

The Great Community of Love — 10

1 John 5:13-21

John's letter is coming to its conclusion. The details of the readers and their pain, and the details of those who left the fellowship and their reasons for doing so are all unknown to us. But, as we have seen, John's answers to his readers carry a far broader message than just a word to a first century congregation. All our historical speculations may be incorrect but the eternal word, which has been from the beginning, is still being spoken to us and its fruit is still being known.

What is more, the battles faced by the people of God are still being experienced, and men and women are still having their standing in Christ called into question. Sadly, when that happens, the beleaguered saints are often hobbled in their prayers and hindered in their warfare against the true enemy. That need not be! So John writes:

I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life. (1 John 5:13)

John has described the testimony which God has borne to his own Son. It is both external, for those with eyes to see, the water and the blood, and it is also internal, as the Spirit brings the reality of Christ into us. But we can discern the purpose which John has in writing this letter:

- Now by this we may be sure (**know**) that we **know** him, if we obey his commandments. (2:3)
- Whoever says, "I have come to **know** him," but does not obey his commandments, is a liar, and in such a person the truth does not exist; (2:4)
- but whoever obeys his word, truly in this person the love of God has reached perfection. By this we may be sure (**know**) that we are in him: (2:5)
- But whoever hates another believer is in the darkness, walks in the darkness, and does not **know** the way to go, because the darkness has brought on blindness. (2:11)
- I am writing to you, fathers, because you **know** him who is from the beginning. I am writing to you, young people, because you have conquered the evil one. (2:13)
- I write to you, children, because you **know** the Father. I write to you, fathers, because you **know** him who is from the beginning. I write to you, young people, because you are strong and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one. (2:14)
- Children, it is the last hour! As you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come. From this we **know** that it is the last hour. (2:18)
- But you have been anointed by the Holy One, and all of you have **knowledge**. (2:20)
- I write to you, not because you do not **know** the truth, but because you **know** it, and you **know** that no lie comes from the truth. (2:21)
- If you **know** that he is righteous, you may be sure (**know**) that everyone who does right has been born of him. (2:29)
- See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not **know** us is that it did not **know** him. (3:1)
- Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do **know** is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. (3:2)
- You **know** that he was revealed to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. (3:5)

- No one who abides in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or **known** him. (3:6)
- We **know** that we have passed from death to life because we love one another. Whoever does not love abides in death. (3:14)
- All who hate a brother or sister are murderers, and you **know** that murderers do not have eternal life abiding in them. (3:15)
- We **know** love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. (3:16)
- And by this we will **know** that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him (3:19)
- whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he **knows** everything. (3:20)
- All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we **know** that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us. (3:24)
- By this you **know** the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, (4:2)
- We are from God. Whoever **knows** God listens to us, and whoever is not from God does not listen to us. From this we **know** the spirit of truth and the spirit of error. (4:6)
- Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and **knows** God. (4:7)
- Whoever does not love does not **know** God, for God is love. (4:8)
- By this we **know** that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. (4:13)
- So we have **known** and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. (4:16)
- By this we **know** that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. (5:2)
- I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may **know** that you have eternal life. (5:13)
- And if we **know** that he hears us in whatever we ask, we **know** that we have obtained the requests made of him. (5:15)
- We **know** that those who are born of God do not sin, but the one who was born of God protects them, and the evil one does not touch them. (5:18)
- We **know** that we are God’s children, and that the whole world lies under the power of the evil one. (5:19)
- 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. (5:20)

Of course, this list contains what we might call ‘ordinary’ uses of the word ‘know’.¹ That is why the NRSV translates it occasionally as ‘be sure’. But there is clear evidence that a person who believes in Jesus Christ can truly say that they *know* God (4:7-8) and that such knowledge should issue in a secure confidence in other areas as well. This knowledge of God is personal (cf. John 17:3). The knowledge of God relates to being born of God (2:29; 3:9; 4:7; 5:1 etc.), with full conscious fellowship with the Father and the Son (1:1-4, 6) and with fellow believers (1:7) as the goal.

What becomes plain at this point is that if we are presently uncertain that we have eternal life then the whole action of God in the revelation of his Son is called into question. The dynamic of revelation, described in 1 John 1:1-4, would be quite ineffective. John is insistent: if a person believes in the name of the Son of God then they will indeed have eternal life and they should know it.

¹ John’s letter (and also his gospel) is conspicuous for its use of synonyms. So two words for ‘know’ are employed: γινώσκω and οἶδα, and on two occasions, 2:29 and 5:20, they are used together.

Believing in the name of the Son of God should not be understood simplistically.² While knowledge of a ‘name’ may be seen by some as having special value (see, e.g. Acts 19:13), as indeed some believers regard the name of Jesus today, the apostles were not even vaguely suggesting that. To believe in the name of the Son of God is to commit oneself to all that is revealed in the name. The ‘name’ is the expression of the whole being of the Son of God.³ Even in plain historical terms, this distinction is important since ‘Jesus’ (*Yēsou*) was a common name, otherwise translated as Joshua. Of course, many cultures today use ‘Jesus’ as male name. In the context of John’s letter, we notice that there were some who were denying the truth of the Son of God as it had been declared in the apostolic gospel. In particular, then, believing in the name of the Son of God meant believing that *Jesus, the Jewish Messiah* (Christ), is the Son of God and that he has come in the flesh, and that his being and purpose is revealed by water and blood and affirmed by the Spirit. Those who believe in the name of the Son of God are, then, a distinct group over against those who have left the fellowship. They have come to this Jesus and in believing in him have been born of God and so have eternal life.

And this is the boldness we have in him, that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us.¹⁵ And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have obtained the requests made of him. (1 John 5:14-15)

Knowing that we have eternal life and that that life is in God’s Son issues in great confidence before God. The depth of that relationship with the Father and the Son (and with the Spirit, see 5:6) is profound. Recognising that, we know ‘that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us’. We should note that the Son also said, ‘Father... I knew that you always hear me...’ (John 11:41-42). Believers have the same access that Jesus had, and still has (see Rom. 8:34). While Jesus, the risen and ascended mediator, stands on our behalf against all who would accuse, we should see that we share that access to the throne of grace (Rom. 5:2; Heb. 4:14-16) and should be bold before the throne. We should understand that the one seated on the throne has given us his promise in Christ.

If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. (John 15:7)

On that day you will ask nothing of me. Very truly, I tell you, if you ask anything of the Father in my name, he will give it to you.²⁴ Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be complete. (John 16:23-24)

This needs to be developed further. ‘If you abide in me’ is not a condition to which we should attain in order to have our prayers answered. In his letter John has been at pains to declare that we do abide in God. Jesus’ conditional statement, ‘If you abide...’, was made prior to the gift of the Holy Spirit, by whom the Father and the Son dwell in the believer and the believer in them.

Too many people see statements about answered prayer as if they were the key to using a divine vending machine. Their focus is ‘how do I get?’ John’s focus is totally different: his focus is on the abiding in the one whose love has dealt with our guilt and whose purpose is our mature standing in his Son on the last day (so 1 John 3:1-3). The

² This is the same as believing ‘in the Son of God’ (5:10). Twice John refers to believing ‘in the name of the Son of God’ or in ‘the name of his Son, Jesus Christ’, and once John has said that there is ‘forgiveness on account of his name’ (2:12).

³ Cf. Exodus 33:18-19, where the glory of God and the name of God are related. Also note the command not to take the name of the LORD in vain.

framework within which John writes is the great plan of God, settled from the beginning and, though contested and denied by fallen humanity, still the established and firm goal for all of history.⁴ So asking in accordance with the will of God is no burden. The will of God is perfectly plain. His character and action, all of a one, has been revealed and we would not be ignorant or deprived if we did not know the will of God, we would be disobedient. Hence Paul's command: 'So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is' (Eph. 5:17).

Of course, none of this implies that abiding in Christ and God or knowing God's will are automatic. Always there is the moral obligation on those who are in the will of God to actively engage in the eternal issues. The believer's conscience may still become desensitised to the things of God. Hebrews says:

Take care, brothers and sisters, that none of you may have an evil, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. ¹³But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called 'today', so that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. (Heb. 3:12-13)

Neither does our standing in Christ put us in a position of superiority before God. As we are dependent upon God for our initial cleansing from sin, so we remain totally dependent upon him for all things. If we are to be confident in the realm of prayer it must be as we pray in dependence upon him. This requires that our wills be constantly moulded to conform with God's will. 'Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect' (Romans 12:2).

If we are not in a superior position before God, neither are we superior to those who are not in Christ. In John's case, neither are the readers superior to those who had left the fellowship. That is probably the reason why John continues as he does:

If you see your brother or sister committing what is not a mortal sin, you will ask, and God will give life to such a one—to those whose sin is not mortal. There is sin that is mortal; I do not say that you should pray about that. ¹⁷All wrongdoing is sin, but there is sin that is not mortal. (1 John 5:16-17)

In the matter of confidence in prayer, it is conspicuous that John does not look at the possibility of personal gain, but at the action of love. Far from being uncaring about the state of a brother or sister, the believer who has confidence in God will be deeply concerned. He will call a spade a spade when recognising the sin that divides the fellowship, but he will not assume the position of judge. That belongs to God alone. So the one who is confident of his own standing in Christ will be concerned enough to pray. If the brother or sister is engaged in a sin which is not mortal, then he will pray and God will give life to such a one. Rather than feeling threatened by those who have left and those who, while remaining, seem careless about sin, the believer will move powerfully into prayer, knowing the character and purpose of God. It is God's purpose that we should not sin and so, with that goal in mind, the blood of Jesus was shed once and now goes on cleansing us from all sin, and therefore we can pray for those whose sin is not mortal. There is a sin which is mortal and John is not suggesting that we should pray for that. All wrong doing is sin, but not all sin is mortal. In other words, there is a category of sin which does not come under the scope of this confidence in prayer.

⁴ I think it can be argued that, while certain features within the action of God are prominent in various letters in the New Testament, it is this 'salvation history' framework which is dominant. All the apostles and their associates had come to realise what it is that determines history and so they wrote from within that new perspective.

The question we may ask is, naturally, what is a ‘mortal’ sin, for which, evidently, there is no cleansing? We may assume that the first readers understood John’s reference. It seems likely, from the contents of the letter, that John has in mind some deliberate rejection of the truth of Christ as revealed in and through the apostolic message, with the consequent refusal to take sin seriously or to love one another. No doubt there were some who had left the fellowship, but who had not done so in wilful rejection of the truth, but who had rather been deceived. They were still responsible for their failure but they had not committed the sin of conscious and deliberate rejection of the truth of Christ, for which, of course, they would never ask forgiveness. So, before that dreadful position is reached,

have mercy on some who are wavering; ²³save others by snatching them out of the fire; and have mercy on still others with fear, hating even the tunic defiled by their bodies. (Jude 22-23)

As our Lord himself demonstrated: ‘Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing’ (Luke 22:34). And it is conspicuous that his prayer was answered on the day of Pentecost when 3000 who had crucified the Lord and Messiah received the forgiveness of sins!

We should also observe that John evidently regarded it as quite possible that those who had been fully functioning members of the fellowship could drift to the point where they commit mortal sin, sin which leads to death. In other words, we cannot presume upon the goodness of God. John has made this point strongly:

Let what you heard from the beginning abide in you. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, then you will abide in the Son and in the Father ... ²⁷As for you, the anointing that you received from him abides in you, and so you do not need anyone to teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about all things, and is true and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, abide in him. (1 John 2:24, 27)

We know that those who are born of God do not sin, but the one who was born of God protects them, and the evil one does not touch them. ¹⁹We know that we are God’s children, and that the whole world lies under the power of the evil one. ²⁰And 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. (1 John 5:18-20)

Seeing brothers and sisters in sin, and knowing the point to which they may well move if not halted soon, could easily cause the readers to feel uncertain about their own position. Again, the point has already been forcibly made: ‘Those who have been born of God do not sin, because God’s seed abides in them; they cannot sin, because they have been born of God’ (1 John 3:9). Now John adds, ‘the one who was born of God protects them, and the evil one does not touch them’. In the final analysis, we abide in God and are confident, because God is at work in us, both to will and to do his good pleasure. Christ, the only begotten Son of God, keeps us: ‘While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me. I guarded them, and not one of them was lost’ (John 17:12). The evil one does not touch us, for ‘the Son of God was revealed for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil’ (1 John 3:8).

From all that John has been saying, he can, then, make the glorious assertion that ‘we know that we are God’s children’ (lit. ‘of God’). There is no doubt at all; the whole world lies in the evil one, that is, in his power through human guilt (John 8:44; Heb. 2:14 etc.) but the believers do not!

Not only do we know that we are ‘of God’, but we also ‘know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding so that we may know him who is true’. This reinforces the statement made in 1 John 2:20 concerning the anointing of the Holy One. The understanding does not consist in broad theological perceptions, though they would be very valuable. It consists in a rich relationship. We know him who is true, hence we know the truth and the truth has set us free. ‘We are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ’. Ours is no nodding acquaintance but a complete unity with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.

John adds, ‘He is the true God and eternal life’. This may refer to ‘his Son Jesus Christ’. If so, it would be the clearest statement of the deity of Christ. But it may also refer to ‘him who is true’, in which case we would read this as, ‘this one, the one made known to us by his Son, Jesus Christ, that is, the Father, is the true God’. Besides that, he is also ‘eternal life’. Eternal life is not something independent of God. It is the experience of the life of God touching the believer and transforming his or her being. Of course, if the reference is to Jesus Christ, then a statement such as John 14:6 would only bear out the same truth: ‘I am... the life [of] the Father’.

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

This may seem an abrupt ending to a letter like this. But it is in fact most appropriate. Is John saying that the readers must avoid the physical idols that abounded in the surrounding pagan world? Of course, because that was true; but that was not the real issue to be dealt with here. An idol is any substitute for the for the true God who has powerfully revealed himself in Christ. It must be said that believers can turn from the full revelation of God and worship an idol. They may do it by either substituting attributes of God, which are declared in the Son, with others which we might prefer, or they might do it by simply deleting from our understanding attributes of which we disapprove. It is not hard to see that this is what happened to some in the group John is addressing.

John’s letter began with the thrilling awareness that the word of life himself, who was in the beginning with the Father, has been manifest, and that the apostolic message was with the goal of believers knowing full and joyful fellowship with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. The readers had indeed received the message and had come to know and believe the love which God has for us. They know that they are in him and he in them. Therefore they must at all costs keep themselves from anything which would attempt to intrude on and to draw them away from that relationship. The idol is any substitute for the true Father, Son and Holy Spirit.. So ‘keep yourselves from idols’, or, as Jude puts it:

But you, beloved, build yourselves up on your most holy faith; pray in the Holy Spirit; ²¹keep yourselves in the love of God. (Jude 20-21)