

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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1 John 5:13-21

"Security"

John is reaching the end of his sermon-letter, and does what he did at the end of his Gospel: he states *why* he is writing. His Gospel summary was "These things 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" (Jn 20:31). The purpose of his Epistle: "I write to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know you have eternal life" (1 Jn 5:13).

John's goal in his letter has been to provide reassurance to troubled Christians, and he has told them repeatedly that if they *believe*, if they *repent* of sin and strive to obey God's will, and if they *love* one another as God loves them, then they can be sure that they are reconciled to God their Father and are now "his children." In these final paragraphs, John spells out again some of the consequences of that reconciliation.

1) *Eternal Life*

He wants the Christians to know that they already have eternal life – the very life of God that Jesus came to share with them. They do not have to go through life wondering if they are or ever will be acceptable to God; if they have faith, they already possess his life and his blessing.

They do not have to wait until they die, or until the Last Judgment, to learn whether they have pleased God.

That is a reassurance we all need, and one that Christians have always been *able* to enjoy. There have, of course, been times when Christians lost that sense of security amid the moralizing that passed as Christian teaching. That only left people fearful that they had not, and never could, "measure up" to God's standards. But that is not the Gospel. Jesus came to redeem sinners, and to give life to those who trusted in his atoning death for them. Acceptance before God is about what Christ has done, not what we do. Salvation is by grace – God's favor to those who do not deserve it – through faith to all who believe, and not a result of our "achievements."

There are those who regard confidence in God as presumptuous; but in fact it is those who feel they may be able to live well enough to earn God's favor who are presumptuous! Assurance of God's grace and favor is a Christian birthright. I will tell you that this becomes an issue as years go by. Nobody with any degree of self-knowledge and honesty can avoid the sense of guilt that comes from having "left undone those things that we ought to have done, and

having done those things we ought not to have done," as the prayer of confession in the Book of Common Prayer puts it. The longer we live, the worse this gets, unless we have faith in Jesus Christ as our Savior and know we are forgiven and set free from guilt.

I have sat with many people in their last weeks of life, and observed the peace of those who know they are accepted by God. There are others who speak anxiously about "whether they have pleased God," and I have at times found wonderful opportunities to talk with them about what Jesus has done.

If you don't yet have the peace that comes from knowing you are reconciled to God through Jesus, then believe, and discover that you "have eternal life." John says it better than I can: "I write to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you *have*" - present tense - "eternal life."

2) *Confidence in Prayer*

Secondly, John wants Christians to know that "we have confidence in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us." Christians have assurance that God listens to their prayers.

Now it is clear to everyone that not all requests made in prayer are "answered." We can be assured of receiving what we ask only if we ask "according to his will." That means several things. First, that as we come to know him better, we know his will better - not only his commandments, the teachings of Jesus, and so on, but his will for us individually. So the way are prayers are answered (or not) is one way in which we learn his will. In other words, prayer changes us. I am sure you know this as well as I do: for example, as I go to visit someone in the hospital or a nursing home, if I pray that God will bless the visit and make it fruitful and

honoring to him, this changes the way I approach the visit, the way I speak, and what I speak about.

But there is more to prayer than changing me or you. To pray according to God's will is also to be ready to say at every point, "Lord, not my will but yours be done." It is to seek through prayer to become instruments of God's will, so that his plans for the world can in some degree be carried out through me. It is also to acknowledge that what God in his great purposes intends may be quite different from my wishes, and to yield to his will. Even then, our prayers may be used by God to set in motion plans that we have no control over or any clear understanding of. But we pray in confidence that God listens to us and answers us.

John gives what is perhaps intended as an illustration of the power of prayer - though it is an obscure one - in encouraging Christians to pray for "a brother who commits a sin." He says that such prayers will be answered, and God will "give life" to the sinner. But it is hard to understand just what sins are in view, and who exactly John means by "a brother." He distinguishes "sins that lead to death" and sins that do not. Centuries later, this idea led the church to list "mortal" sins - which if not repented of would lead to damnation - and "venial" sins that would not. But this cannot be John's point: he is probably referring to "former brothers" who have *apostatized* - renounced their faith in Jesus and no longer believe in repentance and forgiveness - and have "gone out" from the church to become the "antichrists" and "false prophets" that he has denounced earlier. He does not command prayer for them - though nor does he forbid it!

It's also unclear what to think about those others whose sin "does not lead to death" - are they Christians, or not? In that "God will

give them life" in answer to Christians' prayers, they sound more like unbelievers. Whatever the case, the central message is clear: Christians should pray for the spiritual health of others. That is, I suspect, something we do all too rarely - we pray often about material, health or relational issues facing people we care about, but too little that God will protect them - Christians or not - from sin and from the evil that surrounds them in the world. I hope you pray regularly for the spiritual health of your friends and family, your church, your fellow worshippers, your pastor, and all your leaders. All need it!

3) *Protection*

The third of John's consequences for those who believe in Christ is that they will be protected from sin and evil by their Lord. As he has said earlier, "Christians do not sin," or as many modern translations render it, "Christians do not *continue to sin*." That they may do so at times, or inadvertently, is clear to everyone. So Christians should pray for one another, but they should also rest in the confidence that they are being protected, because the Holy Spirit within them is a powerful guard against temptation and evil. We should be thankful for all the sin and evil we are delivered from - often all unknown to us - by the spirit's work.

Christians should also be confident that "the evil one cannot harm them" - or more literally, "cannot touch them." Some Christians live in fear of the demonic, or "the attacks of Satan." John says "do not fear," because in Jesus Christ you are completely protected from such evil. The "evil one" may be roaming the world, but he cannot harm or even *touch* the children of God.

4) *Knowing God*

Finally, John wants Christians then and now to realize that their faith is solidly founded

on the historic facts of Jesus' life, death, resurrection and ascension. "We know the Son of God has come." We no longer wait for him; we know with assurance that he has come, because reliable witnesses have testified to his coming.

In coming, he revealed to us truth about God that we could never have known otherwise. Christian faith is about a person in whom we trust, but also about the revelation he brought. We now *understand* that we can truly come to know - personally - the true God. So assurance of faith is built both on the historic record of Christ's coming, and on our experience of "knowing God." Neither is complete without the other. But if we now "know God," we also share in his life - we are "in him" because we are "in Christ." "This is eternal life, to know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" - so said Jesus himself in prayer to his Father (Jn 17:3). So Christians should rest in their knowing God, and in their communion with him, and should avoid all "false gods" and idols.

This then is John's conclusion, and the question he poses for us over the distance of 20 centuries is clear: do we know God though his Son? Are we reassured by the biblical record of Jesus' coming, and our own experience of faith? Are we confident before God in prayer? Do we know we have the gift of life? Do we know that our faith is true because it is placed in the true God?

Do we have security? Or are we plagued by doubt, uncertainty, confusion? Do we still wonder whether the Bible is reliable, whether Jesus was really who he said he was, whether God is there at all? It would be strange if we had never wrestled with these questions, and stranger still - given their importance - if we had left them unresolved!

But the very fact that we are all here this morning, and not some place else, testifies to some level of desire to understand these things. At the very least, we suspect that there is a transcendent reality beyond our everyday experience of this world, with all its beauty and glory mixed with pain and grief. There must be more than this! This must all have some meaning! Yes, there is more, and yes, it does mean something.

The Christian claim is that when Jesus came, a truth and a life entered the world that had never been seen before or since. Those who explore, follow, embrace, trust this God-man, are given a key to understanding and to living that makes all the difference. To people who “know him” – and it is a present tense knowledge, not just a matter of history – comes a life of confidence, assurance, peace, purpose, and an increasing desire and power to be reconciled to others, to care about the needs of others, to be marked by restraint, graciousness, fidelity, integrity, caring. To them is given a buried layer of joy and hope that is unaffected by the ups and downs of life.

People who believe sense that and live as though they are privileged and blessed people, far beyond what they have deserved, and they try to reflect that grace in their dealings with other people. In their hearts, they know they are at peace with the God who is Maker, Sustainer, Redeemer and Moral Judge of the universe. There is, quite literally, nothing quite like it. Are you one of them? Does John reassure you, or does he baffle or annoy you? Don't rest until you have sorted it out, and found your security in Jesus Christ.

Let us pray...