

“What Do You Know?”

*“I have written 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).*

1 John 5:11-21 ¹

Think with me about some of the possible meanings of the title of this sermon. If the words, “What do you know?” are spoken in a certain way—“Well, whaddayouknow!”—they can indicate surprise, and sometimes pleasure.

If the words are spoken with emphasis on the penultimate word—“What do you know?”—they can suggest the kinds of knowledge that schools probe for. And if emphasis is added—“What do you **know**?”—the question has to do with certainty and conviction. It is this last question that occupies our attention this morning.

Our Journey through the Bible is approaching its end. Today we come to the short letter we know as “1 John.” For the next two Sundays, we’ll consider passages from John’s Revelation. Andrew will preach for Thanksgiving; and then Advent begins. We’ll look at Second and Third John and Jude during Advent.

As you may remember, during this Journey I’ve offered one or two sermons from each of the Bible’s sixty-six books. Although on other occasions I’ve tried to summarize the major thrust of each book, this time I’ve just been looking for “interesting” passages to examine; and so it is this morning that we’ll look at how John concludes this wonderful letter, focusing on “**Seven Things that We Know for Sure.**”ⁱ

As we turn our attention to 1 John 5:11-21, I encourage you to keep your Bible open.

11 *And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son.*

In this final chapter of his letter, John has focused on the testimony God has provided to verify that Jesus of Nazareth was and is God’s Anointed One, the Messiah promised both from the beginning of Creation and from the beginning of the Bible. This testimony has to do with God’s having come among us in human flesh, having died to redeem us from our Sin, and having risen from death in order to share with us God’s victorious Life that never ends:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. We observed his glory, the glory as the one and only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth (John 1:1, 14).²

Just before our text begins in verse 11, John has written that “*The one who does not believe [God’s testimony about Jesus] has made [God out to be] a liar, because he has not believed in the testimony God has given about his Son*” (v. 10). John’s whole letter has been refuting those who have denied Jesus, and his conclusion focuses on what God has given to us through Jesus: *eternal life*.

As I’m sure you know, “eternal life” means a lot more than just life that “lasts forever.” A life that lasted forever could as easily be a curse as well as a blessing, an awful burden and not a wonderful gift. In order for “eternal life” to be a gift, something else is needed, and that something else is JOY.

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on November 1, 2020. All Saints’ Day. Two days before the Presidential Election.

² Re-read John’s powerful statement of this in the opening words of his Gospel—John 1:1-14.

Jesus told His disciples that *“I have told you these things so that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete.”*³

Only God is truly eternal, before, after, and beyond Time. *Eternal life*, then, is the gift of sharing *the joy-full life of God*. Isn't that great?

12 *The one who has the Son has life.*

The one who does not have the Son of God does not have life.

13 *I have written these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may **know** that you have eternal life.*

Earlier in this letter, John wrote that *“No one who denies the Son has the Father; he who confesses the Son has the Father as well”* (2:23). Verse 12 is a restatement of that Truth, and a reminder of what Jesus told us in John 14:6: *“I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”*⁴

As we come to 1 John 5:13, we come to the first of our “Seven Things that We Know for Sure”: *“So that you may know that you have eternal life.”*ⁱⁱ Verse 13 might be considered to be the thesis statement for John's letter (though after the fact). It is also the key idea in this sermon. Let's move on to the second and third “Things We Know for Sure.”

14 *This is the confidence we have before him:*

If we ask anything according to his will, he hears us.

15 *And if we **know** that he hears whatever we ask, we **know** that we have what we have asked of him.*

Verses fourteen and fifteen have been the source of much perplexity and consternation across the centuries. The problem arises, for the most part, from our reading these words too quickly and superficially, which tends to result in our approaching God through prayer as we might approach a vending machine whose only purpose is to give us what we ask for.

This is not the only place in the New Testament where such confusion arises. Jesus told us, for example, that *“Whatever you ask in my name, I will do it so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it.”*⁵ That's the reason we frequently end our prayers with “In Jesus Name,” as though those “magic words” secure the deal and require God's acquiescence to our whims and desires, whatever they might be.

As we try to unravel this, we do well to remember that “prayer” is simply a conversation in which one of the participants is God. While God is obviously aware of and present in all of our conversations, sometimes we're aware of speaking to God directly, and we think of those times as “prayer.” But I'm afraid that many of those conversations tend to resemble a child's conversation with Santa Claus. That's not what real prayer looks like.

In a sense, talking to God is somewhat like the conversations that Andrew, Jenetha and Rebecca and I have in staff meeting each week. We're engaged in a common purpose, and we consult together about how best to move forward toward that purpose in a given week.

³ John 15:11. See also 1 John 1:4.

⁴ While this Truth surely operates in ways beyond our knowing, the New Testament is crystal clear that this affirmation is True.

⁵ John 14:13-14. See also Mark 11:24; John 15:7, 16, 16:23-27; 1 John 3:21-22, among others.

When we talk to God, we're reporting for duty in service of a common purpose—God's Purpose, not ours—and finding out how best to move forward toward the accomplishment of that purpose. That's what it means to "*ask anything according to his will.*"

Long ago, when I visited the Captain in his stateroom, I didn't go to get the Captain to do something I wanted. I went to find out how better to carry out his purposes for the ship. Talking to God is a little like that, but with the enormous difference that God has been revealed to us as a heavenly Father who loves us beyond all imagining and whose Purpose is to provide eternal life to every one of us who will accept that Gift. That's the Great Purpose on which prayer focuses. John Stott noted that every true prayer is a variation on the theme "Your will be done."⁶

In order to pray "according to God's will," you and I must first be "born again" into God's family through faith in Jesus as the One who alone can save us from our Sin (John 3:3). There is no other starting place but this. After that beginning, we "remain in Him" by obeying His commands, chief among which is to love one another (John 15:1-17).

Even at our best, though, we frequently we have only fragmentary ideas about what God is up to in a particular situation. We see only part of the picture, and so we frequently don't receive what we ask for—at least not in the ways we expect.

Even so, for reasons unknown to us, God has chosen to work in our world largely through our prayer. Much of what God desires to do for humankind is limited by whether or not we who follow Jesus cooperate in prayer with God's purposes.

On the one hand, this is an incredible privilege, that you and I should be invited to become channels of God's power into the world. And on the other hand, we have the comfort of knowing that if we imperfectly perceive God's purposes and thereby do not cooperate with God in the ways that we intend, God is not going to run the universe into a ditch because we asked unwisely or incorrectly.

Verses 16 and 17 have some important things in them, but they don't include any of our "Seven Things We Know for Sure," so I'll include an exegesis of those verses with the online version of this sermon.ⁱⁱⁱ Let's move on to the fourth and fifth "Things We Know for Sure."

18 We **know** that everyone who has been born of God does not sin,
but the One who is born of God keeps him, and the evil one does not touch him.
19 We **know** that we are of God, and the whole world is under the sway of the evil one.

Verse 18 ought to get our attention. What in the world might it mean that "*everyone who has been born of God **does not sin?***" Do you find that comforting with respect to your own situation?

This is an excellent example of the crucial importance of context, as well as the need to use several different translations in Bible study. Before we get too overwrought about this, we need to remember that earlier in this same letter, John wrote that "*If we say, 'We have no sin,' we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us*" (1:8); so here he must be talking about something other than literal sinlessness.

⁶ C.H. Dodd put it this way: "Prayer rightly considered is not a device for employing the resources of omnipotence to fulfil our own desires, but a means by which our desires may be redirected according to the mind of God, and made into channels for the forces of his will."

A comparison of other translations⁷ shows that “does not sin” could also be translated as “does not habitually sin,” “does not deliberately and knowingly sin,” or “does not make a practice of sinning.” My friends, so long as you and I inhabit these earthly bodies, we’re going to continue to wrestle with Sin.⁸ Christians are not persons who don’t sin. We’re people who sin more than we want to. We’re people who do not live in deliberate and knowing sin.

That’s good news, and there’s more. John goes on to remind us that while the forces of evil will never give up their effort to lead us into Sin, our Lord Jesus protects us and prevents Satan from being able to take us down, even though we sin.

John reminds us that “*If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness*” (1:9). And Jesus told us that He would lose NONE of those the Father has given Him (John 6:39).⁹

20 *And we **know** that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding so that we may **know** the true one. We are in the true one—that is, in his Son, **Jesus Christ.***

He is the true God and eternal life.

21 *Little children, guard yourselves from idols.^{iv}*

Our final two “Things We Know for Sure” have to do with the fact that we really can have True Knowledge of the True One, Jesus of Nazareth, God in human flesh, who reveals the Father/Creator to us Truly, because, in the Mystery of the Trinity, they are One (John 10:30).

The most amazing thing about verse 20 is that John calls his cousin, Jesus, “the True God” and “Eternal Life.”¹⁰ What would it take to convince you that *your* cousin was—and is—very God of very God? But such a thing did happen . . . Truly it did.

Well, so what? What shall we make of these “**Seven Things that We Know for Sure**”? Let me try to bring this together by thinking for a moment about how we solve problems in ordinary life.

While there is certainly truth to our aphorism that “there is more than one way to skin a cat,” many problems in our lives have very particular solutions.

- Increasing the pressure in your tires will not help a malfunctioning engine.
- Aspirin will not dissolve a cancer.
- Slicing up credit cards will not remove debt that is already owed.
- If your toilet is leaking, calling an electrician won’t help.
- And you probably don’t want your plumber to take your appendix out.

Solutions to particular problems require a proper remedy to be supplied.

⁷ An easy way to compare all English translations of a verse is to search for the verse on www.biblegateway.com.

⁸ See Romans 3:23; 7:14-25.

⁹ See also John 10:27-30. John also tells us that this world is under the control of Satan, which Jesus recognized and affirmed (Matthew 4:8-10; John 12:31, 16:11); but I don’t have time to develop that idea this morning.

¹⁰ See also John 1:1, 18, 20:28.

So here's our Problem. We humans are broken and our world is broken because our relationship with God and our relationships with one another are broken. We—you and I—are guilty, enslaved, lost, and spiritually dead. All of us. Everyone. Everywhere.

If our Problem is to be solved, then someone must take on our guilt and do something about it. Someone must ransom the slaves. Someone must find us and bring us Home. Someone must conquer death and make that victory available to us. Nothing else will work.¹¹

John's "**Seven Things that We Know for Sure**" tell us over and over again in various ways that Jesus—and *only Jesus*—can forgive our guilt, ransom us from slavery, find us and bring us Home, and give us victory over death. With John, *I have written these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may **know** that you have eternal life.*

Do you KNOW that, my friend? If you do, **celebrate** in the Master's **Joy!**

And if you don't KNOW that today, you CAN! Here's what Jesus is saying to you, RIGHT NOW:

***"See! I stand at the door and knock.
If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in"***
(Revelation 3:20).

ⁱ *I have written 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).*

*If we **know** that [God] hears whatever we ask,*

*We **know** that we have what we have asked of him (5:15).*

*We **know** that everyone who has been born of God does not sin, but the One who is born of God keeps him, and the evil one does not touch him (5:18).*

*We **know** that we are of God, and the whole world is under the control 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** the true one. We are in the true one—that is, in his Son, Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life (5:20).*

ⁱⁱ One writer described *eternal life* this way:

1. In God, there is **peace**; and, therefore, *eternal life* means *serenity*. It means a life liberated from the fears which haunt the human situation.
2. In God, there is **power**; and, therefore, *eternal life* means *the defeat of frustration*. It means a life filled with the power of God and, therefore, victorious over circumstance.
3. In God, there is **holiness**; and, therefore, *eternal life* means *the defeat of sin*. It means a life clothed with the purity of God and armed against contamination from a wicked world.
4. In God, there is **love**; and, therefore, *eternal life* means *the end of bitterness and hatred*. It means a life which has the love of God in its heart and the undefeatable love of men and women in all its feelings and in all its actions.
5. In God, there is **life**; and, therefore, *eternal life* means *the defeat of death*. It means a life which is indestructible because it has in it the indestructibility of God himself.

ⁱⁱⁱ **16** *If anyone sees a fellow believer committing a sin that doesn't lead to death, he should ask, and God will give life to him—to those who commit sin that doesn't lead to death. There is sin that leads to death. I am not saying he should pray about that.*

17 *All unrighteousness is sin, and there is sin that doesn't lead to death.*

¹¹ Gregory Koukl, *The Story of Reality* (Zondervan, 2017), pp. 131-132.

It's from these verses that we get the idea of "mortal sin" and sin that is not "mortal." What in the world is that about?

For starters, perhaps we should admit that we're not really sure what John was talking about, but I think we can get close to it. There are several possibilities.

You may remember that in the Older Testament, there were some offenses for which the death penalty was prescribed—chiefly willful sins—and some offenses for which sacrifices could be made—chiefly inadvertent sins (Leviticus 4:2, 13, 22, 27, 5:15, 17-18; Numbers 15:27-31, 18:22; Deuteronomy 17:12, 22:26, among others). You may also remember that Jesus identified a sin against God's Holy Spirit that was "unforgiveable" (Matthew 12:32; Mark 3:29). It seems to me that the idea of willful rejection that is the central component of both of these Capital Offenses is also at the heart of what John makes reference to here.

Specifically, I think John was making reference to some in the church(es) who had rejected the idea of God becoming "flesh"—truly human—in the person of Jesus. Having been taught the Truth about God's Messiah, these folk had now rejected that Truth. Earlier in this letter, John had written that

"They went out from us, but they did not belong to us; for if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us. However, they went out so that it might be made clear that none of them belongs to us. But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and all of you know the truth" (1 John 2:19-20).

It seems to me that the idea of "mortal" or "unpardonable sin" works like this. First of all, it's crucial to affirm that the Blood of Jesus "*cleanses us from all sin.*"ⁱⁱⁱ There is no sin—**No Sin**—that Jesus' Blood cannot or will not cleanse, if that sin is confessed and repented of—but that's a pretty big "IF."

I read somewhere just this week that one of the primary ways that tyrants, gangs, and nefarious groups of every sort "turn people to the dark side" is by having them violate their consciences little by little and bit by bit. People do not usually become heinous in one fell swoop, one awful, diabolical decision, but bit by bit.

You may have seen this happen yourself. The first time we do something wrong, we do it with some degree of horror and with fear; and then, after we have done it, we feel grief and remorse and regret. But if we allow ourselves to flirt with temptation again and again and to succumb again and again, on each occasion the sin becomes easier, and the remorse and the regret become less. In the end, it is possible to reach a state when we can sin without any qualms at all. This is the sin that leads to eternal death.

Here's a simple example. Many of you know that, thanks to the kind generosity of Beth and Dan Trollinger, I now wear their Dad's hearing aids. When I first began wearing them, I heard sounds that I hadn't heard in a long, long time, and some of those sounds were annoying, such as the rustling of paper.

My audiologist said that by wearing the hearing aids all day long every day, my brain would learn to ignore the sounds that were extraneous or annoying; but without daily wearing, such learning would be less likely to occur. I think that "mortal sin" is a lot like that.

God has given us the freedom to ignore the still, small Voice of the Spirit, the Voice that calls us back to the Light, but with each ignoring, with each rejection, we become a little less able to hear that Voice, until, finally, we no longer hear it at all. And once we can no longer be convicted of Sin, we can no longer repent of it, and we have placed ourselves beyond God's Salvation.

That, I think, is what John was talking about here. We should most certainly be much in prayer for friends and family who are wandering away from God's Light, and sometimes we may need to be somewhat confrontational with them, in sincere and compassionate love.ⁱⁱⁱ John doesn't forbid prayer for those whose sin takes them toward death—he has just powerfully affirmed the power of prayer in God's will, and we know that it is God's purpose that all would freely choose to be savedⁱⁱⁱ--but John doesn't promise that such prayer will be effective.

^{iv} John's final words in this letter, about idolatry, are a little surprising. He hasn't said anything at all about idols or idolatry until this last sentence, at least not explicitly. Here's what I think he meant.

We suspect that the folk who had left the church and abandoned the Gospel, which was the apparent occasion for this letter, may have denied that Jesus was really human—He just *appeared* to be

human.^{iv} In these final two verses, John affirms that Jesus was really Real—that the Incarnation was a Real, historical event—and that those who follow Jesus are not following fake news. Another way to put verse 21 might be an admonition to “Reject that which is fake and embrace that which is Real.”

The Prayer of Desolation

My Lord God,
I have no idea
where I am going.
I do not see the road
ahead of me.
I cannot know

for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean That I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing.

I hope that I will
never do anything
apart from that desire.

And I know that
if I do this you will
lead me by the right road
Though I may know
nothing about it.

Therefore will I
trust you always
Though I may seem
to be lost and in
the shadow of death.

I will not fear, for you
are ever with me,
And you will never
leave me to face
my perils alone.

Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude*
(New York: Farrar, Straus, and Cudahy, 1976), p. 83.