

1 JOHN

Part 11: “The Twilight of The Idols”

1 John 5:13–21

By David A. Ritchie

Sunday, August 27, 2023 (Ordinary Time)

Summary

The Apostle John has written the letter of 1 John so that we might know and behold the real Christ and forsake anything that would seek to substitute itself in place of him. As we conclude our exploration of 1 John, we explore three practical applications of the Apostle John’s Christ-centered vision: prayer as a response to knowing God, perseverance amidst challenges, and protection that is available to us because of God’s power.

Scripture Reading

“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. 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. 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. 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” (1 John 5:13–21).

Introduction

The New Testament is a collection of twenty-seven books. And of these twenty-seven writings, twenty-one are known as epistles. Epistles are Holy Spirit-inspired letters that are each written by a Christian Apostle to the early Christian church.

Over the years, I have preached through numerous New Testament epistles to this congregation. In fact, just last year, at this exact same time, our church was walking through Paul’s letter to the church of Rome.

Today, as we read this final section of the letter of 1 John, I can't help but notice the stark and surprising differences between the writing of the Apostle Paul and the writing of the Apostle John.

Paul's epistles are systematically structured and move along a pre-planned path of tightly organized, sequential logic. In this way [show [1Chartres Cathedral](#)], when Paul writes a letter like the book of Romans, he is not just writing a letter—he is constructing a cathedral of ideas that he wants us to inhabit so that we might worship within.

Like a master architect, he lays careful foundations, and on those foundations, he places colonnades of columns and walls of brick and mortar. On the outside of the walls, he builds flying buttresses to support the weight of the high-pointed arches that reach upward to the very peak of the structure [show [2Chartres Interior](#)].

Each portion of Paul's writing is a distinct section that supports and bears the weight of the soaring ideas that follow. So for Paul in Romans, Christian unity stands on sanctification, sanctification stands on our justification, and our justification rests on the foundation that is faith in the righteousness of God revealed by the gospel of Jesus Christ.

But even though Paul wrote the vast majority of the New Testament epistles, John doesn't play by Paul's rules. Whereas Paul writes in straight lines, John writes in circles. Whereas Paul builds cathedrals, John composes stained-glass windows [show [3Chartres Rose Window](#)].

In this way, John does not present his ideas in a linear fashion. His themes flow organically. They braid and intertwine and circle back upon themselves. John's ideas are not meant to be analyzed as individual components any more than you would analyze the individual shards of glass in a stained-glass mosaic. Rather, John's concepts are meant to be contemplated and experienced in terms of their interconnected relationship with one another.

John has taught us that God is light, and because God is light, we are called to walk in the light before God and in fellowship with one another. John has taught us that God is love and as God has loved us in Christ we too are to love one another. John has taught us that the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth who reveals Christ to our hearts and that we are to walk in the truth.

These themes are not separate and independent from one another. They unfold from one another like a rose window unfurls in concentric circles and kaleidoscopic colors.

John writes this way because he does not merely want to teach us abstract theological ideas—he wants us to lead us into an encounter with whom God has revealed himself to be in Christ. And he wants us to truly know and experience the eternal life that is available in Christ now.

As John says in this very passage, *“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”* (1 John 5:13).

So now that we have come to the end of our journey through 1 John, I want to take a step back and contemplate the collective image that is formed by John’s mosaic. I want us to consider a vision of the Christian life that is possible if what John about Christ has written is true.

As we will discover in this final passage, there are three deeply practical realities that flow from John’s vision of Christ. Those realities are 1.) *Prayer*, 2.) *Perseverance*, and 3.) *Protection*.

Exposition

1.) Prayer

When I think about the people that I have known in my life who have truly embodied what it means to know Jesus and follow Jesus, one of the names that come first to my mind is that of Mauricio Barrientos.

Once upon a time, Mauricio was once a medical doctor, an avowed atheist, and a communist who was actively participating in a civil war in which he and his fellow communists sought to take over the national government of El Salvador. As a talented physician and a director of a pharmaceutical lab, the communist leadership had even pegged Mauricio to help lead the new health department if and when their cause should prevail.

However, beneath the surface of all his outward success and bravado, Mauricio’s selfishness and addictions had shattered his family and brought his life to the edge of ruin. Despite seeking help from the best physicians and psychologists he could find, he felt a deep chasm of sorrow in his heart that could not be filled. And it was in this place that Mauricio encountered Jesus Christ.

Christ restored Mauricio’s broken family. He healed Mauricio’s sick heart. Through faith in Christ, Mauricio experienced a spiritual hope and life that he never thought was possible. At great personal risk to his own safety—Mauricio left and forsook the communist party. He even left a lucrative career as a physician and instead became a pastor.

When I first met Pastor Mauricio, he had been in ministry for decades. He had seen hundreds of people come to faith. He had planted churches throughout El Salvador and Central America. He established multiple schools that fed and educated children in extreme poverty.

And he was simply the most joy-filled pastor I have ever known.

I was just starting in ministry, and I wanted to learn everything I could from this man. So, I asked him, “Mauricio, what is the single most important thing you would tell a pastor who is just beginning in ministry?”

His answer was so simple that it shocked me. He responded, “*Pray more.*”

Mauricio is with the Lord now. But I think about the advice he gave me often. I think it is significant that the more a person truly knows God, the more they will feel compelled and confident to pray to God.

So, it doesn't surprise me that John would conclude his letter about knowing the true God with an exhortation to pray. John writes, “*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*” (1 John 5:14–15).

John has told us that God is light. If that is true, we should be unashamed to confess our sins to God in prayer so that we might be forgiven and healed. John has told us that God is love. If that is true, we should be bold to come before God in prayer and bring our requests and our needs. John has told us that the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth. If that is true, we should eagerly pray for wisdom, guidance, and direction.

If, as John says, our God is eternal and greater than any power of this world, that means there is no need of ours that is too big for our God; nor is there any request that is too small that it would be unworthy of his attention. If God loved us so much that he gave us Jesus, we can trust him with our prayers.

If we believe God is who he has revealed himself to be, we should be a people of prayer. But even more, we should be a people who are *confident* to pray. For Christians do not come to God in prayer on the basis of our own merit or worthiness. When we pray, we pray “in the name of Jesus.” We are those who have been united with Christ through faith. And, in Christ, God hears us and loves us and accepts us.

So if you are stuck and you feel like you don't have the words to pray, I want to encourage you to pray with your Bible in hand. You can always use the words of the Lord's Prayer in Matthew chapter 6 as a template for prayer. You can always read the book of Psalms until you find a chapter that you can pray as if they were the words of your own heart.

When we pray God's perfect word, we pray God's perfect will.

So, I encourage you, look for a time to pray a short prayer every morning as your day begins. Pray each night when you lay your head down to sleep. Pray when you drive in your car. Pray before you eat. Pray when you need strength or wisdom or grace for a specific task.

For in prayer, we know and experience God, and when we know and experience God, we will feel more compelled to pray.

2.) Perseverance

Perseverance refers to the capacity to persist and to persevere despite challenges or difficulties. Perseverance refers to our capacity to endure, to keep going, and remain steadfast and resolute in pursuing a goal.

Perseverance has been an undercurrent theme throughout the book of 1 John. John is writing this letter to early Christian communities who beginning to experience both external and internal threats.

Externally, the early Christians are encountering hatred, hostility, and misunderstanding from their non-Christian neighbors as the authorities of the Roman Empire, as their faithfulness to follow Jesus often put them at odds with the way of the world. Internally, these same Christians are facing discouragement, division, and confusion as false teachers sought to infiltrate their churches and spread misleading ideas about Jesus.

In such a situation, it would be tempting to want to just give up. But John writes this letter because he wants to give them such a glorious vision of Christ that they will be inspired to persevere and endure. Likewise, as inspired Scripture, 1 John is meant to help us see Jesus in such a way that we will persevere as well.

For this reason, John has reminded us that we are not only believers—we have been *born of God*. And if God is our Father, we should persevere in obedience. We should persevere in keeping his commands and living for him. We should persevere in loving one another as fellow brothers and sisters in Christ.

John has also taught that Christ isn't just our savior—he is our *advocate*. That means when we fail, we should persevere by quickly confessing and turning away from our sins and turning toward God. John has taught that we are not only in Christ—Christ's Spirit abides within us, and he testifies within us to what is right and true. That means we should be diligent to persevere in the truth and reject any lie that would distract us from Christ or distort our vision of Christ.

Simply said, if all that John has said about God is true, we should persevere in obedience, persevere in love, persevere in contending for truth, and persevere by standing against the temptation of the world that would bend our hearts toward lesser loves.

Moreover, we should be deeply committed to the work of helping one another persevere. And it just so happens that we have a term for this communal process of mutual commitment in which we help one another know Christ and persevere in following Christ. That term is "*Christian community*." In fact, I believe deep Christian community

is perhaps the single greatest predictor of whether or not someone will persevere in their spiritual health and overall walk with Jesus.

We will inevitably stumble and fall in the Christian life. But when we stumble, let us stumble toward Christ together rather than apart from one another and away from Christ.

It is with that mindset that John writes: *“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..”* (1 John 5:16a, ESV)

In other words, the prayer for a Christian brother or sister that John is talking about here is the same thing as the prayer of restoration that Paul talks about in the book of Galatians. Paul says it this way, *“Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. For if anyone thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself”* (Gal 6:1–3).

That means when you are close enough to a fellow believer to see that they are not living as they ought to live—love them enough to lovingly challenge them and hold them accountable. And when a fellow Christian confesses to a fault or failure, do not shame them, condemn them, or retreat from them. Show them the grace and mercy of God, and pray for them that they might be fully restored.

But right after this this idea, we encounter a very odd verse in 1 John. John states, *“... 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”* (1 John 5:16b–17).

At first glance, this sounds really bad. Can the Bible actually not tell us to pray for someone who is struggling with sin?

Here is an example of why it is so crucial to be mindful of the historical context in which John is writing. John is writing to a group of Christians who recently had to separate themselves from false teachers who were teaching that Jesus was never really a human and never truly died for our salvation.

But to hold to and teach such a doctrine is not just a sin. It is a sin that leads to *death*. And John wants his readers to know that they are not responsible for those who willingly reject Christ in this way.

In this way, John’s words are a warning. We are called to stumble toward Christ together. But there are people who would tempt you to stumble away from Christ. There will be those who persist in unrepentant sin and even intentionally and willfully lead people astray from Christ. In such cases, you are not obligated to such people, especially if pursuing them would cause you to forsake your own Christian community.

You are called to persevere, and in order to persevere, you will need people who will remind you who Christ really is and who you are called to be in Christ.

3.) Protection

Almost every night, I am the parent who oversees bedtime for my three sons. And since before our boys could ever speak, I have prayed over them the blessing of Numbers 6:24–26. That blessing reads: *“The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace”* (Num 6:24–26).

Originally, this was a prayer spoken by Aaron, the first high priest of ancient Israel. It was a blessing spoken in the wilderness as the people of God wandered in search of their Promised Land. It was designed as a way by which God placed his very name upon his people. And it was a reminder that the God who delivered them from slavery in Egypt would not abandon them in the wilderness. He will be faithful to protect them.

So, too, I pray this prayer over my boys every night as a reminder to them and a reminder to my own heart that the One who saves us will also sustain us. The One who calls us has also promised to keep up. And he will complete the work he has begun in us until the day of Jesus Christ (Phil 1:6).

That is why John writes, *“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”* (1 John 5:18–19).

If you are born of God, even though you live in the spiritual wilderness of a sin-fractured creation, you are no longer of the world. You have been set free from the tyranny of the spiritual powers of this world, and your God will be faithful to protect you. As Eugene Peterson paraphrases this passage, *“The God-begotten are also the God-protected.”*¹

You can rest in that protection because you can rest in the power of God.

Conclusion

The Lord who is powerful enough and loving enough and faithful enough to bless you and keep you is the Lord who has revealed himself ultimately and perfectly in Jesus Christ. And in knowing Christ, we have known the true God and the source of eternal life.

As John writes in the penultimate verse of this book, *“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*

¹ Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2005), 1 Jn 5:18.

we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life” (1 John 5:20).

Now, this verse would have been a fine and respectable way to end this book. Like Paul, John could have even dropped a few names, written “grace and peace to you,” said “amen,” and no one would blink. After all, that is how you are supposed to end a letter.

But again, John breaks the rules.

He does something very different and unexpected. He ends on a short command that seems like it comes out of nowhere. This is the last verse of 1 John, *“Little children, keep yourselves from idols” (1 John 5:21).*

In the ancient world, idols were graven images of pagan gods that were placed inside temples so that they could receive sacrifices. Idol worship is obviously a bad thing that is condemned elsewhere in the Bible and elsewhere in the New Testament. But why does John bring this up now?

Even if it is a true idea, this is an odd way to end a letter. The word “idols” (εἰδώλων) is a word that he has used nowhere else in this entire book. Why would he introduce a brand-new idea in his final sentence?

It’s a startling move, which is precisely why it is so brilliant. This final sentence is meant to jolt us, surprise us, and make us pay attention. It’s like finding out in the final scene that Bruce Willis was dead the entire film, or that Kevin Spacey was the bad guy they were looking for the whole time.

John wants us to go back and reevaluate everything that has come before in this book. He wants us to look back and see everything in a new light. So, yes, this is the word idol has never been used in this book. But in reality, this whole book has been about how we are to keep ourselves from idols and how idols are far more than just little statues in pagan temples.

John has shown us: any vision of God not formed by Jesus is an idol. Anything that would distract us from Jesus or obscure our vision of Jesus is an idol. Anything that demands our highest love and highest allegiance that is not Jesus is an idol.

And this is the truth about idols: your idols will never fail to fail you. They will always disappoint you. They will always seek to enslave you.

But your heart will never release its hold on lesser idols simply by knowing that idols are wrong. Your heart must be convinced that Jesus is better. That is the real reason why John has written the letter of 1 John—so that we might behold the real Jesus so that, in seeing Christ, our joy would be so complete and that we would willingly forsake all Christ counterfeits.

All the stars of the nighttime sky eventually fade into the grey of dawn when the overwhelming brightness of the sun shines over the horizon. So too, the revelation of Christ's glory is the twilight of all idols. That is what 1 John is all about.

John has taught us to see that Christ is our life and our light. He is the one who came to save us yet whose Spirit abides within us. He is love, and his perfect love casts out all fear.

So, Redeemer Christian Church, may we learn to so embrace the testimony of John the Apostle so that alongside him, we would see and know and encounter the God that is true. May we live our lives in light of who God has revealed himself to be in his Son, Jesus Christ. May keep his words and in keeping these words be kept from all idols.

AMEN.

Discussion Starters for Gospel Communities

- 1. Read 1 John 5:13–21 out loud. Have someone from your group rephrase what this passage is saying in their own words.*
- 2. What does this passage reveal about God, Jesus, and God's plan?*
- 3. What does this passage reveal about humanity?*
- 4. As you look back on this passage, what are the truths that we should apply to our own lives? In other words, what are you doing well, and what do you need to change?*
- 5. When you think about what you have learned from this portion of Scripture, can you think of someone you should pray for or share this with?*