

Keep Yourselves from Idols

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[0 : 00] If anyone sees his brother commit a sin that does not lead to death, he should pray and God will give him life. I refer to those whose sin does not lead to death.

There is a sin that leads to death. I am not saying that he should pray about that. All wrongdoing is sin, and there is a sin that does not lead to death.

We know that anyone born of God does not continue to sin. The one who was born of God keeps him safe, and the evil one cannot harm him.

We know that we are children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one. We know also 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, even in his Son, Jesus Christ.

He is the true God and eternal life. Dear children, keep yourselves from idols. When I was a resident director at Grace College, I had to do walkthroughs at the end of the year in all of the rooms in all of my dorms.

[1 : 16] And what that meant was I needed to make sure that my student leaders had noted any and all damage that had been done in the room. College students can do quite a bit of damage to a very small space in a short window of time.

I saw that over and over again, especially in this area. Damage to walls due to command strips. No matter how much you tried to instruct them, no matter how much you tried to remind them, they never removed command strips the right way.

They would pull them away from the wall instead of straight down from the wall. And in pulling them away from the wall, you would walk into the room, and it would look like a hailstorm had passed through that room.

Just all of these little marks all over the walls of drywall missing. The paint ripped off. And one thing you learned as you looked at those walls, command strips work. They are sticky.

They are very sticky. They stick to those walls. And they stick well. In our passage tonight, we're given four vital truths that must stick in our hearts, like command strips in the dorm room of college students.

[2 : 28] Four vital truths here at the end of John's letter. And it is the end. We've made it here. Our passage tonight, then, is something of a summary of all that John has said.

It's the condensed version of his letter, like the Cliff Notes version. Short, quick statements of truth that John wants to hammer home to our hearts.

Not that we're going to purposely skip to the end of the letter, ignoring the rest, but this is a helpful reminder of what John has said to us. We may not retain everything from the five chapters we've worked through, but how about these four vital truths in these nine verses?

That's what we're given here. Four truths that need to stick in our hearts. So here's the first one. Vital truth number one. You have eternal life. You have eternal life.

Just verse 13. Let's read it again. 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.

[3 : 38] So if you remember, the author of this letter, John, he also wrote one of the four gospel accounts. And both here in his letter and also in his gospel accounts, he gives something of a purpose statement.

In his gospel account, in chapter 20, verse 30, he says this, Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

So why did John write his gospel account? So that as we read it, God, by his grace, might save us, that we might become Christians, so that we might believe that Jesus is the Christ.

The Son of God. And that by believing, we may have life in his name. In John's letter, we read his purpose statement here in verse 13, and it's slightly different.

That we may know that we have eternal life. John inserted the word know. It's a small change, but it's a significant one. John wrote his gospel account so that we might believe and have eternal life.

[4 : 54] John wrote his letter so that we might know that we have eternal life. Now all those who believe are saved.

All those who genuinely believe have eternal life. So John's letter helps us to have assurance that we really do believe in the name of the Son of God.

He helps us to have confidence that we are Christians. So here are some questions that we can ask ourselves based on what John has said throughout his letter.

Do you confess that Jesus is the Christ? That he is the Son of God? Do you confess that Jesus is the Son, the eternal Son, who took on flesh to save you from your sins?

Is that the confession of your lips? Is that the confession also, not just of your lips, but is it what you believe in your heart? Do you both confess and believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God?

[6 : 02] That is good evidence that you are a Christian. Do you love God? Do you obey his commandments? Do you have a growing love for his commandments?

Do you see more and more that his commandments are not burdensome? That is good evidence that you are a Christian. Do you love others, especially your brothers and sisters in Christ?

And do you demonstrate that love, not just in word and in talk, but in deed and in truth? That is good evidence that you are a Christian.

Do you remember that God is greater than your heart when your heart seeks to condemn you? Meaning that, do you cling to what God has said? Do you cling to his promises that he keeps secure those who belong to him?

Rather than listening to your heart and what it says about you and your sin, that is good evidence that you are a Christian. Do you find the world and the things of the world less and less appealing?

[7 : 07] Do you see the world for what it is? The desires of the flesh, the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions. It's fleeting. It's unsatisfying.

It's passing away. Is your heart less and less taken by that? That is good evidence that you are a Christian. So take all of those answers to all of those questions together and you should have a pretty accurate picture of whether or not you indeed know the Lord.

Whether or not indeed you have believed that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you have life in his name. John wants us, who are in fact in Christ, to have assurance.

He writes to us that we might know that we have eternal life. Not that we might hope that we have eternal life. Not that we might question whether or not we have eternal life.

But that we might know. We might be settled in our hearts about what is settled in heaven. Now assurance, it's not necessary for salvation.

[8 : 22] But assurance is a wonderful gift from the Lord. To have peace, to have confidence about your standing before God.

That's a wonderful gift. And it has practical effects on how you live your life. We see that here. Here is an example of a practical effect in how assurance changes how we live.

It changes the way that we talk to our Father. We come into his throne room with boldness. And that leads us to our second vital truth that must stick.

You have the Father's ear. You have the Father's ear. Verses 14 and 15 again. 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.

[9 : 26] So we have confidence now as we enter into God's throne room in prayer. And that confidence is rooted in the assurance of our salvation. We come with boldness because we know that we are children of God.

And that is who we are. That this is our heavenly Father that we're coming to. So we come with confidence and we ask him. And if we ask, he hears. And John says that if he hears, we have the requests.

Our requests are answered. But then to keep us from thinking that God is somehow like a spiritual vending machine or somehow that he is a genie in the bottle who bows to our commands, John gives a very important qualifier.

according to his will. If we ask anything according to his will, he hears. And if he hears, we have the requests.

We can be sure that he will answer what we have asked. Because we ask according to his will as it's revealed in Scripture. And what do we learn there?

[10:38] We learn of what he desires. We learn of what pleases him. It's what John has already told us back in chapter 3. He uses the same line of reasoning here.

Remember chapter 3? That if our hearts condemn us, in other words, I'm sorry, that if our hearts no longer condemn us, in other words, we have assurance of salvation, then we can have confidence before God.

We enter into his throne room boldly. And there in chapter 3 the text says, whatever we ask, we receive from him. Now you could hear that and think, I can get anything from God, whatever we ask.

But then in chapter 3, John added a helpful qualifier. Because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him.

That is what it means to pray according to his will. If we pray as people who want to please the Lord. If we pray as people who want to keep his commandments.

[11:47] If we are doing that, then we have assurance that he hears us and that he answers those requests. So what kind of requests characterize your prayer life?

Are your requests more like demands? And if that is the case, how is your prayer life going? Are you experiencing futility? Like we read of in James 4, verse 3.

When you ask, you do not receive. Because you ask with wrong motives that you may spend what you get on your pleasures. You see, to pray according to God's will is to pray with the right motives. It's to pray whatever the particulars of our request may be. It's to pray according to God's will. Are these the kind of motives that shape the backdrop of your prayer life?

However he may answer your request, do you desire for God's kingdom to advance? However he may answer your request, do you desire for him to be glorified?

[12:56] For sinners to be saved? For his church to be built up? For your brothers and your sisters in Christ to look more and more like Christ.

That is what it means to pray according to his will. And you can expect that he will answer. So we should. We should pray expectantly.

We should pray with confidence that we will receive. But not just whatever we want. Not whatever our desire may be. Not whatever our will may be. We receive what we ask when we ask according to his will.

That is the second vital truth that must stick. And here's the third. We come to the Lord praying. And here's the third truth. You pray for your brothers.

You have brothers and sisters to pray for. Vital truth number three. You have brothers and sisters to pray for. Verses 16 and 17.

[13:59] 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. All wrongdoing is sin. But there is sin that does not lead to death. 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.

These verses likely raise some questions for us. Perhaps you've been wondering the whole time, what does this mean? Two questions that are very pressing. What is this sin that leads to death? And what is this sin that doesn't lead to death? These are important questions. And John clearly has two categories in mind. The difference between the two is one of life and death.

[15:07] So it matters immensely. And yet for something that matters so much, it doesn't seem all that clear to us. What does John mean here?

Well, the first and perhaps best thing that we can do is to consider the context. Perhaps John has already talked about this in his letter and we just haven't put the pieces together.

Because remember, this is the end of what John has written. And these are his closing words. So far, we have seen that his closing words, they hearken back to what he's already said in his letter. It's the truths that he wants to drive home. So that's a clue to us. That whatever he means in these verses probably isn't new to us.

It's probably something that we've already covered in the letter. So we should consider the context. And anytime we think about context, we want to think of like a circle. And we want to see that circle start small and keep expanding.

[16:10] So we want to start with the immediate verses. What do we see around those immediate verses surrounding this perhaps hard to understand passage that we're looking at? And if we don't see it in those immediate verses, then okay, let's broaden the circle.

Let's keep looking at the surrounding context of what John has written in his letter. And if we're not seeing it in his letter, though we will, then we need to keep looking in all that John has written. What else has he said that perhaps can help us to understand this?

And if we don't see something in what else he has said, then we look to the whole New Testament. Well, what does the New Testament say? If we don't find it in the New Testament, we look to the whole Bible. We can see what God has said.

We don't need to go that far when we consider the context here. We just need to look at the next verse. Verse 18. John talks about the one born of God who does not keep on sinning.

Now, John doesn't mean there that we stop altogether. He means it's not our habit. It's not our pattern. We don't make a practice of sinning.

[17:17] That's the idea that we saw back in chapter 3. Beginning in verse 4 in that chapter, John had distinguished between the children of God and the children of the devil.

And what distinguished the two? The pattern of their lives. The children of God make a practice of sinning. The children of the devil make a practice...

Children of God make a practice of righteousness. The children of the devil make a practice of sinning. John goes to great lengths to help us understand you can't claim to be a Christian and then live a lifestyle that's defined by sin.

You can't claim to be a Christian and yet the pattern of your life is one of disobedience and disregard for God and what He says. You have no desire to know Him.

No desire to love Him. No desire to know what He says and to live according to it. The pattern of your life says that you are not in Christ. Now that's not to say that a Christian never sins.

[18:23] John has also gone to great lengths to help us to understand that we will war against the flesh until either Christ comes to us or until we go to Him in glory.

John said back in chapter 1, if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. So Christian perfectionism, which is taught by some, is not a biblical teaching.

It is not attainable in this life. There is only one who is perfect, who lived upon this earth. Now as a Christian, we should progressively look more and more like our perfect Savior.

We should grow in grace. We should mature in the Christian life. So the Christian's life should be a pattern of righteousness. And we see the non-Christian's life will be a pattern of sin.

That's how John talks about sin in his letter. He talks about patterns of sin that demonstrate unbelief. Patterns of sin that demonstrate a rejection of the gospel.

[19:34] A rejection of who Jesus is. So we need to understand this. Sin leading to death likely is not a particular sin that we accidentally fall into.

John doesn't tell us about one specific sin here. So we should be careful that we don't think about it in those terms. Whatever it is that John's talking about, it's far more likely in keeping with the context of the letter that it's patterns, it's lifestyles.

Some people live with this fear that they will commit one particular sin and come to realize that is the very sin, the sin that leads to death.

Like it's unknown to us. And we're just hoping that we don't commit that sin as though God is just waiting like a tiger crouching in the grass to catch you in that one sin, to pounce and to condemn you.

And only then do you realize, oh, this is the sin leading to death. But the testimony of Scripture is that is not the character of our God.

[20:45] He is not out to get you like a tiger crouching in the grass. So what John is talking about here is a persistent, hardened rejection of the Son.

What did we just see in the last section of this letter? The testimony concerning this Son. The sin that leads to death is to reject the testimony concerning the Son that the Father has given to us. That is the sin that leads to death. And so that is a sin that an unbeliever commits and continues to commit and never repents of until the day that he stands before the Lord in judgment. Not the brother. Not the brother. The brother, here John says, commits sin that doesn't lead to death. That's not to excuse his sin.

Just like John says here, all sin is wrongdoing. So we should be confessing and repenting of sin. And that is what the true Christian does, which leads to a restored relationship with God.

[21 : 54] But that kind of sin, sin that a Christian absolutely needs to deal with, is a sin that doesn't lead to death. The Christian, the one truly who has been born of God, has no fear of committing sin that leads to death.

And the one who has been born again is described as what in the scriptures? One who has been brought from death to life. Death to life.

So the one who has been born again does not keep on sinning in the sense that he makes a practice of sinning. Because what does verse 18 say? We are protected.

That is, we're protected by the one born of God. Which is an interesting way that John talks about Jesus Christ here in his letter.

Over and over, he's talked about us as the ones who are born of God. And now he says, we are protected by the one born of God. This is John's way of highlighting Jesus' humanity.

[23 : 00] That the Word became flesh. That the Word was born into his world, into this world, though the Word had existed from eternity past.

And as the God-man, he protects us. And what does he protect us from? From following the evil one's lies that lead to hell.

He keeps his children from apostasy. He keeps his people from abandoning their faith, from rejecting the gospel, from committing sin that leads to death.

Now that was a lot of theological lifting to get there. To understand these verses. We have to be careful though. We have to be careful that we don't miss what these verses are calling us to do.

To pray for our brothers and sisters when we see them committing sin. I know it's a temptation for me to get caught up in the curiosity surrounding this sin that leads to death.

[24 : 09] But then failing to heed what John is actually telling us to do. Yes, we need to understand what John means by sin that leads to death. That's why we spent so much time unpacking it.

We certainly can't skip it. But we also can't just stop there. Now, I think I understand what this means. Pack it up. Call it a day. No, we actually need to now do what the passage says.

If you see a brother committing a sin not leading to death, John says, you need to pray for him. And maybe you're asking one more question here. What about the unbeliever committing the sin that leads to death?

Should we pray for them? Because it almost seems like John is telling us to not pray for them. It is John saying not to pray for the conversion of sinners. Look at verse 16.

There is sin that leads to death. I do not say that one should pray for that. I think John simply means that's not my focus here.

[25 : 14] That's not my focus in my closing words to you in my letter. His focus, his exhortation to us here in these verses is to pray for one another. Pray for those who are in Christ.

That God would bring repentance. That he would make this brother to have a contrite heart. That this brother's relationship with the Lord would be restored. That this brother's relationship to other believers would be restored.

That there would be confession of sin and forgiveness sought. We should want good for our brothers and sisters in Christ. We should want life for them.

The life that God gives. Close fellowship with God. So what do you do when you see sin in the life of a brother or sister?

What is your first response? Is it to get on your knees in prayer for them? Or is it something else? Is it to scoff? Wow, that's terrible.

[26 : 16] How could they? What were they thinking? Or how about to gossip? You see a brother committing sin and you talk about it with others. Did you hear what he said?

Did you see what she did? Do you turn a blind eye and not care? You see sin in a brother's life, you go on your merry way.

Too busy to concern yourself with what you've seen. The Word tells us to act. We're to do something. We're to pray. Not to point fingers.

Not to gawk. And not to look down on that fellow believer. How easy is it to compare ourselves to one another?

And here's just how sinful we can be. This came to mind because it is in my heart. I can be relieved when I see sin in a fellow believer's life.

[27 : 17] Relieved because it makes me feel better about myself. Oh, well, at least I haven't done that. Or at least I haven't said that or behaved in that way.

I'm doing okay, I guess, in the Christian life. I'm actually doing better than I thought I was now that I've seen his sin. That is an evil thought.

I am downplaying. You are downplaying sin in your own life. You are making light of your sin and at the very same time failing to love your brother or sister in Christ.

Those kinds of thoughts don't build up the body of Christ. They only serve to divide us, to push us apart as we are jockeying for position as the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

That's what the disciples were doing multiple times. But in particular, on their way to Capernaum, they were arguing among themselves as to who was the greatest.

[28 : 19] And every time they did that kind of thing, they were shown to be so far off the mark. Are we just as guilty of doing that in our hearts towards others?

You see another Christian in sin. Don't compare yourself to them. Stop thinking about yourself altogether. You see a brother in sin, you should be disheartened, you should be grieved for his sake, and you shouldn't be thinking about yourself and how you compare to that person.

Instead, you should pray for him. Doesn't that say something about how much we really love each other? We want to see good in each other's lives.

We want to see each other walking in sweet fellowship with the Lord. If we see sin in a brother or sister's life, we want that sin put to death. So where do we start?

We bring them before the throne of grace. We bring them before our Lord and we pray according to his will. And more often than not, we see the sins of fellow Christians in those that we live with, those that we live closest to, perhaps in the home.

[29 : 33] What is your first response when you see, say, a believing spouse or a believing child committing sin? Is it to speak?

There's a place for that. The Bible calls us to speak, to confront in love, to come to a brother or a sister and to rebuke with a spirit of gentleness.

Galatians 6.1 tells us there is a place to speak. But are we also at times speaking with harshness? Are we critical towards each other? Are we quick to point out the sin, perhaps in anger?

And whether or not we speak, have we even thought to pray? Are we so quick to speak to that person in our life that we are so close to that we fail to speak to our Father on their behalf?

Are you praying? Or are you skipping that part? That's the third vital truth that we must see stick in our hearts.

[30 : 39] You pray for your brothers and sisters. Here's the fourth and the final one. You belong to the one true God.

You belong to the one true God. beginning in verse 20. 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. Little children, keep yourselves from idols.

Have you ever noticed in movies, TV shows, that more often than not when characters are on the phone, they don't say goodbye when they hang up.

It is the strangest phenomenon that they always, and nobody's ever put off by it, just hang up, keep going with whatever's happening in the plot of the movie. They never say goodbye. Just finish what they're saying, click, hang up.

[31 : 41] These verses feel a little bit like that. especially if you think about the fact that letters would be read often publicly for all of those in attendance to hear.

The congregation would gather together to publicly hear that letter read. Can you imagine receiving this letter and hearing it read for the first time? He is the true God and eternal life.

Little children, keep yourselves from idols. Click. We're done. There's nothing more to say here. No formal closing to the letter. No greetings to pass along.

No individuals to recognize in the church. No benediction. Just keep yourselves from idols. And we roll that up. There's something jarring about that, but in a good way.

The last words given to us we need to remember well. John doesn't close by saying, I can't wait to see you soon. His letter doesn't finish with this lighthearted mood about it.

[32 : 44] He closes with a grave warning. Keep yourselves from idols. Now idols were very much a reality still in the first century when this letter would have been written and circulated.

John was likely writing this letter for the sake of the church in Ephesus and then for the surrounding region. And idol worship was alive and well at that time. If you remember in Acts 19 a riot broke out in Ephesus because of Paul's preaching of the gospel.

And the riot was instigated by this man named Demetrius. He was a silversmith and what he made were silver shrines of Artemis.

And he was angered because Paul had successfully done this the scriptures say. Persuaded and turned away a great many people saying that gods made with hands are not gods.

So now John is writing to those who had in fact turned away. And he's telling them don't go back to where you came from. You turned away from worshiping gods made with hands.

[33 : 56] They are no gods at all. Keep yourselves from idols. Keep yourselves from what is false. Why? Because you are in him who is true.

So keep yourselves from what is false because you belong to the one true God. So here's John's flow of thought in these last two verses.

The Son of God has come. The eternal Son has entered the world as a man. And he's given you understanding. He has enlightened your eyes to see him and to know him as your only Savior, your only Lord, the one who died on the cross for your sins and rose again.

You have this right understanding of the Son who has come. And now you have this right knowledge of him. You know him. He abides in you.

You abide in him. You have a living relationship with Jesus Christ. He's the one true God. He's the only source of eternal life. So then, don't turn back to false idols.

[35 : 10] Don't turn away from him. Don't look for life outside of him. You won't find it. But how the evil one wants to tempt you to think otherwise.

How he wants to convince you that God is not enough. That fullness of life is not found at God's right hand. That pleasures forevermore are not located there.

So John says, don't be deceived. And the best way to do that, keep yourself as far away as possible from whatever would deceive you.

Keep yourselves far from whatever would try to steal your love and your obedience and your devotion to the Lord. You have come to know the one true God.

you have come to know his Son, Jesus Christ. He is the true God. In him is found eternal life.

[36 : 14] May you know with confidence that you have life in him. Let's pray together. Heavenly Father, what important truth you have given to us, revealed to us in your word that we might live by it.

We thank you for the closing of John's letter, even a letter that ends so abruptly because by it you've drawn our attention to what is of such utmost importance in our lives.

We thank you that you have sent your Son, that he has come into the world, to save sinners such as us. We pray, Lord, that you would make us to know that we have eternal life because it is true of all of those who believe in you.

We pray that you would give us that assurance. We pray that the truth of John's letter here would continue to resonate in our hearts, that it would continue to ring out in our minds, that we would recall all that you have said in this letter and that by it you would comfort and encourage us and that with that assurance that you would change the way that we live.

That even as we've seen in these truths that we would be a praying people coming before you with boldness, knowing that you hear our requests and you answer. What a faithful, kind God you are to us.

[37 : 43] Thank you for loving us, demonstrating that love in sending your son. Thank you that we can call you Father because we are your children. We come before you humbly saying, hear our requests, even tonight we pray.

In Jesus' name, Amen.