no restriction  
on *who* may hear your confession.

All believers are priests – and all believers may intercede for the one who has sinned –  
and all believers have the promise that if you intercede for the one who is penitent  
then God *will give him life*.

This means that in the life of discipleship

*we need* to confess our sins to each other –  
and *we need* to pray for one another, asking God to forgive each other.

Yes, *you* need to ask God to forgive you:

“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins...”  
but you also need one another to ask God on your behalf:  
“he shall ask, and God will give him life.”

At least, so long as you have not committed “a sin leading to death”?

What does John mean by that?

First, we should note that John is not referring to a *particular* sin.

There is no definite article.

He is not speaking of “*the* sin that leads to death” –  
as though there was one particular sin that alone fits the definition.

Second, John has talked about both kinds of sin before!

In 1:8, “if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves.”

In 1:10, “if we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar.”

But these sins obviously do not lead to death,  
because 1:9 says “if we confess our sins,  
he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins”

But in 2:11 we heard that whoever hates his brother walks in darkness.

In 2:19 we were told that “they went out from us but they were not of us”  
And 2:23 “No one who denies the Son has the Father.”  
And 3:4 “Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness...  
No one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him.” (v6)  
And 3:15 “Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer,  
and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.”

A sin that leads to death (in Yarbrough’s phrase)  
“is simply a violation of the fundamental terms of relationship with God  
that Jesus Christ mediates.” (310)  
or to use Augustine’s way of putting it,  
“I think that the sin of a brother is unto death  
when anyone who has attained a knowledge of God  
through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ  
opposes the brotherhood  
and is aroused by the fires of envy  
against that very grace by which he was reconciled to God.” (226)

Yarbrough gives a couple of good examples.  
A church member kills her children and testifies in court:  
“God told me to do it!”  
Or, someone sends you an email claiming to be a Christian from Nigeria  
who wants to give you millions of dollars.  
I could add another:  
a pastor or elder abandons his wife and congregation  
and runs off with his secretary.

Sins that lead to death are preeminently high-handed violations  
denying the faith that we are to have in Jesus,  
forsaking the love that we are to have for God and others,  
and eschewing the obedience that we should have for God.

As Yarbrough puts it,  
“John rules out sin in the Christian life  
when defined as doctrinal convictions, ethical patterns, and relational tendencies –  
or any combination of these three –  
which belie one’s claim to know the God of light (1:5).  
To know God is to have been born of God.  
Divine parentage does not generate the breaches of faith, ethics, or love  
that John warns against.” (310)

So, what is the sin that leads to death?  
Remember 3:14  
“We know that we have passed out of death into life,  
because we love the brothers.  
Whoever does not love abides in death.”

A fundamental refusal to love God or brother – is a sin unto death!

But how can you tell the difference?

Remember the emphasis on “his brother” in verse 16.

This is someone you know.

To put it more clearly: this is some *Christian* you know.

And you have come to know that this fellow Christian has sinned.

Presumably you also know whether they are repentant.

John had said earlier, “if we confess our sins he is faithful and just to forgive us our sin and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

John does *not* say that sins that lead to death are necessarily unforgivable!

Rather, he says that the church cannot do anything to remedy them.

In your life together –

as you confess your sins to one another

and exercise the ministry of reconciliation –

you are not asked to intercede on behalf of the apostate.

In verse 17, John says

“All wrongdoing is sin” (incidentally, the word “wrongdoing” is the same word used in 1:9 – translated ‘unrighteousness’!).

All unrighteousness is sin,

but there is sin that does not lead to death.

Now, some would say that this is absurd!

After all, Paul says, “the wages of sin is death” – therefore all sin leads to death!

But John is not dealing with the abstract question “does sin deserve death?”

John is dealing with the concrete question, “for the Christian, does all sin lead to death?”

And the answer is – no – not if you repent!

Before we move on, we need to deal with the caution

concerning prayer for the one who has sinned unto death.

Remember what John has just said –

that God hears the prayers that we pray “according to his will.”

If someone commits a sin *not* leading to death,

in other words, if the one who sinned confesses his sin –

then God’s revealed will (according to 1 John 1:9)

is to forgive his sin.

Therefore, you may have great confidence as you pray for him,

because you know that God will hear your prayer and answer it.

But John is less certain that you should ask concerning one who has sinned unto death.

Why?

Because God's will is less certain.

You *must* pray that God will forgive the sin of the one who is penitent.

If your brother comes to you and says "I sinned, please forgive me" –  
then you *shall* ask, and God *will* give him life.

But how do you treat the one who is impenitent?

John does not say that you must *not* pray for *him* –

rather John says, "I do not say that one should pray for that."

In other words, you are bound to pray that God will pardon the sin of the penitent,

but you are *not* bound to pray that God will pardon the sin of the impenitent.

Why this ambivalence?

Because John has told us that we must pray according to the will of God –

and throughout scripture, the will of God is ambivalent regarding this matter.

Sometimes we hear the saints praying for God to forgive –

Moses in the wilderness – or Jesus on the cross

But on the other hand, God tells Jeremiah to *stop* praying for the rebels in his day  
(Jer 7:16; 11:14; 14:11).

But how do you know?

Remember, for John, the sin unto death is a sin

that can only be committed by "a brother" –

in other words, pagans, Muslims, Jews, all unbelievers  
are incapable of sinning the sin unto death,

because they never had connection with life!

## **2. What We Know (5:18-20)**

John concludes with three statements regarding what "we know."

First,

### **a. Everyone Who Has Been Born of God Does Not Keep on Sinning (v18)**

<sup>18</sup>*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.*

In other words,

if you have been born of God, then you won't commit a sin that leads to death!

How do we know?

Because "he was born of God protects him" –

in other words, Christ, the Son of God –

who is the eternal life who was with the Father in the beginning,  
and is now with us.

The evil one does not touch the one who is protected by Jesus.

Jesus said, "This is the will of him who sent me,

that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me,  
but raise it up on the last day.

For this is the will of my Father,

that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him  
should have eternal life,

and I will raise him up on the last day...

No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him.

And I will raise him up on the last day." (John 6:39, 40, 44)

The second "we know" goes a step further:

**b. We Are from God – the World Lies in the Power of the Evil One (v19)**

<sup>19</sup>*We know that we are from God, and the whole world lies in the power of the evil one.*

The contrast is stark:

We are from God – and in him we have eternal life and light.

The whole world lies in the power of the evil one –

and in him they have darkness and death.

This may sound depressing – and for those who are languishing under the evil one  
it *is* depressing! –

but in the context of John's epistle, we should hear hope!

After all, greater is he who is in you – than he who is in the world.

So we know

1) that everyone who is born of God does not keep on sinning,  
and that Christ protects us from the evil one;

2) that we are from God, and the whole world is under the power of the evil one;

but rather than despair because of this,

we know, thirdly:

**c. The Son of God Has Come So that We Might Know the True God  
(v20)**

<sup>20</sup>*And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life.*

This is the summary statement – the whole point of the book.

*We know that the Son of God has come –*

once again highlighting the centrality of the incarnation –

*and has given us understanding –*

here John reminds us of the importance of truth,

both the historical-doctrinal truth of the incarnation itself,

but also the ethical and relational truth

because true understanding/wisdom results in obedience and love –

*so that we may know him who is true;*

*and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ.*

Knowing him and being “in him” are intimately united.

This is why “effectual calling” and “union with Christ”

are inseparably linked in our catechism:

Our catechism asks, “what is effectual calling?”

“Effectual calling is the work of God’s Spirit, whereby,

convincing us of our sin and misery,

enlightening our minds in the knowledge of Christ

and renewing our wills,

he does persuade and enable us to embrace Jesus Christ

freely offered to us in the gospel.”

The world is “in the evil one”

We are “in him who is true”

These are parallel constructions that communicate the basic options in life.

There are no third options.

You are either “in the evil one”

or you are “in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ.”

*He is the true God and eternal life.*

Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is “true God and eternal life” –

this is where the Nicene Creed found the phrase “very God of very God.”

The life that is in you is nothing less than the life of God himself.

When you grasp that,

then pretty much everything else that John says

becomes pretty obvious!

Even the last verse:

**Conclusion: Little Children, Keep Yourself from Idols (v21)**

<sup>21</sup>*Little children, keep yourselves from idols.*

This may seem rather abrupt.

After all, John has said nothing about idolatry in his entire epistle!

But idolatry has been the bane of God's people through all of history.

After all, if the whole world languishes "in the evil one" –

then *the* threat to the people of God

will be our tendency to revert to our old master!

John's warning *is* abrupt.

It is designed to be abrupt.

Little children, stay away from *anything*

that would distract you from knowing, loving and obeying

the true God and eternal life, Jesus Christ our Lord.